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A Critic at Large

- [The Shaming-Industrial Complex](#)

By [Becca Rothfeld](#)

Content

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In 2013, when people still nursed high hopes for the salvific effects of the Internet and cancellation was a fate reserved for poorly rated TV shows, a private citizen with a hundred and seventy Twitter followers was loitering in Heathrow Airport, waiting for a flight to Cape Town, South Africa. “Going to Africa,” she dashed off before boarding. “Hope I don’t get *AIDS*. Just kidding. I’m white!” By the time she landed, eleven hours later, her ill-advised missive had gone disastrously viral. She stumbled off the plane to discover that a multitude of online detractors had weighed in on her character. Now she was a globally known racist.

The woman, Justine Sacco, was one of the first high-profile casualties of public shaming in the digital era, and she suffered all the consequences that have since become routine: job loss, wide-scale condemnation, and a public identity subsumed by a very public sin. Still, in the wake of subsequent disasters, her story is almost quaint. How pleasant it is to recall a simpler, kinder time when an online mobbing was an occurrence so unusual that it merited two articles in the *Times*.

Our social fabric has since frayed considerably. What’s curious about the brutality that fuels Internet shaming frenzies is that in real life—that is, IRL, in the usual online parlance—most of us would hesitate to consign a normal nobody to nationwide notoriety and several years of unemployment. We might even have mustered the charity to read Sacco’s quip as a satirical, if clumsy, sendup of the white privilege and parochialism that give rise to public-health inequalities. (Sacco, as people in her inner circle would have known, was no stranger to either Africa or progressive causes.) Yet the nasty comments went on accumulating, as if of their own accord. “We are about to watch this @JustineSacco bitch get fired. In *REAL* time. Before she even KNOWS she’s getting fired.” “All I want for Christmas is to see @JustineSacco’s face when her plane lands and she checks her inbox/voicemail.” “Her level of racist ignorance belongs on Fox News. #AIDS can affect anyone!”

It's an open question whether there is anything redeeming about our transformation into bloodhounds as soon as we log on, and two new investigations into the nature of shame offer contrasting answers. In "[How to Do Things with Emotions: The Morality of Anger and Shame Across Cultures](#)" (Princeton), Owen Flanagan, a professor of philosophy and neurobiology at Duke University, suggests that our tense political climate is the product of poor emotional regulation. In "[The Shame Machine: Who Profits in the New Age of Humiliation](#)" (Crown), the data-scientist-cum-journalist Cathy O'Neil suggests that shaming is structural: its ubiquity is the fault not of individual vigilantes but, rather, of the many industries that manufacture and exploit mortification for profit.

At the heart of these diverging perspectives is an ambiguity built into the very concept at issue. Shame is an emotion—a person can suffer from its bilious bite, as Sacco did—but it is also a state of affairs. No matter how Sacco felt, her ostracism was an established fact, a thing that happened to her. Is shame fundamentally a feeling or fundamentally a social phenomenon? Should we treat it as a matter of psychology or of politics?

In "[How to Do Things with Emotions](#)," a scholarly plea for a renovated emotional landscape, Flanagan casts his vote for psychology. Troubled by the churlishness of contemporary American politics, he sets out to isolate "emotional habits that are mixed up in our troubles," by which he means our descent into polarity, chaos, and mutual mistrust. He's against the more vituperative forms of anger, which he believes are too prevalent, and is in favor of shame, which he regards as all but absent from our ethical repertoire. Shame, in his view, is an unjustly maligned emotion that we might rehabilitate in order to discipline racists and misogynists.

Shame, canonically, is the sinking sentiment that attends deviation from widely endorsed mores, whatever they happen to be. You can be sad or elated for any reason or for no reason, but shame requires a shared social context. The emotion in question arises not because you violated a standard that you set for yourself but because you violated a standard that your milieu (perhaps policed by Twitter) imposes on you. Because shame is a means of enforcing whatever values are operative in a given society, whether it proves salutary hinges on the merits of the moral system in which it is deployed, at least according to Flanagan. He admits that shame has too often been

conscripted as a weapon against the oppressed—as when women and queer people have been encouraged to suppress their sexual impulses. Nonetheless, he calls for shame to be enlisted in the service of social justice, as it was when a concerted social-media campaign ejected the Hollywood producer and serial rapist Harvey Weinstein from power.

This proposal is undergirded by an ornate apparatus, the product of a lifetime of meticulous inquiry into the workings of the human heart. In Flanagan's view, shame is not so very anomalous among the emotions in being constitutively social. “The idea is to get away from thinking that emotions are only or primarily ‘inner things,’ ” he writes. “Instead, it would be better to think of an emotion as an event” or, better yet, as “a sequence of events,” with characteristic causes and consequences. In particular, emotions follow “scripts.” To be angry, according to this model, is not merely to feel a crimson flicker: it is to feel the flicker in response to a culturally specified trigger (an insult, for example) and to respond in a culturally sanctioned fashion (by screaming, for example, or by demanding a duel). In this sense, Flanagan says, emotions are cultural artifacts, and, consulting a body of anthropological research, he makes a valiant effort to demonstrate that other societies “do” emotions differently—and that we might follow suit if we only took the trouble. Perhaps we could become more like the Nepalese Tamang, who “value harmony and self-effacement and strongly discourage anger,” or the Tibetan Buddhists, who “believe that anger, resentment, and their suite are categorically bad.”

“[How to Do Things with Emotions](#)” is a welcome corrective to Anglophone philosophy’s tendency to frame Western presumptions as universal. And it presents an appealingly sensible moral program. Flanagan instructs us to begin by acknowledging the cultural contingency of our emotional outlook and to proceed by modifying our unruly inner lives, eliminating vengeful impulses and instilling a propensity for shame in the face of moral transgression. Yet we may wonder how many people are capable of exercising so much control over their feelings. It is usually rash to conflate our espoused ideals with our actual practice; Seneca’s vaunted Stoicism didn’t prevent him from bellyaching when he was exiled. Few will defend vindictiveness for its own sake—but many of us fall prey to it, out of spite.

And what if we *could* learn to forfeit the pleasures of pettiness and perversity? Political life might plod on unchanged. Private fractiousness, unseemly as it is, may have less to do with Donald Trump's rise to power, say, than with any number of structural factors, among them the arrangement of the Electoral College and the dissemination of misinformation by right-wing news outlets. Even if emotions involve external actions, not simply interior states, the behavior of scattered individuals may have only a minor effect on the institutions that shape our lives and constrain our conduct.

Besides, if the scripts that define our emotions are social, then personal reform cannot be expected to kick off an about-face. We can adjust our behavior, but we cannot change the nature of emotions until we overhaul the rituals bound up with them. Because, by Flanagan's own account, shame is parasitic on the norms it polices, "How to Do Things with Emotions" gets the proper order of operations backward: to reinvent shame, we must first reimagine those norms.

Shame, as Flanagan sometimes appears to forget, is an effective weapon only when it is brandished against those who already inhabit a shared ethical universe. If politicians on the other side of the aisle strike Flanagan as shameless, that's not because of any shame shortage but because they are not bound by the norms he favors. When Representative Liz Cheney, of Wyoming, remarked that "anyone who denies the truth of what happened on January 6th ought to be ashamed of themselves," the Fox News commentator Tucker Carlson countered that she was the one who "should be ashamed." A mere increase in the total volume of shame in circulation would not result in the social betterment that "How to Do Things with Emotions" envisions; big feelings do not guarantee big changes.

In "[The Shame Machine](#)," O'Neil takes a more promising tack, proposing that shame is inextricable from its institutional buttresses. Her previous books, notably the award-winning "[Weapons of Math Destruction](#)," have focussed on unmasking the data science so often abused by companies like Facebook. "The Shame Machine" moves her into uncharted territory: although it contains its fair share of pseudoscience-debunking, including an admirably lucid explanation of how diet programs massage statistics to artificially bolster their success rates, it is largely a work of social criticism. It presents a tripartite investigation into what O'Neil terms the "shame

industrial complex.” This comprises a weight-loss industry that capitalizes on eating disorders, a pharmaceutical industry that capitalizes on widespread addiction, and a cosmetics industry that capitalizes on women’s discomfort with their sexual selves.

Perhaps the most powerful shame machines of all are social-media companies, to which O’Neil devotes the middle (and best) section of the book. If the quintessentially shameful scenario is one in which we are “seen, inappropriately, by the wrong people in the wrong condition,” as the philosopher Bernard Williams argues, then the Internet is the perfect theatre: online, almost everyone has an audience almost all the time, and social-media companies have every incentive to push Sacco and other bunglers into the spotlight. Stale debates about the interpersonal ethics of “cancel culture,” O’Neil notes, have long overlooked the extent to which “digital titans, led by Facebook and Google, not only profit from shame events but are engineered to exploit and diffuse them.”

Since Sacco’s highly publicized wipeout, many have suffered a similar fate, in large part because of social-media fracases. In 2014, a British astrophysicist named Matt Taylor delivered a press briefing about the Rosetta mission while clad in a shirt depicting cartoon women in suggestive attire, a garment that turned out to be a birthday present from a female friend who had designed it. While Taylor was discussing his hand in devising the first spacecraft to land on a comet, many viewers fixated not on his accomplishment but on the sexism that his shirt supposedly evinced. Soon, #shirtgate and #shirtstorm were trending on Twitter. More recently, aggrieved TikTok users heaped abuse on a man dubbed West Elm Caleb, a furniture designer in the unfortunate habit of wooing and then ignoring women on dating apps. Commenters began by chastising him for his disrespectful behavior, but before long they were calling on his employer to fire him. Though very few people, if you buttonholed them, would advocate the sort of trial by TikTok that West Elm Caleb endured, social-media companies work to push paroxysms to the top of our feeds in defiance of our feeble scruples.

The lesson O’Neil is keen to impart is that the primary drivers of online scandals are not isolated cyberbullies, tapping out vindictive screeds in the privacy of their home offices, but machine-learning algorithms that optimize

for traffic. The more divisive a meme or a story, the more engagement it generates; the more engagement it generates, the more time it induces people to waste feuding online; the more time people waste feuding online, the more they idly reveal about their browsing habits; and the more they idly reveal about their browsing habits, the more precisely they can be targeted by advertisers. Public shaming attracts the kind of attention that yields big profits, so social-media platforms are in effect “engineered to spur these lucrative disputes.”

“A constant in these shaming industries is the concept of choice,” O’Neil writes. “The guiding premise is that the victims screwed up: They could have chosen to be rich, shapely, smart, and successful, and they didn’t.” Peddlers of diets and fitness routines insist that we could lose weight if we cycled more vigorously or ate fewer calories—when, in fact, “obesity isn’t a disease of willpower” but a “biological problem,” as a biomedical researcher assures O’Neil. Richard Sackler, the erstwhile president and chairman of the company [responsible](#) for the disastrously addictive painkiller OxyContin, directed employees to “hammer on the abusers in every way possible. They are the culprits and the problem.” In reality, O’Neil says, the opioid crisis is the fault of “publicly traded corporations, from pharma giants to private prisons,” which “profit from this grim status quo and perpetuate their thriving empires by casting blame on the victims and shaming them into subscribing to their offerings.”

The shame machine’s mythologies can be difficult to resist even for those who are well positioned to know better. For all O’Neil’s rightful skepticism of the weight-loss industry, she finds herself susceptible to its stratagems. She returns over and over to the indignities that she has weathered as a chronically overweight woman. “Once shame inhabits you, especially from a young age, it’s with you for the long haul,” she writes. Accordingly, her book keeps the human costs of the titular shame machine in clear view. We meet a nurse who, at O’Neil’s doctor’s appointments, persists in asking her about her target weight, even after she repeatedly asks him to stop, and a disabled woman who, after falling off her motorized cart at a Walmart, discovers an unflattering photograph of the incident in wide circulation online.

O’Neil’s forays into narrative journalism are frequently moving. Unfortunately, they make up only a small fraction of a book that is rife with conceptual confusions and even internal contradictions. “The Shame Machine” contains no attempt to define shame, much less to distinguish it from neighboring sentiments, and the book’s conclusions can be muddled as a result. Few of O’Neil’s general pronouncements about the emotion of the hour advance beyond truisms—it is hardly a revelation that shame “consumes us with doubts about our own worth.” Despite her book’s premise, there’s no reason to think that companies capitalize more on shame than on the other negative feelings on offer. Envy and good old-fashioned insecurity are at least as prone to consume us with doubts about our own self-worth. And, worse, O’Neil ricochets between characterizing shame as a social state and as a feeling. “Shame, by definition, is something we carry inside,” she informs us at one point—but is this true at all, much less true “by definition”? Aren’t shame machines outside us, and isn’t that precisely the source of their horrible power?

At first blush, O’Neil’s and Flanagan’s positions seem irreconcilable, but the two can be wrangled into a tense consensus. Both writers agree that the wrong people (women, people of color, the poor) bear the brunt of our emotional infelicities, and that the people who should feel worse about themselves (billionaires, pharmaceutical executives, Donald Trump) display undue equanimity. Both are leery of shame’s dangers but cautiously attuned to its benefits, at least when it is wielded under appropriate conditions and against appropriate targets. Flanagan calls shame accompanied by progressive values “mature shame”; O’Neil ends by championing “healthy shame,” which is levied against the powerful instead of the vulnerable. The usual suspects, namely righteous protesters, serve as examples of healthy shamers, engaged not in bullying but in venerable “punching up.”

Yet it seems unlikely that shaming the shamers will yield anything approaching justice. Even when shame is employed in the service of virtuous norms, it’s bound to spawn excessive cruelties when it is unleashed on a national, or even a global, scale. By now, so many blunderers have become full-fledged personae non gratae that it is impossible to keep track of all of their demolished lives. Many of these untouchables have exhibited bona-fide misjudgments, but the scope of their censure is disproportionate to the severity of their crimes.

In 2020, for instance, a graphic designer with no claim to public interest whatsoever was outed by the *Washington Post* as having worn blackface to a Halloween party two years before. It emerged that the woman had dressed not as a person of color but, rather—in a misguided attempt at mockery—as the conservative talking head Megyn Kelly, who had recently remarked that she did not consider it racist for a white person to don blackface for Halloween. Such details didn’t matter, though; the woman had already taken on what the sociologist Erving Goffman evocatively calls a “spoiled identity,” and, to nobody’s surprise, she was fired. We can surely favor norms proscribing blackface without favoring the excommunication of our offending graphic designer. Sudden infamy is no longer a risk assumed only by the public figures who have always invited it, the compulsive exhibitionists who sometimes court it, and the Weinstein-esque villains who merit it; instead, it can befall anyone leading a less than saintly private life. (“*GIRL I live in Paris and I have seen 6 videos of west elm caleb I thought he would need to move to Idaho, but now is known WORLDWIDE.*”)

Perhaps the perils of shaming are so readily underrated because of its peculiarly dual nature: it is a public punishment cleverly disguised as a trifling psychic disturbance, and both O’Neil and Flanagan ultimately submit to the temptation to write it off as a feeling to be managed. Although the first two sections of “The Shame Machine” attack companies for shifting social burdens onto individuals, the book ends by recommending that we “detoxify our relations.” It’s self-improvement that’s paramount. We should stop feeling shame, and we should stop inflicting it. “Don’t get outraged—or at least don’t make a habit of it.”

But how much does it matter whether we make a habit of it? The suggestion that our emotional practices have such outsized political import belongs to a dubious theory of cultural change. There is little evidence that electoral havoc is an offshoot of private insecurities, to be discussed and dismantled on the psychoanalyst’s couch. Vicious gerrymandering and laws that continue to disenfranchise millions are at least as consequential as a handful of private outbursts.

The force of shame stems from its status as a social condition, not from its emotional resonance. The bad feelings that shamings instill are incidental to the material injuries they inflict. No matter how supreme our sanguinity,

how unshakable our equipoise, people who get raked over the coals online can expect to find themselves jobless in the aftermath, and employers in every state but Montana will still be empowered to fire anyone at any time for almost any reason, including indecorous tweets.

O’Neil extolls the pop star Lizzo, whom she regards as admirably immune to the sorts of insecurities that the weight-loss industry works so hard to inculcate. “The trolling works only when the target is ashamed,” she writes sunnily, concluding that “shamelessness can be a healthy and freeing response.” But if fat-shaming is the result of the weight-loss industry’s machinations, we almost certainly cannot alter our feelings without altering the institutional arrangements that support them. Flanagan may be right that emotions are culturally specific—but we will still have to change a culture in order to change the emotions that it generates. How effective can a personal crusade really be when the gears of the shame machine go on grinding?

Cavalier witnesses of online shamings have been known to recommend that their targets “just log off” and resume existence IRL. But logging off—and returning to the sphere in which people are apt to forgive one another for venial affronts—is no longer an option. Reality is less real than the Internet, where jobs are lost and lives are ruined in just a few clicks. There is no “off” left. ♦

Annals of Fashion

- [Should Leopards Be Paid for Their Spots?](#)

By [Rebecca Mead](#)

Content

This content can also be viewed on the site it [originates](#) from.

When Jacqueline Kennedy was living in the White House, in the early sixties, she relied upon the taste of Oleg Cassini, the costume designer turned couturier, to supply her with a wardrobe that would befit her role as First Lady, one of the most photographed women in the world. In 1962, Cassini provided her with a striking leopard coat. Knee-length, with three-quarter sleeves and six buttons that fastened across the chest, the coat was not made from a synthetic leopard-patterned fabric. Rather, it consisted of the pelts of several formerly wild, living leopards, which had been hunted and slaughtered for their alluring, treacherous skins. Fashion-wise, the garment was a great success: the demand for Jackie-style leopard coats soared. For leopards, the trend was a disaster. It has been estimated that a quarter of a million leopards died to satisfy consumers wanting to dress like Jackie. A decade after Cassini made the First Lady's coat, the U.S. government placed leopards on the endangered-species list, making it illegal to import their skins.

It is an irony of nature that although the leopard's spots—or, more accurately, rosettes—evolved as a form of camouflage, the same characteristics that allow leopards to lurk unseen by their prey in a dappled forest or on a dusty savanna render the creature's hide irresistibly eye-catching to human observers. Leopard skin has been repurposed as prestigious clothing for humans for millennia, notably by the ancient Egyptians, for whom feline characteristics were linked with aspects of divinity: Bastet, a goddess associated with femininity and a protector of the home, was represented as a woman with the head of a lioness. An Egyptian stela dating from more than four and a half thousand years ago, now in the collection of the Louvre, depicts the Princess Nefertabet dressed in what looks like elegant contemporary evening wear. Seated, she is clad in a slim, ankle-length sheath spotted with the rosettes of a leopard. The garment may be made from the skin of a leopard, but it may also be trompe-l'oeil: the Egyptians not only wore leopard pelts but also painted linen with spots to resemble them, or wove the pattern into woollen fabric, according to Shannon Bell-Price and Elyssa Da Cruz, the authors of an essay in “Wild:

Fashion Untamed,” a publication to accompany a show that opened in 2004 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Bell-Price and Da Cruz note that the representation of a fringe on the bottom of a garment is a telltale sign that it is definitively faux, not fur.

This cognitive split between species and pattern—between the leopard and its spots—has lately become the subject of academic study, with conservation-minded scholars analyzing data generated by fashion trends. Caroline Good Markides, formerly a research fellow in the Department of Zoology at Oxford University’s Wildlife Conservation Research Unit, did not set out to be an advocate for animals; her background is as an art historian, with a focus on British art of the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth century. In her doctoral research, she examined the then emergent genre of still-life painting, or “dead-standing things,” as such works were first characterized in English in the middle of the seventeenth century. At the Wildlife Conservation Research Unit, which Good Markides joined early in her career, her work involved exploring the cultural significance of representations of endangered wildlife in art. One day, during a staff discussion about the plight of lions, several colleagues remarked on the difficulty of engendering interest in them in Britain, given that lions are not native to the country.

“I was thinking about it afterward, and I realized that, actually, there are lions everywhere,” Good Markides told me recently. There are the three heraldic lions *passant guardant*—striding, with heads turned toward the viewer—that have been included on the royal arms of England since the late twelfth century. There are the four bronze lions reclining on pedestals at the foot of Nelson’s Column, in Trafalgar Square, a feature of the cityscape since the eighteen-sixties. There are the three lions emblazoned on the English soccer team’s shirt and celebrated in the chart-topping anthem of the sport in England, “Three Lions (Football’s Coming Home)”; a crowned lion is the emblem of the Premier League, the U.K.’s top-tier soccer league. Even British eggs have lions on them, stamped with the image of the beast as a quality seal since the late nineties. Despite lions having died out in Britain more than twelve thousand years ago, the creature still has a charged symbolic power—one that could be harnessed, Good Markides speculated, to the benefit of lions themselves.

In 2017, Good Markides, with colleagues at the Wildlife Conservation Research Unit, published an opinion piece in an academic journal titled “A Cultural Conscience for Conservation.” In the article, Good Markides and her co-authors, Dawn Burnham and David W. Macdonald, suggested a novel method of raising funds for conservation: a “species royalty” for the use of animal symbolism. When a song or a design is used for the promotion of a product or an event, a royalty is paid to its creator, they pointed out. What if a fee were owed to an endangered species every time its image or characteristics were co-opted by commerce? Good Markides and her co-authors calculated that, if a levy as minuscule as one-tenth of a penny were applied to each lion-stamped egg sold in Britain, that would result annually in revenues of ten and a half million pounds, or about fourteen million dollars. A levy of one pound on each Premier League soccer shirt sold would raise about six and a half million dollars—enough, the authors pointed out, to employ four thousand trained “lion guardians” to watch over and protect populations of the animal in East Africa for a year.

While making a case for a species royalty for the English national animal —“the Lion’s Share,” as they catchily dubbed it—Good Markides and her colleagues also raised the issue of the unwitting cultural contributions made by another big cat, whose image is arguably even more exploited than the lion’s: the leopard. What if the cultural power of leopard print, that omnipresent fashion staple, could be turned to the advantage of the endangered animal to whom it rightfully belongs? Leopard print “saturates both high-street and high-fashion,” the authors wrote. If a species royalty were levied on the use of the pattern, Good Markides and her co-authors argued, the leopard could become “the cash-cow of the jungle.”

Leopard print first entered Western fashion in a recognizably modern way—as a compelling pattern that is mostly divorced, conceptually, from its animal-kingdom origins—in late-eighteenth-century France. Designers, adding to their repertoire of floral-patterned dresses, began creating new gowns from light, pliable fabrics printed with stylized replicas of big-cat camouflage. Judging from how such fabrics were represented at the time, leopard print was, from the start, an edgy choice. A late-eighteenth-century etching by Louis Bosse titled “*La Matinée (L’heureuse Union)*” shows a young woman perched on a man’s knee; she wears a loose-fitting gown, or matinée, hemmed with a band of leopard-printed fabric that falls like silk,

her sensuality amplified by her association with the wild animal whose patterns her garment alludes to. Another image from the era, published in *Le Cabinet des Modes, ou les Modes Nouvelles*, shows a woman in a wig and feather-decked hairpiece, carrying an enormous white fur muff; her gown is edged with lace but is otherwise fashioned from spotted fabric that resembles the pelt of a cheetah. (The term “leopard print,” as Jo Weldon points out in “Fierce,” her cultural history of the pattern, is used loosely to apply to designs that are based on the pelts of a range of big cats, including not just *Panthera pardus*, the leopard proper, but also jaguars, ocelots, and others.)

Le Cabinet des Modes, often called the world’s first fashion magazine, was a venue for dressmakers to advertise their services to the affluent, but its pages were also used to provide inspiration to a wider readership who aspired to dress fashionably. A cheetah-patterned gown would likely have been a startling and provocative suggestion—and the print would not have been reserved for women only. The collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, in London, includes a French men’s frock coat from the seventeen-eighties, the silk-velvet pile of which is woven with black-and-white spots. The background color, originally a turquoise that has now faded to a silvery-blue sheen, indicates that the coat was not intended to give the appearance of actually being made from fur—unlike the leopard-spotted waistcoat worn under a ruby-colored, fur-trimmed coat by John Campbell, the first Baron of Cawdor, in a portrait painted by Sir Joshua Reynolds a few years earlier, the tawny hues of which are very like those of the animal it mimics. Rather, the turquoise frock coat takes the leopard’s spots and abstracts them into a fascinating pattern that remains at an aesthetic distance from the creature that inspired it.

In eighteenth-century portraiture, leopard pelt or print was a marker of wealth and luxury, though artists also drew upon its connotations in classical mythology to suggest the individual characters of their sitters. Marie-Aurore de Saxe, a French noblewoman and freethinker, was painted in the guise of Diana, the huntress, wearing a leopard-print gown with billowing sleeves and a plunging bosom. Charlotte du Rietz, a worldly Swedish baroness, also chose to be depicted as Diana, dressed in a leopard-pelt robe and a floral choker, bearing a spear.

Leopard print was associated with chastity—Diana is the chastity goddess—although that link had dwindled by the time the design was disseminated into mainstream fashion, in the twentieth century. Yet its suggestion of independent-mindedness arguably endured. Weldon, the author of “Fierce,” notes that in the nineteen-thirties leopard was usually considered sporty—suitable for head scarves, summer dresses, and outdoor activities. But the print also became a signifier of élite glamour: it was worn by movie stars from Joan Crawford, who was pictured looking sylphlike in a silk dress with leopard-print trim, to Carole Lombard, in a jacket with leopard-print collar and cuffs, and from Jayne Mansfield in a leopard-print bikini to Audrey Hepburn in a leopard-print pillbox hat. Josephine Baker went one step further, accessorizing herself with a pet cheetah named Chiquita. Christian Dior, in his couture collection of 1947, presented a fluid sheath dress in leopard print that he named “Jungle”—a rare, if now clunkily exoticizing, allusion to the native habitat of the wild creature whose spotted back Dior was profiting from.

Today, leopard print has been democratized, and mainstreamed. It no longer signifies a rebellious punk aesthetic, as it did when a young Debbie Harry wore a skintight leopard jumpsuit in 1979; nor does it connote untamed carnality, as it did when an even younger Steven Tyler wore his own skintight leopard jumpsuit, three years earlier. If leopard does still carry a hint of subversion and sensuality, it does so in a way that is compatible with professionalism and probity. Often, when worn in public life, leopard bestows the flavor of edginess where none is naturally occurring: consider, for example, the much chronicled leopard-print kitten heels favored by Theresa May, Britain’s former Prime Minister. Sometimes it signals a barely concealed carnivorousness, as in the case of the lawyer Sidney Powell, a former member of Donald Trump’s legal team, whose wardrobe includes multiple leopard tops. Leopard print may have reached the apotheosis of respectability when, in early 2020, the irreproachable Kate Middleton, the Duchess of Cambridge and the future Queen of England, was photographed wearing a midi-length, floaty pleated skirt patterned with leopard spots. It was swiftly reported that the skirt came from the high-street brand Zara, where it was on sale for thirteen dollars if you could find it, which you definitely couldn’t.

To what extent does the modern wearer of leopard print perceive the fashion choice as having anything to do with the wild animals that roam, in diminishing numbers, in Africa and Asia? This is the question that Good Markides, after publishing “A Cultural Conscience for Conservation,” sought to tackle next, suspecting that a dissociation between the print and the animal itself might get in the way of encouraging leopard conservation through fashion. Last year, Good Markides, along with her co-authors Macdonald and Burnham, and with the contribution of Tom Moorhouse, published a follow-up paper, “Connecting the Spots: Leopard Print Fashion and *Panthera pardus* Conservation.” They attempted, for the first time, to measure connections between the wearing of leopard print and our awareness of leopards.

In the paper, Good Markides and her colleagues noted the perennial popularity of leopard print: while other styles wax and wane, leopard is a fashion-industry constant, both in high-end labels and in budget brands. (You can buy a georgette leopard-print blouse at Dolce & Gabbana for \$1,095; you can also buy a ruffled, off-the-shoulder leopard-print blouse for \$11.99 from Walmart.) By analyzing data from Internet search engines, traditional editorial media, and social-media platforms, Good Markides discovered that although consumer interest in animal print varies from year to year, it reliably rises in the fall, between October and December, and declines in late spring; leopard print is featured most prominently in the season-setting September issues of fashion magazines. Interest in leopard print is higher in some parts of the world than in others, she found: Northern Europe and East Asia are home to the most avid aficionados, while “leopard print” is far less frequently Googled in the Middle East and Central Africa, regions of the world where actual leopards can still be found.

By analyzing Instagram hashtags, Good Markides found that leopard print was associated with a wide range of aesthetics, “from ‘professionalism’ to ‘punk.’ ” But, she added, “while it is highly adaptable in its wearability, our insights into the emotions it evokes offer little evidence that they are at all related to issues surrounding biodiversity loss and the extinction crisis.” Good Markides and her co-authors speculated that the prevalence of leopard print in fashion might even have the effect of misrepresenting the prevalence of real leopards in their native habitat, functioning as “a virtual population

whose widespread abundance creates a delusion that the wild population is similarly commonplace.”

The challenge for conservationists, Good Markides and her co-authors argued, is to find ways to divert the appetite for leopard print, at least in part, toward a sense of obligation to the species from which it had been appropriated. One method could be through the application of a species royalty. They cited the American shopping site ShopStyle, which in a single month, April, 2019, offered more than nineteen thousand leopard-print products for sale, with an average price of four hundred and twenty-three dollars. If one per cent of the sale of each of those leopard-print items went to support leopard conservation, they wrote, that would result in an eight-million-dollar leopard fund.

How might such a levy be instituted? Good Markides and her colleagues acknowledged that it was beyond their remit to devise an appropriate mechanism, but suggested that firm codes of practice, incentivizing, and even regulatory requirements might be applicable. One figure in the big-cat conservation world has already been experimenting with linking leopard print with real-life leopards. Thomas Kaplan, the chairman of the Electrum Group, a New York investment firm, is the founder of Panthera, a nonprofit dedicated to the conservation of big cats, which partners with fashion brands to promote wildlife. Two years ago, Panthera launched a campaign called Leopard Spotted, whereby wearers of leopard print are encouraged to promote awareness of the animal’s plight by adding a hashtag to their Instagram selfies, and to donate, via Panthera, to conservation efforts.

“What we are trying to do is to encourage people to see beyond the spots,” Kaplan told me. “We’re not interested in discouraging people from using leopard print. To the contrary, what we want to do is make people understand that, while celebrating the leopard, they can also give back. If royalties were paid for any fashion statement like this, there would be more than enough money to save the leopard.” Six years ago, Panthera collaborated with Hermès on an exhibition to celebrate the work of Robert Dallet, an illustrator who designed iconic silk scarves for the company depicting big cats in the wild; one scarf, featuring a leopard in grassland, was launched, with partial proceeds going to Panthera. Kaplan hopes to recruit a number of fashion brands to institute a species royalty.

A dozen years after Jackie Kennedy was photographed in her leopard coat, accessorized with a black pillbox hat and black elbow-length gloves, another iconic leopard outfit was in circulation: Diane von Furstenberg's leopard-print wrap dress, which the designer was photographed wearing in 1974 at a film première, purring into Andy Warhol's ear. When I asked von Furstenberg if she thought the big cats were due a cut, she acknowledged that animal royalties were an interesting idea. "But, you know, every element of nature has been used as a source of inspiration in fashion—flowers, bark, roses," she said. "Leonardo da Vinci said that of all his accomplishments what he was proudest of was that he could read nature. Nature for me is everything." Von Furstenberg still has a taste for leopard print, she told me: when we spoke, she was on an overseas trip for which she had packed a leopard-print velvet jacket and a leopard-print passport holder.

In the decades after von Furstenberg wrapped herself and other women in her sleek, clingy faux-leopard dresses, Oleg Cassini came to regret the real leopard coat he'd made for Jackie Kennedy. "Animals sense when they're about to be killed," he once told an interviewer. "They have the imagination to fear." Cassini's conscience was troubled by his implication in the fur trade; for him, it seems, the link between *Panthera pardus* and a fashionable coat was indelible, and a source of shame. Cassini, who died in 2006, forswore fur, instead designing with and advocating for the use of fake fur as a substitute for the actual, bloody thing. The designer did what he could to make reparations. A species royalty, its proponents suggest, would enable all who appropriate the leopard's guise, thinkingly or not, to repay their own debt to nature. ♦

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Art

- [The Geometric Glass Sculptures of Larry Bell](#)

The octogenarian American artist **Larry Bell** is renowned for his geometric glass sculptures, which resist classification. (Bell was already a cult figure in 1967, when he appeared on the cover of the Beatles' album "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band.") Dia:Beacon, in the Hudson Valley, has opened a long-term installation of Bell's works, both historic and new, including "Nesting Boxes" (pictured), from 2021, which he conceived specifically for the space it now occupies.

Art Everywhere

- [Arachnid Art at Hudson Yards](#)

By [Adam Iscoe](#)

The artist Tomás Saraceno recently spent an afternoon in Hudson Yards, at the Shed, searching for spiderwebs. “Look, look, do you see it? There’s one here!” he yelled, on his hands and knees, as he peered beneath a wooden pallet in the loading dock. “It’s an old one. It’s very small. Look!” Saraceno wore a blue sweater with light-blue running shoes and a KN95 mask; he was covered in dust, and his eyes glowed with excitement. “It’s so little, look!” An art curator handed him an iPhone with the flashlight on. “We’re looking at the body of the spider,” he said, illuminating a web spun by a member of the species *Steatoda triangulalis*. “The spider is not there! But, when you see the spiderweb, you are seeing the spider itself.”



Tomás Saraceno Illustration by João Fazenda

Nearby, Emma Enderby, the curator, looked under a stack of folding stepladders for more webs. “Usually the impulse is just to remove,” she said.

“Or sweep them away!” Saraceno added. “But we can stop boozing them away! And we can admire their work. And we can change our phobias from arachnophobia to arachnophilia.” Earlier, in preparation for a new exhibition, Saraceno had sent an e-mail instructing staff members at the Shed, including docents, custodians, and curators, to preserve webs throughout the building; he then tagged them with “an open letter for invertebrate rights”:

WE WOULD LIKE TO START BY THANKING YOU FOR RECOGNIZING OUR RIGHTS TO INHABIT AND EXHIBIT IN THIS SPACE AND FOR NOT LABELING US “URBAN PESTS” AS MANY OTHERS DO. WE HOPE THAT AFTER THIS EXHIBITION ENDS, YOU WOULD CONSIDER ALLOWING OUR CONTINUING BUT THREATENED, UNLIMITED EXISTENCE . . . DO NOT BE AFRAID . . . SIGNED, SPIDER/WEBS

Saraceno, who is forty-eight, was born in San Miguel de Tucumán, in Argentina, where his father, an agronomist, was imprisoned before the right-wing coup in 1976. His mother, a botanist, relocated the family to a five-hundred-year-old house in northern Italy. Saraceno spent some time alone, in the attic, looking at spiderwebs. “No one was living there,” he recalled. “But, when you looked carefully, it was full of life.”

In his work, Saraceno focusses on spiders and sustainable hot-air balloons. One project, “Museo Aero Solar,” involves balloons made of reused plastic bags. Two years ago, a schoolteacher named Leticia Noemi Marqués broke thirty-two world records when she piloted another balloon, “Aerocene Pacha,” over Argentinean salt flats. It was heated entirely by air and sunlight.

The show at the Shed includes a collection of seven webs displayed in glass frames. “I just put up the frame, invite the spider to come, they weave the web, and then they move out and the art work is ready,” Saraceno said. He pointed up to a work called “Free the Air: How to hear the universe in a spider/web,” a metal spiderweb, ninety-five feet in diameter, suspended from a point forty feet above the ground. Docents, after delivering a safety briefing, would encourage participants to climb in. “The spiders who weave webs have poor vision,” Saraceno said. “But they are able to perceive the world through vibration.” He crawled into the web and lay down. The room darkened. “We have recorded all the spider activities, and we’re playing back the vibration,” he said. The web pulsed. “It’s a spiderweb concert! It’s a concert you’re not meant to be hearing. I’m trying to change the world of experience.”

Saraceno resumed his hunt. He found a sheet web near the elevators—“Look how it moves!”—and a cobweb hanging in a ventilation shaft. He went

upstairs, into a machine room, and shouted, “We’re looking for our friends, the spiders and the webs!”

“We just did a kind of extensive cleaning out here,” a young engineer replied.

“And you did not have any webs?”

“I don’t think so—”

Saraceno was undeterred. He searched a crawl space behind some machinery; the engineer scoured a pipe-distribution area. “I think I’ve got one!” the engineer hollered.

“Amazing! Yes!” Saraceno said. Inspired, he pulled out his phone and asked the engineer to select a digital spider tarot card, part of what he called a “divination process.” The engineer pressed a button, and the phone buzzed. “The spider has answered you,” Saraceno said.

The engineer shrugged. “I felt something. I don’t know what the answer was, but it was *something!*”

Saraceno headed downstairs, where he sought help identifying a web atop a doorframe. Louis Sorkin, an arachnologist from the American Museum of Natural History, inspected. “How long has this been here?” he asked.

“It’s two weeks old!” Saraceno said.

“It’s hard to say if it’s a theridiid, which is a cobweb weaver, a common thing to find. Or is it an amaurobiid?”—an uncommon indoor find.

Saraceno studied the web, admiringly. “I don’t do nothing. I exhibit the web of the spiders. I’m a curator of the spiderwebs.” He grinned. “Who is the artist? I don’t know anymore.” ♦

Books

- [How Putin's Oligarchs Bought London](#)
- [Briefly Noted](#)

By [Patrick Radden Keefe](#)

Content

This content can also be viewed on the site it [originates](#) from.

Roman Abramovich was thirty-four years old—baby-faced, vigorous, already one of Russia’s richest oligarchs—when he did something seemingly inexplicable. The year was 2000. Abramovich, an orphan and a college dropout turned Kremlin insider, had amassed a giant fortune by taking control of businesses that once belonged to the Soviet state. He owned nearly half of the oil company Sibneft, and much of the world’s second-biggest producer of aluminum. A man of cosmopolitan tastes, he favored Chinese cuisine and holidays in the South of France. But now, he announced, he was going to relocate to the remote Chukotka region, a desolate Arctic hellscape, where he would run for governor.

Chukotka, which is some thirty-seven hundred miles from Moscow, is comically inhospitable. The winds are fierce enough to blow a grown dog off its feet. When Abramovich arrived, the human population was meagre, and struggling with poverty and alcoholism. After he was elected governor—he got ninety-two per cent of the vote, his closest challenger being a local man who herded reindeer—he was confronted with the baying of his new constituents: “When will we have fuel? When will we have meat?” There was no Chinese food in Chukotka.

“People here don’t live, they just exist,” Abramovich marvelled. Shy by nature, he was not a natural politician. He pumped plenty of his own money into the region, but appeared to derive no pleasure from his new job. Nor could he explain, to anyone’s satisfaction, what he was doing there. When a reporter from the *Wall Street Journal* trekked to Chukotka to pose the question, Abramovich claimed that he was [“fed up”](#) with making money. The *Journal* speculated that he was working an angle—did he have a lead on some untapped natural resource beneath the tundra? Abramovich acknowledged that his own friends “can’t understand” why he made this move. They “can’t even guess,” he said.

Three years after gaining his governorship, Abramovich leapt from wealthy obscurity to tabloid prominence when he bought London’s Chelsea Football

Club. In 2009, he settled into a fifteen-bedroom mansion behind Kensington Palace, for which he reportedly paid ninety million pounds. His mega-yacht Eclipse featured two helipads and its own missile-defense system, and he took to hosting New Year's Eve parties with guests like Leonardo DiCaprio and Paul McCartney. It was a long way from Chukotka. Indeed, that unlikely interlude seemed mostly forgotten, until the publication of "[Putin's People: How the KGB Took Back Russia and Then Took on the West](#)" (2020), a landmark work of investigative journalism by the longtime Russia correspondent Catherine Belton. Her thesis is that, after becoming the President of Russia, in 2000, Vladimir Putin proceeded to run the state and its economy like a Mafia don—and that he did so through the careful control of ostensibly independent businessmen like Roman Abramovich.

When Abramovich went to Chukotka, Belton tells us, he did so "on Putin's orders." The first generation of post-Soviet capitalists had accumulated vast private fortunes, and Putin set out to bring the oligarchs under state control. He had leverage over government officials, so he forced Abramovich to become one. "Putin told me that if Abramovich breaks the law as governor, he can put him immediately in jail," one Abramovich associate told Belton. A "feudal system" was beginning to emerge, Belton contends, in which the owners of Russia's biggest companies would be forced to "operate as hired managers, working on behalf of the state." Their gaudy displays of personal wealth were a diversion; these oligarchs were mere capos, who answered to the don. It wasn't even *their* wealth, really: it was Putin's. They were "no more than the guardians," Belton writes, and "they kept their businesses by the Kremlin's grace."

Belton even makes the case—on the basis of what she was told by the former Putin ally Sergei Pugachev and two unnamed sources—that Abramovich's purchase of the Chelsea Football Club was carried out on Putin's orders. "Putin's Kremlin had accurately calculated that the way to gain acceptance in British society was through the country's greatest love, its national sport," she writes. Pugachev informs her that the objective was to build "a beachhead for Russian influence in the UK." He adds, "Putin personally told me of his plan to acquire the Chelsea Football Club in order to increase his influence and raise Russia's profile, not only with the elite but with ordinary British people."

The stark implication of “Putin’s People” is not just that the President of Russia may be a silent partner in one of England’s most storied sports franchises but also that England itself has been a silent and handsomely compensated partner in Putin’s kleptocratic designs—that, in the past two decades, Russian oligarchs have infiltrated England’s political, economic, and legal systems. “We must go after the oligarchs,” Prime Minister Boris Johnson declared after the invasion of Ukraine, doing his best to sound Churchillian. But, as the international community labors to isolate Putin and his cronies, the question is whether England has been too compromised by Russian money to do so.

For the past several years, Oliver Bullough, a former Russia correspondent, has guided “kleptocracy tours” around London, explaining how dirty money from abroad has transformed the city. Bullough shows up with a busload of rubbernecks in front of elegant mansions and steel-and-glass apartment towers in Knightsbridge and Belgravia, and points out the multimillion-pound residences of the shady expatriates who find refuge there. His book [“Butler to the World: How Britain Became the Servant of Oligarchs, Tax Dodgers, Kleptocrats, and Criminals,”](#) just published in the U.K., argues that England actively solicited such corrupting influences, by letting “some of the worst people in existence” know that it was open for business.

Invoking Dean Acheson’s famous observation, in 1962, that Britain had “lost an empire but not yet found a role,” Bullough suggests that it did find a role, as a no-questions-asked service provider to the crooked élite, offering access to capital markets, prime real estate, shopping at Harrods, and illustrious private schools, along with accountants for tax tricks, attorneys for legal squabbles, and “reputation managers” for inconvenient backstories. It starts with visas; any foreigner with adequate funds can buy one, by investing two million pounds in the U.K. (Ten million can buy you permanent residency.)

London property is always an option for such investments. After King Constantine II was ousted in the wake of a military coup in Greece, in 1967, he moved into a mansion overlooking Hampstead Heath; ever since, global plutocrats have sought safe harbor in the city’s leafy precincts. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian buyers raced into London’s housing market. One real-estate agent described his Russian clients “gleefully

plonking saddlebags of cash on the desk.” According to new figures from Transparency International, Russians who have been accused of corruption or of having links to the Kremlin have bought at least 1.5 billion pounds’ worth of property in Great Britain. The real number is no doubt higher, but it is virtually impossible to ascertain, because so many of these transactions are obscured by layers of secrecy. *The Economist* describes London as “[a slop-bucket](#) for dodgy Russian wealth.”

Bullough has made a careful study of this process. In an earlier book, “[Moneyland: Why Thieves and Crooks Now Rule the World and How to Take It Back](#)” (2018), he explained that, for moneyed arrivistes in the U.K., a glamorous new home is the first step on a well-established pathway for laundering reputations. Next up: hire a P.R. firm. “The PR agency puts them in touch with biddable members of parliament,” Bullough says, “who are prepared to put their names to the billionaire’s charitable foundation. The foundation then launches itself at a fashionable London event space—a gallery is ideal.” Ultimately, the smart billionaire will “get his name on an institution, or become so closely associated with one that it may as well be.” Major gifts to universities are popular. So are football clubs.

What’s most apt about Bullough’s butler analogy is the appearance of gray-flannel propriety, which can impart an aura of respectability to even the most disreputable fortune. The mercenary grubbiness of Britain’s role might be “hard to comprehend,” Bullough suggests, “because it is so at variance with Britain’s public image.” Yet Belton and Bullough are joined in their dispiriting diagnosis by Tom Burgis, the author of the excellent book “[Kleptopia: How Dirty Money Is Conquering the World](#)” (2020). And by Britain’s National Crime Agency, which found that “many hundreds of billions of pounds of international criminal money” is laundered through U.K. banks and subsidiaries every year. And by Parliament’s own intelligence committee, which has described London as a “laundromat” for illicit Russian cash. And by the Foreign Affairs Committee of the House of Commons, which declared in 2018 that the ease with which Russia’s President and his allies hide their wealth in London has helped Putin pursue his agenda in Moscow.

Each time Putin has taken a provocative step in recent years—including the [assassination](#) of Alexander Litvinenko in Mayfair, in 2006; Russia’s

[annexation](#) of Crimea, in 2014; and the [poisoning](#) of Sergei Skripal and his daughter in Salisbury, in 2018—British politicians and commentators have acknowledged London’s complicity with his regime and vowed to take steps to address it. But this has largely amounted to lip service. The English political establishment, like everything else in London, appears to be for sale. Boris Johnson, in his tenure as London’s mayor, was a pitchman to foreign buyers, boasting that property in the city had grown so desirable it was “treated effectively as another asset class.” Russian oligarchs have donated millions of pounds to the Conservative Party, and have enlisted British lords to sit on the boards of their companies.

At a fund-raising auction at the Tory summer ball in 2014, a woman named Lubov Chernukhin—who was then married to Vladimir Chernukhin, one of Putin’s former deputy finance ministers—paid a hundred and sixty thousand pounds for the top prize: a tennis match with Johnson and David Cameron, who was Prime Minister at the time. Johnson defended the match, decrying “a miasma of suspicion” toward “all rich Russians in London.” A Russian magnate told Catherine Belton, “In London, money rules everyone. Anyone and anything can be bought.” The Russians came to London, the source said, “to corrupt the U.K. political elite.”

Another reason that London’s oligarchs have been able to forestall a day of reckoning is their tendency to pursue punishing legal action against people who challenge them, exploiting a legal system that is notably friendly toward libel plaintiffs. In January, 2021, the Russian dissident and anti-corruption campaigner Alexey Navalny, who had recently survived an assassination attempt, released a video, titled “[Putin’s Palace](#),” in which he accused the Russian President of being “obsessed with wealth and luxury,” and presented information about a billion-dollar compound that Putin had reportedly built for himself on the Black Sea. “Russia sells oil, gas, metals, fertilizer, and timber in huge quantities—but people’s incomes keep falling,” Navalny said. The oligarchs “influence political decisions from the shadows.” At one point, he held up a copy of Catherine Belton’s book.

Not long afterward, Roman Abramovich sued Belton and HarperCollins in London. “Putin’s People” had been on shelves for nearly a year, leading Belton to suspect that Navalny’s endorsement had likely prompted the suit. (Navalny has described Abramovich as “one of the key enablers and

beneficiaries of Russian kleptocracy.”) Within days, three other Russian billionaires filed lawsuits against the book, as did Rosneft, the national oil company. To Belton, it felt like “a concerted attack.”



ADT

"Do you want heater side or humidifier side tonight?"
Cartoon by Adam Douglas Thompson

And a terrifying one. Abramovich’s suit named Belton personally, meaning that her own home and savings would be at stake. The case was projected to cost ten million pounds if it went to trial, and under English law those who lose a suit can be ordered to pay their adversary’s legal costs. That’s part of why the rich like to take detractors to court in London. (Indeed, last fall, the Kazakh mining giant E.N.R.C. sued Tom Burgis over claims he made in “Kleptopia”; the case was dismissed on March 2nd.) Libel tourism is another chronic English problem that everyone bemoans but nobody does anything about.

This has meant terrific business for the oligarchs’ morally flexible attorneys; according to the British trade publication *The Lawyer*, some law firms charge a “[Russian premium](#)” for their services, of up to fifteen hundred pounds an hour. The attorneys who represent oligarchs have managed to remain largely unsullied by their unsavory doings. One lawyer involved in the HarperCollins suit is Geraldine Proudler, who previously sued the anti-corruption activist Bill Browder on behalf of a Russian official who was accused of involvement in the torture and murder of the lawyer Sergei

Magnitsky in 2009. (Browder prevailed in that case.) Remarkably, Proudlar has served as a trustee of English *PEN*, which advocates free speech and human rights.

In assessing this dire legal situation, it's important to consider not just the cases that are brought against books and articles but also the books and articles that are never published in England to begin with. In 2014, the American political scientist Karen Dawisha submitted her book "[Putin's Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia?](#)" to her longtime publisher, Cambridge University Press. After reviewing the manuscript, Dawisha's editor, John Haslam, wrote to her praising the book but saying that Cambridge could not publish it. "The risk is high that those implicated in the premise of the book—that Putin has a close circle of criminal oligarchs at his disposal and has spent his career cultivating this circle—would be motivated to sue," he explained. Even if the press ultimately prevailed, the expense of the proceedings could be ruinous, Haslam said. In a controlled fury, Dawisha wrote back that the U.K. had apparently become a "no-fly zone" when it came to publishing "the truth about this group." The oligarchs "feel free to buy Belgravia, kill dissidents in Piccadilly with Polonium 210, fight each other in the High Court, and hide their children in British boarding schools. And as a result of their growing knowledge about and influence in the UK, even the most significant institutions . . . cower and engage in pre-emptive book-burnings." (The book was ultimately published by Simon & Schuster in the United States.)

A major difficulty for would-be chroniclers of the kleptocrats is that, in England, a person bringing a libel suit does not have to prove that an assertion is untrue, so long as there's evidence of "serious harm"; instead, the author must prove that it is true. This is a fiendishly burdensome standard when it comes to, say, establishing the true ownership of a super-yacht, or the subtle dynamics of an influence campaign orchestrated by ex-K.G.B. spies. In "[Kleptopia](#)," Tom Burgis remarks that in the former Soviet Union the "skill prized above all others" was the ability to obfuscate the origins of stolen money. (On paper, Putin's real-estate portfolio consists chiefly of one conspicuously modest apartment. He has denied that the palace on the Black Sea belongs to him.) Here, the professional facilitators of London's butler class come in handy. There is a booming industry in

financial dissimulation: the creation of shell companies, tax shelters, offshore trusts.

Haslam, in his letter to Dawisha, had objected that “Putin has never been convicted” for the crimes described in the book. But, by making it perilous to publish allegations, however well documented, that haven’t yet resulted in a criminal conviction, the legal system can grant well-financed malefactors a free pass from scrutiny. According to an investigation by BuzzFeed News, U.S. intelligence believes that at least fourteen people have been assassinated on British soil by Russian mafia groups or secret services, which sometimes collaborate, but British authorities tend not to name suspects or bring charges. (Instead, they have concluded with an unsettling frequency that such deaths are suicides.) In an interview with NPR in late February, [Bill Browder](#) was asked whether he would name Russian oligarchs who had not yet been sanctioned but should be. “I live in London,” he said. “So it’s very unwise to name names.”

Catherine Belton named names. But she, too, is bedevilled by the challenge of producing absolute proof in a world of shadowy deniability. There is the official record—property deeds, legal convictions—and then there is what everyone knows. “It’s not just his money,” a onetime associate of Abramovich’s told her. “He is Putin’s representative.” As the oligarch Oleg Deripaska once explained, “If the state says we need to give it up, we’ll give it up. I don’t separate myself from the state. I have no other interests.” (He later claimed to have been joking.) Time and again in “Putin’s People,” Belton tells the official version of a story, and then shares what she understands to be the real story—the word on the street. She describes “an emerging KGB capitalism in which nothing was quite as it seemed.” This is what it looks like when a national economy is designed by ex-spies.

“Putin’s People” does include a denial from someone close to Abramovich, who said that he was not “acting under Kremlin direction” when he bought the Chelsea Football Club. Belton also uses a phrase that concedes the empirical limitations of her reporting: “whatever the truth of the matter.” But this was not enough for Abramovich, whose representatives argued that Sergei Pugachev was an unreliable source. “At no stage is the reader told that actually Abramovich is someone who is distant from Putin and doesn’t participate in the many and various corrupt schemes that are described,” his

lawyers asserted. They later argued, “It would be ludicrous to suggest that our client has any responsibility or influence over the behavior of the Russian state.”

In December, the case was settled. Belton and HarperCollins agreed to some changes and clarifications in future editions; the book would be amended to contain a more strenuous denial on the Chelsea claim, and to emphasize that the allegations relating to the team could not be characterized as incontrovertible facts. They also agreed to cut the line about Abramovich being “Putin’s representative,” and to include additional comments from his spokesperson. Chelsea released a smug statement expressing satisfaction that Belton had “apologized to Mr. Abramovich.” HarperCollins committed to making a payment to the charity of his choosing. Belton greeted this settlement as a victory—she would not have to go to trial, or make major changes to her book. But she seemed exhausted and demoralized. “This last year has felt like a war of attrition,” she said. The *Observer* columnist Nick Cohen, reflecting on the case, ventured that “oligarchs can manipulate the truth here as surely as Putin can in Russia.”

In the days following Putin’s invasion of Ukraine, a slow-motion comedy began to unfold in the various exotic ports in which billionaires moor their yachts. Some of these mega-vessels started motoring out to international waters, presumably on instructions from anxious Kremlin-affiliated owners. Others were reportedly setting course for the Maldives, which has no extradition treaty with the United States. The Graceful, a hundred-million-dollar yacht that is widely believed to belong to Vladimir Putin, had made a hasty departure from a German port on the eve of the invasion, and relocated to Russian waters, in Kaliningrad. Officials in France seized a boat linked to Igor Sechin, the C.E.O. of Rosneft.

Boris Johnson, meanwhile, announced that “oligarchs in London” would find that there was “nowhere to hide,” and said that he would form a kleptocracy cell at the National Crime Agency, to target “corrupt Russian assets hidden in the U.K.” The real test, however, is not so much what legal authorities are created as how they are used. In 2018, Britain introduced a promising new ordinance concerning “unexplained wealth,” which meant that a potentate could be required to account for the source of the funds used to buy a particular asset or risk losing it altogether. Yet it has so far been

used in only four cases, none of them targeting Russian oligarchs. In one proceeding, against the family of the former President of Kazakhstan, authorities froze three properties. After the move was challenged in court, though, the order was reversed. If a lack of political will was to blame for the paucity of cases, so was a lack of resources. The National Crime Agency is notoriously underfunded. Addressing the issue of why there hadn't been more "unexplained wealth orders," the agency's director said, "We are, bluntly, concerned about the impact on our budget, because these are wealthy people with access to the best lawyers."

But, given the bloodshed in Ukraine, and the international community's surprising resolve to isolate the Kremlin economically, couldn't things be different this time? One great irony of the story that Bullough relates in "*Butler to the World*" is that, after decades of obliging the global criminal élite, Britain now has a singular opportunity to turn the tables. Lured by "Tier 1" visas and luxury real estate and fabulous shopping and the comfortable prospect of lasting impunity, the oligarchs entrusted their fortunes to the butlers of Britain. If the British government were to have a genuine change of heart and start demanding transparency and freezing assets, a sanctuary could become a snare. After all, what does Putin own on paper? If he has left his many assets in the care of a coterie of front men who have built lives for themselves in London, then London has the upper hand. It could help isolate Putin—by pinching off his access to resources, and perhaps even by motivating the front men to pressure him to change his behavior, or to abandon him altogether.

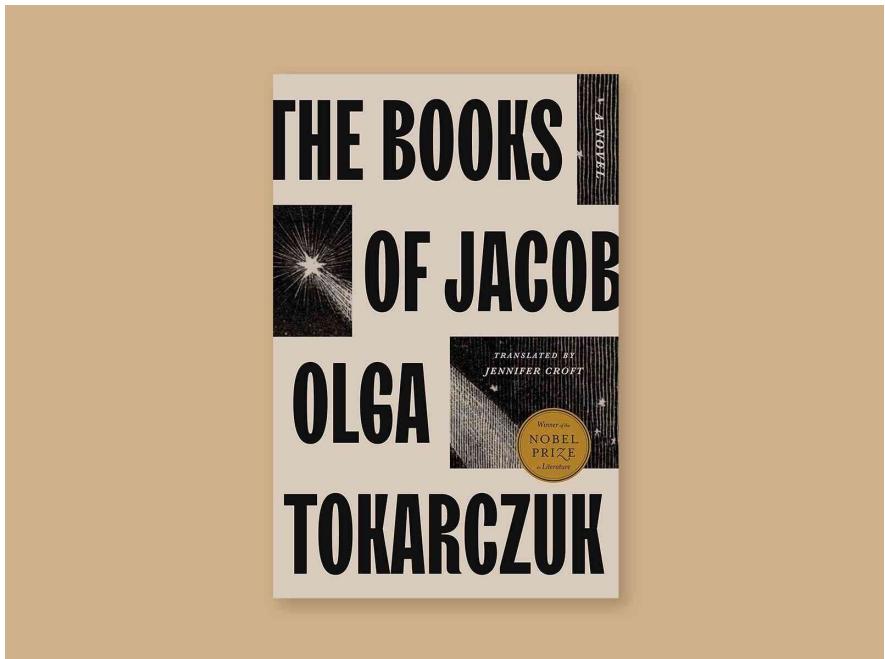
Roman Abramovich, for one, seems to have grown worried about the long-term prospects of British hospitality. In late February, he reportedly flew to Belarus to help Russian and Ukrainian negotiators secure a "peaceful resolution" to the conflict. (The lawyers who had previously claimed that it would be "ludicrous" to think there was a relationship of influence between Abramovich and the Kremlin volunteered no explanation for why he might now have a seat at the table.) Abramovich also said that he was putting Chelsea up for sale. There should be no shortage of potential buyers; last year, Newcastle United was purchased by a consortium of investors representing the Saudi sovereign wealth fund, which is chaired by Mohammed bin Salman, who authorized the murder and dismemberment of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi. Net proceeds from any sale would be

dedicated to a fund for “all victims of the war in Ukraine,” Abramovich pledged. Even so, it appeared as if he were seeking to unload assets while he still had the chance. There was talk that Abramovich was also looking to sell his home in Kensington. A Chinese buyer was said to be circling.

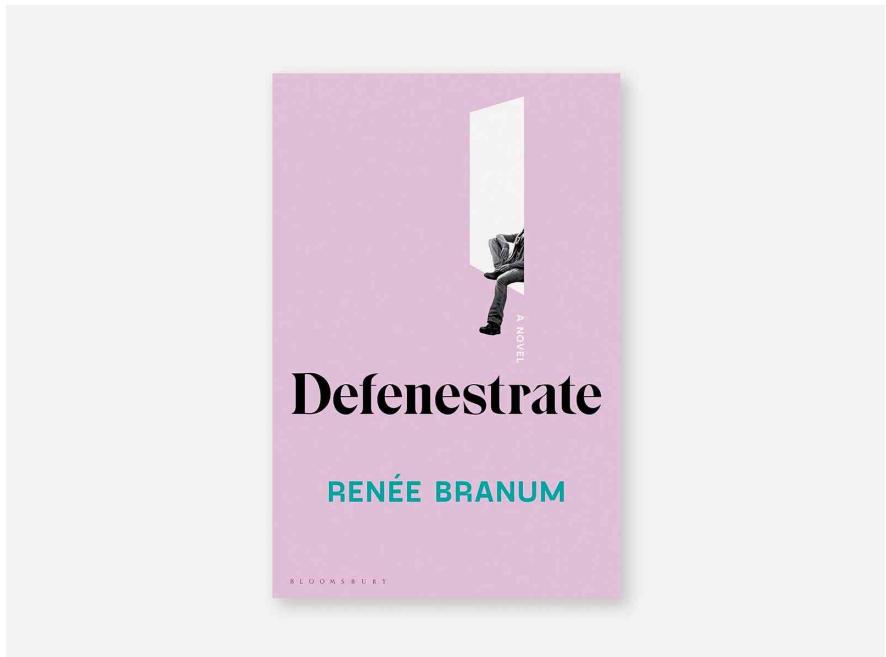
On March 10th, the British government finally sanctioned Abramovich, along with six other Russian oligarchs. The Chelsea Football Club can no longer charge for tickets or sign new players, but it can continue to play, and players and staff still get paid; Abramovich just can’t profit from the team. How much will these sanctions accomplish? Not enough, Bullough seems to suggest, given the multitude of tricks available for obscuring transactions. The system, he writes, “derives its power and resilience from the fact it does not rely on any one place: if one jurisdiction becomes hostile, money effortlessly relocates to somewhere that isn’t.”

Ironically, this is the very rationalization that Britain’s butler class has long offered in its own defense: if deep-pocketed foreigners can’t do their business here, they’ll just take it elsewhere. In recent weeks, some have worried that dirty money is so woven into the fabric of British life that, as one parliamentary report from 2020 suggests, it “cannot be untangled.” But many Londoners share another fear, which is that it can—that the money will simply migrate to a more permissive jurisdiction. Dubai, for one, seems positively eager to sink to the occasion. And what becomes of Britain if that happens? The prospects for a post-Brexit economy were looking bleak already. Will Britain find itself, once again, without a role?

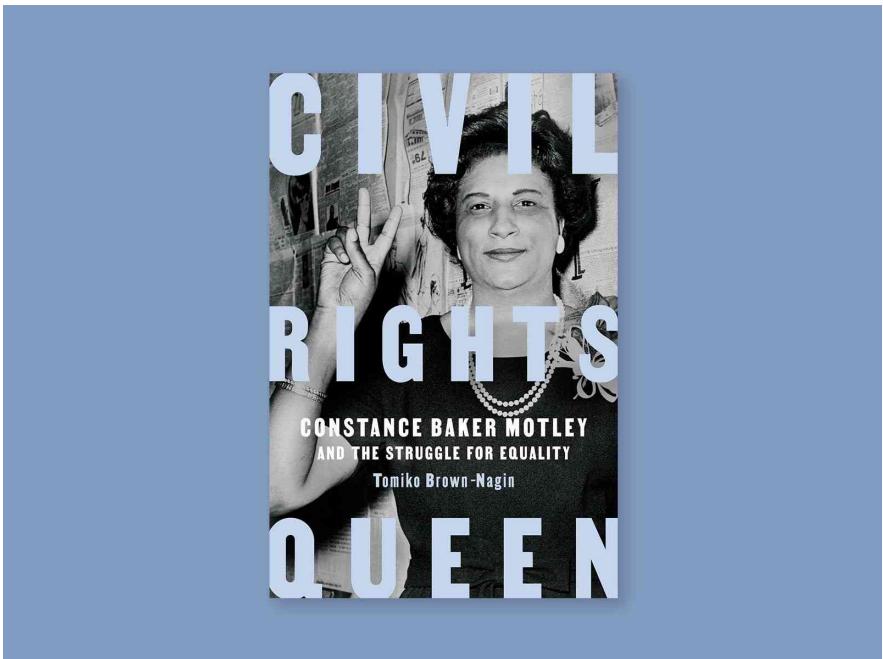
On March 5th, Chelsea played Burnley. Prior to kickoff, at Turf Moor, Burnley’s stadium in Lancashire, both teams on the pitch and the fans in the stands paused for a show of solidarity with the people of Ukraine. For a solid minute, everyone stood clapping. In the midst of this, however, a discordant sound could be heard, as visiting Chelsea fans chimed in with a chant of their own. They were singing the name of the club’s beloved owner, who had just announced that he would be selling the team. His largesse is credited with transforming Chelsea from a moribund club to a championship-winning juggernaut. These supporters appeared unfazed by the accusations against him; they were just grateful for his munificence, and sorry to see him go. “Abramovich!” the English fans chanted. “Abramovich!” ♦



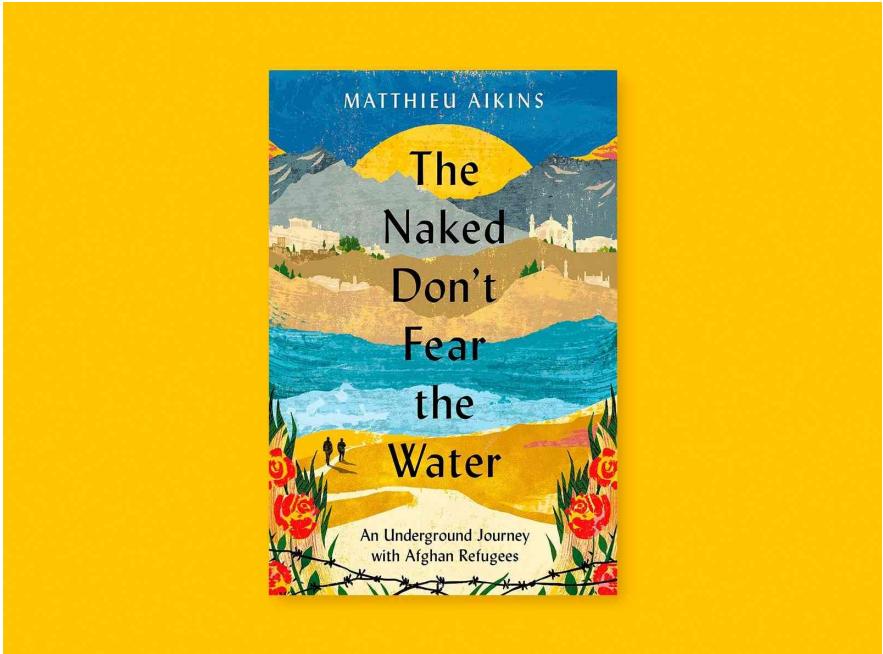
The Books of Jacob, by *Olga Tokarczuk*, translated from the Polish by *Jennifer Croft* (Riverhead). Published in Poland before its author won a Nobel Prize, in 2018, this epic reimagines the life of the eighteenth-century Jewish heretic and self-proclaimed Messiah Jacob Frank. Tokarczuk's Frank is perhaps motivated less by faith than by political expediency and even erotic desires, as he converts to both Islam and Christianity and fashions a subversive sect drawing on many religions. Crisscrossing Europe, he encounters a huge cast of characters, including a devoted, naïve "messenger," an anti-Semitic bishop, and a slippery Polish translator. In the popular movement that Frank inspired, Tokarczuk finds a multiethnic, multi-faith tableau of Europe that repudiates the increasingly nationalist, historically revisionist views of many of its modern nation-states.



Defenestrate, by Renée Branum (Bloomsbury). The protagonist of this novel, which riffs gently on the historical Defenestrations of Prague, is a young American woman whose family is dogged by a propensity for falling out of windows. Family lore says that it all started with a Prague forebear who shoved a stonemason out of a window, thinking that the man was having an affair with one of his daughters. The perpetrator fled to America, apparently cursed: his kin are continually falling off or out of things and learn to “keep far back from balcony railings.” When the protagonist’s beloved brother defenestrates himself, she begins to ask questions about the origin myth she’s been told.



Civil Rights Queen, by *Tomiko Brown-Nagin* (Pantheon). This nuanced biography of Constance Baker Motley examines the paradoxes in the remarkable life of a “first”: the first Black woman elected to the New York State Senate, the first female Manhattan borough president, the first Black woman appointed to the federal judiciary. Motley gained national fame as a lawyer for the N.A.A.C.P. Legal Defense Fund, where she worked on *Brown v. Board of Education* and fought to desegregate Southern public universities. She forged high-profile connections—including ones with Thurgood Marshall and Martin Luther King, Jr.—but her identity profoundly shaped her career; she was passed over for promotions or was given them by people interested “in anointing an outsider to an important role.” That Motley is little known today is “a kind of historical malpractice,” Brown-Nagin writes; this book is a convincing corrective.



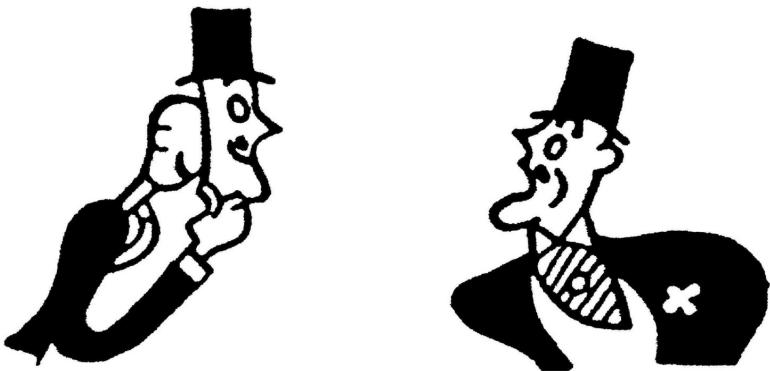
The Naked Don't Fear the Water, by *Matthieu Aikins* (Harper). In 2016, while reporting in Afghanistan, the author of this startling, humane account of the “refugee underground” abandoned his passports in order to pass as an Afghan migrant fleeing war-stricken Kabul. Entrusting his life to smugglers, illegally crossing from Bulgaria into Turkey, and boarding an “overgrown pool toy” of a boat to Lesbos, Aikins logs the often fatal obstacles that refugees face and provides an impassioned critique of cruel border policies. “In liberal democracies, the border has a unique power to transmute ordinary needs into criminal desires,” he writes.

Casting Call

- [Neverland Comes to Broadway](#)

By [Michael Schulman](#)

Rewind the clock on Michael Jackson—past the child-molestation allegations, the reworked face, Neverland, Bubbles the chimp—and eventually you get to Little Michael, the silver-voiced eleven-year-old of the Jackson 5, crooning “[I Want You Back](#)” on “The Ed Sullivan Show” in a purple fedora. It’s not exactly a comforting image, given the ruthless discipline that Jackson’s father meted out, the crushing loneliness that he recalled later, and the morphing to come. But there’s a magic to Little Michael that’s hard to resist: the candy-bright costumes, the Motown riffs, that *voice*. That’s the thrill that the new Broadway show “[MJ the Musical](#)” (original title: “Don’t Stop ’til You Get Enough”) seeks to re-create when Little Michael emerges, in flashback, belting “ABC” in groovy regalia.



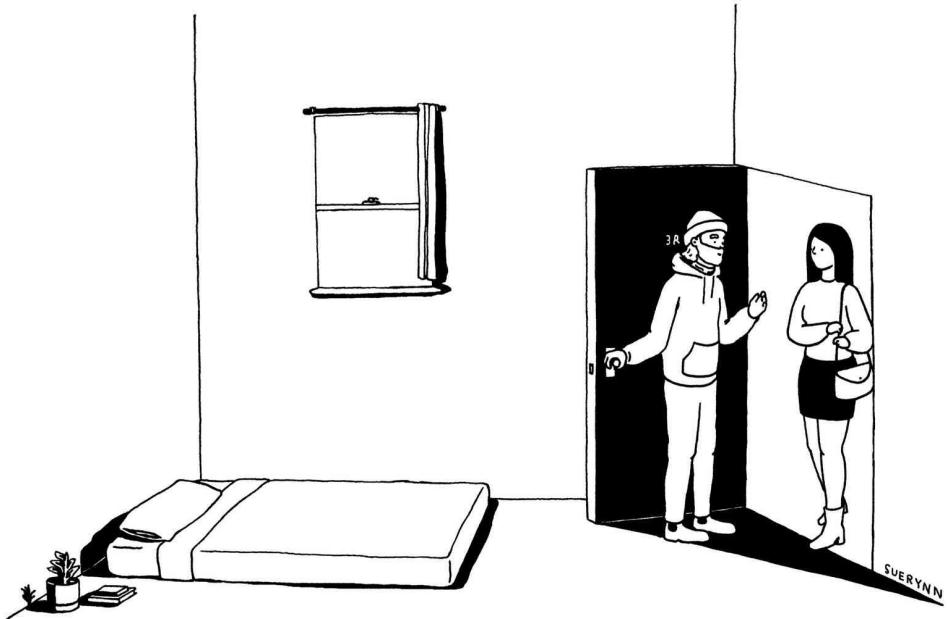
Still, who would send their kids into such a minefield? After open calls in seven cities, two child actors were chosen to alternate in the role of Little Michael, Christian Wilson and Walter Russell III. “I was singing before I was talking,” Christian (twelve, soft-spoken) said recently. He lives in Norfolk, Virginia, and his parents drove him six hours to New York for the audition. He recalled walking into a building “with a lot of escalators,” where he sang “The Love You Save.” Then he was invited to a “boot camp” with six other kids and got the part, his professional début. Walter (thirteen, outgoing), who lives in Harlem and shares a birthday with Jackson, is a

veteran: he's played Simba in "The Lion King," appeared in the Metropolitan Opera's "[Fire Shut Up in My Bones](#)," and hosts "the PAW-cast," in which he interviews "Lion King" cub stars. "I was dancing when I was a baby," he said. "My mom was, like, this is something that we can use."

The two boys were having lunch before a matinée (Walter was on), along with their parents. They first met at a photo shoot, after being cast; Walter had auditioned by tape while touring with "The Lion King," but it took three years to land the part. ("It was the most crazy journey I have ever had.") Christian, who ordered pizza and sweet tea, wore a wool cap and a leather jacket; Walter, who got spaghetti and meatballs with cranberry juice, wore a Jackson 5 hoodie. They sometimes meet for intermission rap battles, or to play [Fortnite](#) on their dressing-room PlayStation. Walter said that his favorite part of the show is "Thriller," which was ironic, because when he was three he saw the video and got nightmares: "I was, like, 'Why would you show me this?'"

Christian was also scared by "Thriller." "I used to have the same dream over and over again: being chased by the werewolf," he said.

"I would be getting chased by a zombie!" Walter said. They laughed. Their parents grew up as Jackson fans. Christian's father, Harold, is a sheriff's sergeant and plays the trumpet. "I met my wife in college," he said. "She used to dance right in front of me on the football field. We had a 'Thriller' routine." His wife, Kris, a teacher, recalled watching Jackson début the moonwalk in 1983, on the "Motown 25" TV special. "My bedroom had all the posters," she said. Walter's mother, Angela, had seen the Jacksons in concert as a child. "I'm the ultimate fan, because I gave birth on Michael Jackson's birthday," she said. She'd been in labor with Walter the night before. "I was, like, I gotta get to midnight! And my doctor said, 'Are you crazy?'"



"What I lack in stuff I make up for in generational wealth."
Cartoon by Suerynn Lee

“Christian was born the same year Michael passed away, so we kind of feel it’s like a relay race,” Harold added.

Doing the show, both kids had learned new things about Jackson. Christian didn’t know that Quincy Jones had produced “Off the Wall.” Walter hadn’t realized that Jackson said he planted the rumor that he slept in an oxygen chamber, or the extent of his childhood trauma. “Some people don’t know the full story of Michael Jackson,” he noted.

As for other disturbing episodes—the kind that would make some parents keep their children miles away from anything having to do with him—the musical only hints at them. Jackson’s estate, which has endorsed the show, has denied the accusations that Jackson abused children—and the young actors’ parents appeared to have no qualms. Angela said that she had discussed the issue with Walter, “but I also say that you have to remember he was never convicted of anything.” The Wilsons agreed. Kris said, “If someone did something to a child, I know for me, I don’t want your money. You need to go to jail! But it seems like a lot of these accusers were after monetary gain.” Harold added, “What I’ve learned from working in our city jail in Norfolk is I’m not a judge.”

The boys watched this exchange blankly. Leaving the restaurant, they showed off their moonwalks. The secret, Christian said, is to “go off your heels.” ♦

Comment

- [The Complexities of the Ukraine Dilemma](#)

By [Steve Coll](#)

In September, 1949, two Ukrainian agents working with the C.I.A. landed near Lviv, in what was then the Soviet Union. They were the vanguard of an operation that would acquire the code name Redsox. Its aim was to connect with anti-Soviet insurgents fighting by the tens of thousands in Ukraine, as well as in smaller numbers elsewhere on Russia's rim. Soviet moles betrayed the program, however, and at least three-quarters of the Redsox agents disappeared. By the mid-nineteen-fifties, Moscow had quelled Ukraine's rebellion while forcibly displacing or killing hundreds of thousands of people. The C.I.A.'s glancing intervention was "ill-fated and tragic," an internal history concluded.



Illustration by João Fazenda

Since Vladimir Putin ordered Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine, on February 24th, the United States has acted as if to redeem itself; the Biden Administration has led its *NATO* allies to airlift planeloads of Javelin anti-tank weapons and Stinger anti-aircraft missiles to Ukrainian forces, while pledging billions of dollars more in military assistance and imposing punishing sanctions on Russia's economy and Putin's élite. More than three weeks after the crisis began, the mood in Western capitals remains pugnacious and emotive. Last week, the Ukrainian President, Volodymyr Zelensky, appeared by video before Canada's Parliament, and, the next day, he addressed a joint session of Congress. In both venues, politicians rose to

applaud and chanted an improbably viral invocation of Ukrainian glory: “*Slava Ukraini!*”

Yet *NATO* has declined to provide Ukraine what Zelensky has repeatedly sought—a no-fly zone to ground Russian warplanes or a transfer of fighter jets—for fear that such actions would bring the U.S. and Russia into direct combat. “We will not fight a war against Russia in Ukraine,” Joe Biden reiterated on Twitter recently. “A direct confrontation between *NATO* and Russia is World War III. And something we must strive to prevent.” The President is, of course, right about that, and yet, as Russian planes and artillery daily pound Ukrainian apartment buildings and hospitals, he can surely understand why Zelensky is pressing for more.

Zelensky has been justly celebrated for his personal courage and his adaptations of Churchillian rhetoric for the TikTok era. His presentation to Congress last week was a study in discomforting moral provocation. He invoked Pearl Harbor and September 11th to describe Ukraine’s daily experience under Russian missiles and bombs, then showed a graphic video depicting the recent deaths of children and other innocents. Later that day, Biden called Putin “a war criminal” and announced a new package of military supplies, including anti-aircraft systems and drones. The aid may help, but it cannot relieve Zelensky of the terrible predicaments he must manage in the weeks ahead. Ukraine may be facing a long war costing the lives of hundreds of thousands of its citizens, a war that may not be winnable, even with the most robust assistance that *NATO* is likely to provide. In any event, *NATO*’s greatest priority is to strengthen its own defenses and dissuade Putin from attacking the alliance.

Zelensky’s alternative may be to pursue a ceasefire deal with Putin that could require Ukraine to forswear future *NATO* membership, among other bitter concessions. In the light of Putin’s annexation of Crimea, in 2014, and his years-long armed support for pro-Russian enclaves in Ukraine’s east, such a deal would be unstable and unreliable. Still, Zelensky appears torn. Even as he asked Congress last week to “do more” for Ukraine’s war effort, he pleaded with Biden to lead the world to peace, and he recently signalled his willingness to bargain with Putin on Ukraine’s relationship with *nato*. The country’s past failure to win admission to the alliance is “a truth” that “must be recognized,” he said.

It has become common to describe Russia's invasion as a watershed in history comparable to 9/11 or to the fall of the Berlin Wall. "The war in Ukraine marks a turning point for our continent and our generation," President Emmanuel Macron, of France, said earlier this month. Perhaps, but some of this speculation about Europe's destiny and the future of Great Power competition may be premature. Certainly, the war has already produced a humanitarian disaster of shocking and destabilizing dimensions. Three million Ukrainians have fled their country. The 1.8 million of them who have gone to Poland constitute a population roughly the size of Warsaw's. If the fighting drags on and Ukraine implodes, the country will export many more destitute people, and, as happened in the former Yugoslavia during the nineteen-nineties, it may also draw in opportunists, including mercenaries and extremists.

Meanwhile, Russia's economy, according to the International Monetary Fund, could shrink by thirty-five per cent this year under the weight of Western sanctions. Putin's oligarchs and enablers can endure the loss of super-yachts and private jets, but a sudden economic contraction on that scale would crush ordinary Russians and inevitably cost lives. ("Our economy will need deep structural changes," Putin acknowledged last week, adding, "They won't be easy.") Russia's isolation from large swaths of global banking and trade, and its loss of access to advanced U.S. technologies, could last a long time, too: democracies often find it easier to impose sanctions than to remove them, even when the original cause of a conflict subsides. (Ask Cuba.) "When the history of this era is written, Putin's war on Ukraine will have left Russia weaker and the rest of the world stronger," Biden said in his recent State of the Union address.

Still, some introspection may be in order. In his address, the President also declared that, "in the battle between democracy and autocracies, democracies are rising to the moment." But Europe is troubled by illiberal populism, including in Poland. And Donald Trump—who, just two days before Russia rolled into Ukraine, called Putin's preparatory moves "genius"—retains a firm hold on the Republican Party, and appears to be all in for a reëlection campaign in 2024. As long as Trump's return to the White House is a possibility, Biden's declarations will require some asterisks.

“Every night for three weeks now,” Zelensky told Congress, “various Ukrainian cities, Odessa and Kharkiv, Chernihiv and Sumy, Zhytomyr and Lviv, Mariupol and Dnipro,” have endured attacks. “We are asking for a reply, for an answer to this terror.” Ukraine is an unlucky country, and the restoration of its independence and security may be a long and costly project, but it is one the U.S. cannot afford to abandon again. ♦

Crossword

- [The Crossword: Wednesday, March 16, 2022](#)

By [Elizabeth C. Gorski](#)

Dept. of Psychopharmacology

- [The Pied Piper of Psychedelic Toads](#)

By [Kimon de Greet](#)

Content

This content can also be viewed on the site it [originates](#) from.

In 2013, a charismatic Mexican doctor took the stage at Burning Man, in Nevada, to give a *TEDx* talk on what he called “the ultimate experience.” The doctor’s name was Octavio Rettig, and he would soon become known by his first name alone, like some pop diva or soccer star. He told the crowd that, years earlier, he had overcome a crack addiction by using a powerful psychedelic substance produced by toads in the Sonoran Desert. Afterward, he shared “toad medicine” with a tribal community in northern Mexico, where the rise of narco-trafficking had brought on a methamphetamine crisis. Through this work, he came to believe that smoking toad, as the practice is called, was an ancient Mesoamerican ritual—a “unique toadal language,” shared by Mayans and Aztecs—that had been stamped out during the colonial era. He announced that he’d restored a lost tradition, and that he had a duty to share it with others. “Sooner or later, everyone in the world will have this experience,” he told an interviewer after the talk.

At the time, Octavio, who was thirty-four, was virtually unknown within the world of psychedelics—as was smoking toad. But two years later Vice made him the subject of a laudatory documentary, calling him “a hallucinogenic-toad prophet.” (The film has more than three and a half million views on YouTube.) Octavio became, as Klaudia Oliver, the organizer of the *TEDx* talk, put it, “the Pied Piper of toad.” By Octavio’s count, he has introduced toad smoking to more than ten thousand people.

The practice, after decades of obscurity, is now entering the psychedelic mainstream. “If we were looking at popularity on a graph, the line was pretty close to the bottom for the past four decades,” Alan Davis, a clinical psychologist who studies psychedelics at Ohio State University, said. “That line has gone exponential.” Hunter Biden credits toad with keeping him off cocaine for a year. In 2019, Mike Tyson said on Joe Rogan’s podcast that, ever since smoking toad, he’s “never been the same.” When I first spoke with Octavio, last year, he told me that his work was “the trigger for toad medicine to be spread all over the planet.”

Smoking toad has been likened, in one guide to psychedelics, to “being strapped to the nose of a rocket that flies into the sun and evaporates.” An account from the nineteen-eighties describes how, unlike most hallucinogens, which distort reality, toad “completely dissolves reality as we know it, leaving neither hallucinations nor anyone to watch them.” Michael Pollan, who recently wrote a book on psychedelic science, tried the drug after being warned that it was “the Everest of psychedelics.” He wrote that the “violent narrative arc” of his trip—terror and a sense of ego dissolution, culminating in relief and gratitude—“made it difficult to extract much information or knowledge from the journey.”

Most people say that the experience is euphoric, even life-changing. But, for some, smoking toad can be nightmarish. The drug’s effects come on within seconds, and it’s easy for a novice user to become panicked, which can manifest in reactions such as high blood pressure or tachycardia. These can be dangerous for people with preexisting conditions, which might be the case for those who are using toad after years of drug abuse. Some people also experience flashbacks, called reactivations, after a trip. “I’ve been waking up in fear like I’ve died—pure adrenaline, heart racing, hyperventilating,” a woman wrote in a support group on Facebook, ten days out from smoking toad. But researchers caution against inferring too much from any one subject’s experience; according to analyses of recent surveys, as many as three-quarters of users have reported these reactivations, with most of them describing the flashbacks as positive or neutral.

Only one species of toad, *Incilius alvarius*, is known to induce these sensations. Commonly known as the Sonoran Desert toad, it is found in the arid borderlands between Mexico and the United States. The toad spends most of the year burrowed underground, emerging to mate during the summer-monsoon season. In order to repel predators, it secretes toxins from its skin. Dogs sometimes die from ingesting the toad, and regional pet hospitals issue warnings about it. But, in the nineteen-sixties, an Italian pharmacologist published a chemical analysis of the toads’ skin, later inspiring Ken Nelson, a researcher from Texas, to conduct a series of daring experiments. He obtained the toads’ poison by squeezing, or “milking,” glands on their necks. (This process, which is not unlike popping a pimple, can be done without injuring the toad.) The poison dried into a crystalline

substance, and Nelson realized that vaporizing it nullified its toxicity, producing one of the most powerful hallucinogenic agents on Earth.

The scientific name of this compound is five-MethOxy-N, N-Dimethyltryptamine, or 5-MeO-DMT, which many people refer to as the “God Molecule.” In 2011, the U.S. banned 5-MeO-DMT; it is also illegal in several other countries, including Germany and China. But, in recent years, researchers have become interested in its potential therapeutic applications. As with many other psychedelics, the compound can be synthesized in laboratories and is thought to be nonaddictive and low in toxicity; unlike with many other psychedelics, the trip is relatively short, typically lasting around thirty minutes. Davis believes that 5-MeO-DMT might be administered more cheaply, and to more patients, than substances such as psilocybin, which can remain psychoactive for up to six hours.

In 2018, Davis published a survey in the *Journal of Psychopharmacology* of some five hundred 5-MeO-DMT users. Of the two hundred and eighty-three respondents who struggled with substance abuse, roughly sixty per cent claimed that their condition had improved—around double the percentage that report improvement after more conventional therapies. Davis acknowledged that these findings could be biased toward positive outcomes: people who have had bad experiences may be less likely to participate in research. But after surveying fifty-one military veterans at a clinic in Mexico, where the drug is unregulated, Davis came away with an even stronger sense that the substance may have healing benefits. At the clinic, which is run by the psychedelic researcher Martín Polanco, veterans took 5-MeO-DMT and ibogaine, a hallucinogen originally derived from a central-African plant. Davis and his colleagues found “significant and very large reductions” in suicidal thoughts, cognitive impairment, and P.T.S.D. symptoms among participants. The first laboratory study of 5-MeO-DMT in a human subject also involved a patient of Polanco’s—an Air Force veteran who suffered from P.T.S.D. and alcoholism. Brain scans before and after treatment with 5-MeO-DMT and ibogaine showed changes in neural activity in regions of the brain that are associated with alcohol abuse. Three months in, the veteran had stopped drinking heavily.

There are many theories for why psychedelics might help treat addiction. A 2015 review of clinical research into hallucinogens highlighted “the role of

mystical or other meaningful experiences as mediators of therapeutic effects.” Some clinical researchers believe that psychedelics, by provoking a dramatic shift in consciousness, can help people reprocess traumatic memories, arrive at new insights, and undergo profound and lasting changes in mood. And 5-MeO-DMT, as Polanco put it, is “the most reliably mystical of the psychedelics.”



“We will now begin boarding Group 2 and anyone from Group 3 or 4 bold enough to try.”
Cartoon by Asher Perlman

A few years ago, Veterans Exploring Treatment Solutions, a Texas-based nonprofit, began sponsoring 5-MeO-DMT and ibogaine treatments for veterans at health centers in Mexico. A host of biotechnology companies are now working on treatments that use 5-MeO-DMT. One British firm has raised more than a hundred million dollars in venture capital for developing, among other therapies, a 5-MeO-DMT intranasal treatment for depression. Yet even some clinical researchers who find the substance promising are wary of expanding access before it is better understood. “Everything in the beginning looks like it works really, really well,” Walter Dunn, a member of the F.D.A.’s Psychopharmacologic Drugs Advisory Committee, told me. “But, once you run the big trials and you expose it to a broad swath of the population, those benefits always come down.” And then, he noted, you start seeing the range of adverse reactions. A handful of clinical trials are currently under way, and key questions—about optimal dosage, interactions

with other medications, and so on—remain hotly debated. Meanwhile, among the many dozens of underground practitioners serving toad medicine and its synthetic equivalent, Octavio remains the most visible, and also the most divisive.

Polanco, who was introduced to toad by a former patient of Octavio’s, told me, “I owe my work with toad medicine indirectly to him.” But many researchers and toad practitioners also expressed grave concerns about Octavio’s approach, which includes serving toad to as many people as possible. As Polanco told me, 5-MeO-DMT can induce “a kind of ontological shock.” He sometimes warns his patients, “This can cure P.T.S.D.—or it can cause it.”

Last summer, I met Octavio in Sonora, a state in northwest Mexico where *Incilius alvarius* is found. He wore a trucker hat with a toad on it—a gift from a Mexico City policeman who had recently smoked with him. “How are you, bro?” he asked, clasping my hand. He is tall, fair-skinned, and muscular, with sinuous forearms and long, tousled hair. He seems to pour energy into his interactions, as if willing the people around him into his orbit.

Octavio had invited me to observe his toad-smoking sessions around the state. He serves toad to as many as twenty people at a time—“patients,” as he calls them. He tells everyone to show up sober and to fast for eight hours beforehand, and he charges roughly two hundred and fifty dollars a person. Octavio models his approach on shamanic rituals, though he acknowledges that this is highly interpretive, given that smoking toad is a “lost tradition.” He fills a glass pipe with flakes of toad secretion, lights it, and then instructs the patient to inhale deeply. As the substance takes effect, he picks up a wooden rattle and begins a series of Indigenous Mexican chants. “I could not do toad medicine without the chanting,” he once said.

Yet, for all this ceremony, the sessions can be unsettlingly casual. There is no restriction on bystanders’ watching, and some of them take videos that end up online. Octavio frequently smokes cannabis during sessions, leaving his patients in the care of assistants. Some people scream and writhe during their trips; others go still, or throw up, or become violent. People have had spontaneous orgasms. One day, I saw people film a woman who menstruated

through her white shorts during a trip; later, she shared a photograph on Instagram of her and Octavio, adorned with an animated frog and the words “love you.”

Octavio grew up in Guadalajara, nine hundred miles south of Sonora. His mother, Bertha Hinojosa, ran a small bookstore, and he used to work behind the counter. His father, Werner Rettig, taught calculus at the local university. When Octavio and his younger brother, David, were kids, their parents divorced; later, Werner developed an interest in alternative medicine and became a successful homeopath. David seems skeptical of his father’s work, telling me that Werner was good at marketing himself. But Octavio considers Werner, who died in 1998, an inspiration. “I think that he will feel very proud of me by now,” Octavio said. “I think we could be very good friends.”

When Octavio and David were growing up, they attended a Catholic school, and for a while Octavio aspired to join the priesthood. He was a star student who had “a very special way of convincing people,” David recalled. On one occasion, Octavio persuaded a group of boys to give him their savings, insisting that he’d worked out how to win the lottery. In his teen-age years, he began experimenting with drugs. One afternoon, he got drunk, smoked pot, took cocaine, and swallowed a handful of benzos. He woke up the next day with no memory of what had happened. “I wanted something more,” Octavio recalled, in “The Toad of Dawn: 5-MeO-DMT and the Rising of Cosmic Consciousness,” his 2016 memoir. “That was the feeling then: a constant search, an insatiable hunger.” His mother had fired several employees for stealing from her bookstore; she eventually realized that Octavio had been the culprit. Still, she continued to support him, covering some of his living expenses so that he could study medicine at the University of Guadalajara, a six-year program. He graduated with passable grades: soon afterward, he got married, and his wife gave birth to a child. He continued using drugs, going on benders with Gerardo Sandoval, a former classmate. They drove across the country, taking LSD, mushrooms, mescaline, and other substances. On one acid-soaked excursion, Octavio fell in love with a hitchhiker. That was the end of his marriage.

Octavio also became addicted to crack during those years—a period that his mother described as “a living death.” She said that she bought a pharmacy

for him to run, but he purloined the inventory to get high, losing the business. Then, in the summer of 2006, Sandoval introduced him to smoking toad, after hearing about it from two Americans who had come to Mexico in search of the substance. “As soon as I started to inhale these vapors, the cravings started to vanish,” Octavio recalled. “The toad medicine, every single time, brought me back to the same place—inner peace, calmness, love.”

Octavio and Sandoval travelled to Sonora, where they gathered up hundreds of toads and emptied their glands onto glass plates. Octavio began smoking toad multiple times a day. Within eighteen months, he says, he was off crack, although he continued to smoke toad and cannabis. He began serving toad at outdoor raves, among addicts, and to his friends, often free of charge. He moved to Hermosillo, the capital of Sonora, where he got a job as a general practitioner at a chain pharmacy, giving him access to a stream of potential toad clients. He told his brother that he was “doing research” with the toads. David recalled visiting Octavio’s apartment: “You would sit on a couch and a toad would jump out.” His family sensed a change in him. “When Octavio met *sapito*,” Bertha said, using the diminutive Spanish term for toad, “that’s when he found his mission.”

At around this time, Octavio began to wonder if Native communities in Sonora had ever used toad medicine. Mexico is home to numerous shamanic rituals involving psychoactive substances, such as psilocybin and peyote; farther south, communities in the Amazon have been brewing ayahuasca for centuries. Although the most concentrated source of 5-MeO-DMT is the Sonoran Desert toad, the compound is also produced by some plant species in Latin America, where it was traditionally used in snuffs. One of Octavio’s uncles was an archeologist who had excavated Aztec artifacts, and David was studying archeology, too. They told Octavio about a rich archive of iconography in Mesoamerica—pottery, paintings, pipes ornamented with toads. He became convinced that at least one of the tribes of Sonora had, at some point, performed rituals with toad.

His hunch was seemingly confirmed in 2011, when he was introduced to the Seri, a remote tribe on the eastern shore of the Gulf of California. The tribe’s territory falls within a drug corridor to the U.S., and there had been an increase in addiction among its members. Octavio claimed that he served

them toad, and that several tribal elders then began speaking of a lost tradition. “None of these tribes remembered that this toad contains this medicine,” Octavio said, at a psychology conference in 2017. The Seri authorized him as a practitioner of their traditional rituals, and they began calling him *el doctor sapo*, or “the toad doctor.”

The Seri hold their New Year celebrations at the end of June, marking the onset of the summer monsoons. On the first day, I accompanied Octavio to a gathering at a house in Bahía Kino, a coastal town south of Seri territory. Down-tempo electronic music played from a speaker, and two dozen people milled around. I spoke to a young couple with a toddler and another baby on the way; when I asked where they were spending the night, they said, “We don’t know, we’re just following Octavio.” One of Octavio’s patients, a man who asked to be called J.R., sat on the outskirts of the group. He had come from Houston, where he had become hooked on meth and Xanax, after years of being a dealer. He’d been in rehab nearly a dozen times; his addiction had become so bad that he no longer cared if he survived. The night before leaving for Sonora, he told me, he woke up to rivals shooting at him. His usual response would have been to “kick down the front door and shoot everybody,” he said, but instead he rolled over and fell back asleep. Since arriving in Sonora, he had smoked toad with Octavio twice. “I know what it is to have a heart now,” he said.

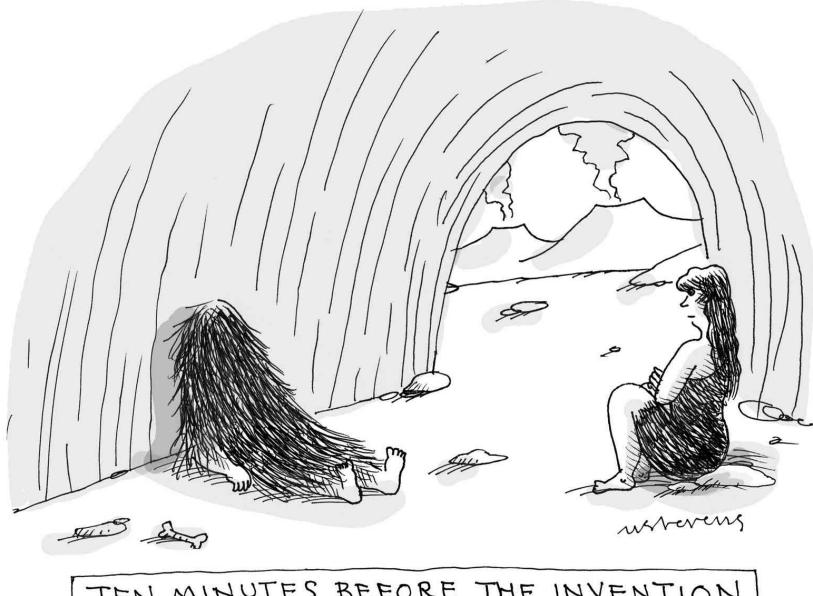
Later that day, Octavio and his entourage drove fifteen miles to the Seri village of Punta Chueca. For thousands of years, the Seri were nomadic, roaming in small groups along the coast. From the sixteenth century onward, they came into conflict with settlers. In 1850, the Sonoran government began paying bounties for murdered Seri people, and within a few decades the tribe had been reduced to around two hundred members. In the twentieth century, the Seri slowly rebounded, but they struggled to find a foothold in the modern economy. Fishermen supplied the commercial market with sharks and turtles, and artisans sold curios to tourists in Bahía Kino. But, until recently, few outsiders visited Seri lands. “I opened the door,” Octavio told me.

At the entrance to Punta Chueca, a sign advertised ancestral toad medicine. We arrived at a gathering of several hundred people. There were stands selling handcrafts, and women who, for a fee, would paint your face with

Seri markings. On a wall was an unfinished mural of psychedelic toads, one of several in the village. A tour guide told me that five buses, each carrying around fifty visitors, had arrived for the celebrations. “Tourism to Punta Chueca has really taken off,” he said. “It has a lot to do with the toad.”

That evening, as the setting sun turned the clouds orange, I saw three boys approach Octavio. He used a pipe to blow *rapé*, a tobacco snuff from the Amazon, up their noses. The youngest boy, who was fourteen, immediately began throwing up. Before long, his companions were emptying their stomachs, too, and a pack of emaciated dogs gathered to lap up the vomit. A middle-aged woman arrived with rolls of toilet paper; two of the boys were her sons, she told me, wiping their mouths. The youngest was addicted to meth. She said that the family had travelled nearly a thousand miles, from Léon, in central Mexico, to smoke toad with Octavio, and that the *rapé* was necessary for purging toxins. Her husband, a lawyer with Seri face paint, stood nearby. Octavio came over and flung an arm around his shoulder. “Man, I love this guy,” Octavio said, his eyes streaming from a hit of *rapé*. “He just got me free on a manslaughter charge.”

Araceli Ramírez Hidalgo, a housewife from Léon, was susceptible to losing money in pyramid schemes. That was the view of her husband, Jorge Villalpando Medel, who saw it as his duty to protect her. One time, he said, his wife got caught up selling dietary supplements; on another occasion, it was skin-care products. “They abuse people,” he said, of the companies. “But they also offer a sense of purpose and relief.”



Cartoon by Mick Stevens

The couple had been married for two decades when, in 2015, Ramírez’s mother died, and Ramírez fell into a prolonged depression. She turned to alternative healing, signing up for an ayahuasca ceremony. Villalpando was skeptical, but afterward Ramírez told him that she’d had visions of her mother at the event. An ayahuasca practitioner later told the couple about toad medicine. “You just have one puff, you’re going to experience ten years of therapy,” Villalpando recalled him saying. When Ramírez heard that Octavio would be in town, she was eager to attend a session. She reserved a spot, promising Villalpando that this would be her last experiment with psychedelics.

On October 5, 2018, Ramírez went early to the venue, a remote property on the outskirts of the city. She was friends with some of the organizers and planned to spend the day there; Villalpando would join them after work, and Octavio would serve toad in the evening. But at around noon Villalpando got a call. Ramírez had stopped breathing. Eyewitness accounts, gathered by justice officials, describe how the session unfolded: Ramírez inhaled toad from a pipe, and Octavio splashed water in her face and dosed her with *rapé*. Soon, she started convulsing. When she stopped breathing, Octavio began CPR. As Ramírez turned purple, Octavio grew frantic. Two participants heard him yell, “She died!” (Octavio denies this.) According to a deposition from Ramírez’s eldest son, she was still alive when she reached the hospital,

but she died soon afterward. The official cause of death was an anaphylactic reaction to an unknown substance.

There have been only a few public reports of deaths associated with 5-MeO-DMT. In the early two-thousands, a twenty-five-year-old man was found dead on a camping trip, with elevated levels of the substance in his body. Last year, Nacho Vidal, a porn star from Spain best known for selling candles made from a mold of his penis, was charged with reckless homicide after allegedly presiding over a toad-medicine ceremony in Valencia, at which there was a fatality. (Vidal maintains his innocence, and the case has been put on hold.) By the time Ramírez died, in 2018, at least two other people had died shortly after smoking toad with Octavio. During a talk that year, Octavio said that an elderly patient of his had died, a few years earlier, after taking toad. “I think this person had a beautiful opportunity to transcend in love and in light,” Octavio said. He also mentioned the death of another patient—an alcoholic in his forties who had a pulmonary embolism during a toad session. Octavio blamed the man’s unhealthy life style.

In December, 2012, before Octavio rose to fame, a woman in her twenties named Ana Patricia Arredondo, widely thought to be his girlfriend, disappeared after going on a walk with him. Divers later recovered her body from an underground body of water. Odily Fuentes, a friend of Octavio’s at the time, said he told her that he’d smoked toad with Arredondo before she went missing. (Octavio denies this; he also denies that Arredondo was his girlfriend.)

Whispers of reckless facilitation have followed Octavio for years. In 2014, he was endorsed as a “carrier of traditional indigenous medicine” by the United Nations Association Venezuela, which is part of a group of nonprofits loosely affiliated with the U.N. A year later, he toured Australia with an ancient Indigenous medicine group. The promotional materials for his tours have featured a lightly edited version of the U.N. logo, the blue globe adorned with a leaf and a feather, so that it resembled a dream catcher. While Octavio was on tour, some of his clients struggled with reactivations. They tried to reach him, but he had moved on. “He’s too busy serving thousands of patients to take a phone call,” Dean Jefferys, a filmmaker who smoked toad with Octavio in 2015, told me. Jefferys founded an online

support group to deal with what he called “the trail of destruction left behind by Octavio.”

“I haven’t slept six nights,” a woman in Dublin posted. “My situation is now serious.” Another woman, from Melbourne, claimed that during a toad session Octavio had left her husband unattended, unable to breathe. She suggested ways to make the sessions safer, such as limiting the number of participants and having a first-aid kit on hand. Octavio replied that “making rules, prototypes, and protocols” for his ceremonies was “judgmental and unfair,” adding that he couldn’t be held responsible for his patients’ reactions to toad.

In 2016, footage began circulating online of Octavio being violent during sessions. In one clip, he kicks and slaps a visibly terrified man on a beach in Venezuela while giving him no fewer than six hits of toad. “Don’t make me beat you up,” Octavio shouts, thrusting a finger in the man’s face. Later, the man tries to run away, sobbing, “Octavio, no!” In another video from Venezuela, posted a year later, Octavio repeatedly pours water down the throat of a man after serving him toad—a technique that he uses to “provoke a breathing response.”

Criticism of Octavio grew more strident, yet he maintained the support of many former patients. Some of his most ardent defenders were people with whom he’d been aggressive, including the man from the Venezuela beach, who appeared in a video denouncing the “blasphemies” of Octavio’s critics. Many previous clients still swore by his methods. One woman, who said she stopped breathing during a toad session with Octavio in 2015, recalled “pain and horror that cannot be described.” She posted on Facebook, “Is there anyone here who feels/felt that they were traumatized by aspects of the experience?” But, a year and a half later, she thanked Octavio for changing her life.

Octavio and his supporters have historically viewed traumatic experiences during toad sessions as a result of fear or resistance. The solution, they’ve often said, is to smoke more toad. “I need to push people until they accomplish the goal that they supposedly set before the session,” Octavio declared at a consciousness symposium in 2018. But other practitioners I spoke with were horrified by Octavio’s approach. He insists on using large,

so-called breakthrough doses of toad, though one can't be sure of precisely how much he serves, as he eyeballs the amounts. He performs minimal screening of patients, who he says range from five-year-olds to octogenarians, merely proffering basic release forms to them. In addition to pouring water on people's faces, he used to administer small electric shocks; the purpose, he explained at the symposium, was to "really mind-fuck" patients who resisted the effects of toad. Even his old friend from college, Sandoval, who had gone on to become an obstetrician and a rival toad doctor, criticized Octavio's fast-and-loose approach to me. (Similar criticisms have been directed at Sandoval.)

In 2018, a group of anonymous practitioners, who call themselves the Conclave, released a best-practices guide for serving 5-MeO-DMT, which amounted to an implicit rejection of Octavio's methods. The guide advised practitioners not to "mechanically bludgeon an ego into submission with large doses of medicine." It also cautioned, "Pouring water into the mouth, nose or throat to instigate the breathing reflex is an extreme tool that should be avoided." Soon afterward, a man in central Europe was hospitalized after smoking toad with Octavio and spent several days in a coma. (He recovered.) Octavio's girlfriend at the time, a psychologist studying psychedelics, recalls warning him that, unless he implemented safety measures, another person would get hurt. A couple of months later, Ramírez was dead.

For nearly two years, Villalpando, who has a law degree, collected evidence against Octavio, contacting eyewitnesses and paying for chemical analyses of toad medicine. Then, in September, 2020, Octavio was arrested and charged with manslaughter for Ramírez's death. He appeared at a pretrial hearing in Léon, with his lawyer, the man I met at the toad session in Punta Chueca. Villalpando also attended the hearing, asking the judge to elevate the charge from manslaughter to murder, but he was unsuccessful. Octavio was told that he could pay a settlement in order to avoid a trial. Weeks later, he contacted Villalpando to negotiate a deal. The men agreed to meet at a diner in Léon. Villalpando told me that he had become obsessed with "stopping Octavio from hurting more people"; beneath his coat, he carried a gun. But, according to Villalpando, as his finger moved toward the trigger, a small boy, no older than five, came over from another table and tugged at his coat. The boy lifted his arms, as if asking to be held. Recounting this story,

Villalpando began weeping and said, “I don’t believe in supernatural things.” He accepted a settlement of six hundred thousand pesos.

A common critique of Octavio is that he has used toad to amass a fortune. Last July, I visited him at his house in Hermosillo, which is about ninety miles east of Punta Chueca; aside from his two cars, one truck, and three high-end mountain bikes, there were few overt signs of wealth. He lives in a poor neighborhood with potholed streets. His house is two stories: upstairs, he sleeps and plays video games, usually first-person shooters; downstairs, he works out. Octavio often posts videos of himself biking and launching off of ramps. He had recently dislocated his shoulder, but he said that he was ready for even bigger jumps. “I can fucking easily break my leg or something if I don’t land properly,” he said. “I am fucking excited about it, because, if I do it, this will only increase my level of confidence.”

Behind the gym was a spartan dormitory with bunk beds and a communal bathroom. Octavio would sometimes take on longer-term patients, often addicts, who paid a four-thousand-dollar fee to stay with him and receive extensive “treatment.” The dormitory walls were covered with photographs of Octavio, framed certificates from university, and toad art. In an unlocked chest on the floor, he had thousands of release forms and testimonials, haphazardly thrown together.

I asked Octavio about the complaints against him. “My work has been misunderstood, misinterpreted, and misused,” he said. He conceded that certain videos might look “barbaric or violent,” but he argued that this was sometimes necessary. “I cannot play by the same rules of conventional therapy,” he said. “Most of my patients already went to many rehab centers. They already tried many drugs. I don’t have time to fool around. I just need to be very straight, very direct”—he clapped his hands together—“to stop the bullshit.”

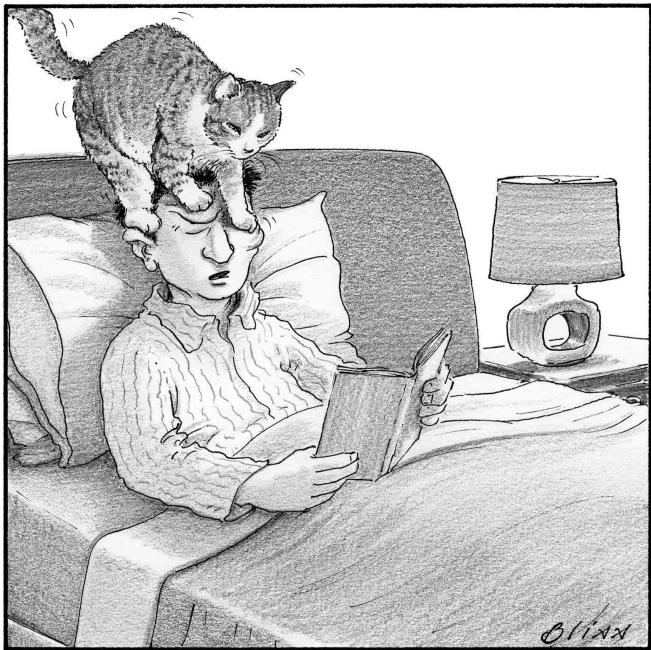
In Bahía Kino, I saw one of his patients, who was left unattended after smoking toad, throw up, choke, and slam his forehead on the floor. In Punta Chueca, when the fourteen-year-old son of his defense lawyer refused more *rapé*, Octavio had started shouting at him. “Come on! Shut up! I don’t want to hear it, man. Come on,” he’d said, calling the boy *cabrón*. Another day, a boat took Octavio and a group to an uninhabited island a half hour from

Punta Chueca. As the boat headed back to the mainland, Octavio began serving toad. One man lay on his back, thrashing his arms, as seawater splashed in his mouth.

During that session, Octavio launched into a rant. “Where are all these dead people they talk about?” he asked. “I’ve never walked around with a pistol killing people. I’ve never walked around with a toad drowning people.” His acolytes stood by, nodding. One was a man named Brian, from Sri Lanka, who had sold his home to travel with Octavio. (Previously, Brian had been a devotee of Osho, an Indian guru who inspired a cult movement.) Brian had purchased two expensive cameras and was using them to document Octavio’s work. One day in Punta Chueca, Octavio initiated an impromptu photo shoot, putting on a Seri-style jacket and striking various poses. Without warning, he sprinted toward us and leaped at Brian, knocking him off his feet. Everyone laughed uneasily. Octavio strode away for more photographs. Afterward, Brian found me and pulled down his sleeve, revealing a tattoo of Octavio on his shoulder. He whispered, “Whoever gives you the milk, the mother becomes.”

When Octavio first came to Punta Chueca, in 2011, Jesús Ogarrio was conducting an ethnographic study of Seri rituals for his undergraduate thesis. Ogarrio, who is now a professor, remembers Punta Chueca as a ghost town, with government houses on the verge of collapse, and its few public spaces overrun by meth addicts. He estimated that, of the roughly four hundred residents, dozens were addicts. “It was a pandemic of addiction,” Ogarrio said.

The head of the Seri council of elders was a man named Antonio Robles, who spoke little Spanish and had at least two adult children who were addicted to meth. On Octavio’s first visit to the Seri, he served toad to one of Robles’s sons. Several tribal elders also tried the medicine, and some of them experienced penetrating visions. “When I had the toad, I remembered the history,” Pancho Barnett, whose late father was a venerated shaman in the community, told me.



"I get it—you're hungry."
Cartoon by Harry Bliss

Robles signed formal letters and certificates declaring Octavio a “medicine man” and allowing him to serve toad to the tribe. Octavio moved to Punta Chueca, where he and Ogarrio—the only outsiders in the community—shared a room. Initially, Ogarrio found Octavio “credible and trustworthy,” he said. “He was there to help with a very grave issue.” The village had no basic medical services; here was a doctor, offering treatment. But Octavio smoked toad several times a day and often seemed irritable and anxious —“like an addict,” Ogarrio said. (Octavio denies this.) Ogarrio was also distressed by Octavio’s attitude toward people in the community. Many of them were afraid of toad, and Ogarrio said that on several occasions he watched Octavio serve toad without explaining what it was, or by presenting it as another drug. One day, Octavio slipped a toad pipe to another son of Robles’s, Ogarrio said. The man “started to go crazy,” he recalled, throwing furniture and then running toward the desert. (Octavio denies giving toad to Robles’s son, or to anyone else without the person’s consent.) The man’s meth addiction grew worse, leading to his death, in 2019.

Robles has since died, too, but Octavio has continued to secure documents from the tribe. He has used these to legitimize the harvest and the transport of toad medicine across borders, and to validate his role to external organizations such as *Ted* and the U.N. Association Venezuela, which have

given him a platform to broadcast his claims about toad medicine's ancestral roots. Yet there are reasons to question this origin story, particularly as it relates to the Seri. Frogs and toads were ascribed a range of symbolic meanings in Mesoamerica, including death, rebirth, and the arrival of seasonal rains, which could explain why the animals were often depicted on pipes and other artifacts. Researchers on the Seri have recorded a rich set of medicinal and cultural traditions, and there is no clear evidence that toads were considered important, let alone sacred. In "People of the Desert and Sea: Ethnobotany of the Seri Indians," a classic text on Native Mexican ethnobotany, Richard Felger and Mary Moser argue that toads were "inconsequential in Seri culture." A few Seri people I spoke with said that they'd heard stories of a secret ancient toad-smoking practice. But, as Alberto Mellado Moreno, a historian from the Seri tribe, said, "It's speculative even for us. Consider a society reconstructed from so few survivors. It's impossible to know what might have been lost."

One night in Hermosillo, I met with Odily Fuentes, who had helped introduce Octavio to the Seri. Fuentes is a swimming instructor, but in 2011 she and Octavio helped found an organization for the preservation of Indigenous Sonoran cultures, called OTA.C., which Octavio said was named after a sacred Seri word for toads. (Gary Nabhan, an ethnobiologist who has spent decades documenting Indigenous Seri knowledge and assisting the tribe with conservation efforts, told me that *otac* is a generic term: "It's like saying 'some frog.'") Fuentes said that her partner at the time, Luis Ogarrio (a cousin of Jesús Ogarrio), had a long-standing relationship with some Seri, with whom he used to consume various psychedelics. Within weeks of meeting Octavio, Fuentes and her ex took him to Punta Chueca. Fuentes said she had written the original documents authorizing Octavio to work in the community; Robles had simply signed them. She told me that in 2013 the tribe rescinded its endorsement of Octavio, but he paid to have it reinstated, and has continued paying the tribe to renew the letters and certificates. (Octavio denies any falling out with the Seri and says he didn't purchase the documents, but he acknowledges giving money and gifts to tribe members.) "We needed a tribe to protect and promote the toad," Fuentes recalled. "Any Sonoran tribe embracing the toad would have been fine."

Fuentes also helped introduce Octavio to another tribal community in Sonora, the Yaqui. According to Anahí Ochoa, a Yaqui activist, Octavio

smoked a pipe during a meeting with tribal elders, and later brought a film crew to the village without asking permission. He began boasting about his relationship with the tribe, using a Yaqui word for toad. But, after Octavio had conducted a few sessions, Ochoa told him to stop using the tribe's name to promote his practice. After that, Octavio stopped visiting. "He was looking for validation as a shaman," Ochoa said. "But he's nothing more than an actor—a fake."

Today, around a dozen Seri practitioners offer toad ceremonies to tourists. Some of these take place at the home of a nephew of Pancho Barnett, which is known as the "hippie house." When I stopped by one night, a jam session was under way, and dreadlocked white people came and went. A small pig was nosing through beer bottles and trash in the yard. Although some Seri have welcomed the toad boom for the revenue it brings, others resent the degree to which toad has come to define their existence. "It's hurt our culture," Gabriela Molina, a Seri activist who has studied Indigenous law, told me. "It's out of our control."

The toads themselves are also under threat, in part owing to overharvesting. There have been signs of the drug cartels moving in on the toad trade. The toads are being "wiped out from certain swaths of land," Robert A. Villa, a herpetologist from Arizona, said. He is among a growing number of people advocating for the consumption of synthetic 5-MeO-DMT instead of toad secretion. Although a toad typically survives being milked, repeated handling places it under stress and exposes it to dangerous pathogens, making it harder for the animal to survive after being released back into the wild. Fernando Suárez Bleck, a toad practitioner who tried to set up a fair-trade organization for Sonoran Desert toads in Mexico, told me that most harvesters "don't have a consciousness about the sacredness of the species." He added, "It's just a hustle business."

For many years, the New Age ethos of radical nonjudgement that pervades the toad world helped Octavio avoid scrutiny. "I best serve the Sacred Medicine and myself by not adding to the infectious negativity and Ego on display by condemning or judging Dr. Octavio Rettig," one person posted, in 2017. But the atmosphere has begun to shift. In 2018, at a toad conference in Mexico City, Octavio sat on a panel that descended into chaos. Octavio made a "star entrance," an audience member recalled, but the panel, which

was on the subject of ethical practice, turned into an “intervention.” Octavio was confronted about his methods, and he began “shouting angrily, charging around the room, and lashing out at those who raised objections.” Things became so heated that one woman screamed “at the top of her lungs.”

In early 2019, a public letter, written by a group of anonymous toad practitioners and users, circulated online. It detailed “reckless, unethical, and potentially criminal behavior” by Octavio and Sandoval. (Sandoval, who was accused of fraud and of sexual assault, among other offenses, denied the accusations.) The letter described Octavio’s approach as “high-volume, high-dose, haphazard, dose-them-and-then-leave,” and included reports of Octavio “manhandling people while they are in the medicine.”

Since then, his international travels have slowed. When I asked about this, he blamed it on the pandemic. He described the letter as a blessing for his work—now only people without fear would seek him out. “If I had any regrets, I wouldn’t be doing this,” he told me. I asked if he regretted the deaths in his care. He replied, “They made me a better human being.”

As we spoke, I recalled my conversation with Alan Davis, the psychologist from Ohio State. Warning me about a potential risk of taking psychedelics, he’d said, “When the ego is dissolved, and you are completely at one with what you’re perceiving as God or the universe, there is no difference between you and that thing. . . . You are that thing.” He’d added, “When you come back from that, and your ego reasserts itself, there is a potential to hold onto that belief—that there’s no difference between you and God.”

Octavio owns a piece of land on the outskirts of Hermosillo, which he is developing into a retreat center. He got it in 2011, in exchange for a Mustang convertible. Now his vision is to host people from around the world for toad ceremonies. I met him there one day, and he walked me past excavated pits of muddy water filled with thousands of Sonoran Desert tadpoles; they ranged in size from lentil to raisin, with spherical bodies and thin, whiplike tails. Soon, they would metamorphose and burrow into the earth.

A short distance away, some contractors were at work. Octavio has plans for dormitories, bathrooms, a communal dining area. The property is far from the city, with no neighbors and a padlocked gate. Once, at a conference,

Octavio was challenged on his safety record. “The medicine, it’s safe,” he said. “Humans, we are dangerous.” ♦

Dispatches

- [The Russians Fleeing Putin's Wartime Crackdown](#)

By [Masha Gessen](#)

Content

This content can also be viewed on the site it [originates](#) from.

In the world as it existed before Russia invaded Ukraine, on February 24th, the Vnukovo International Airport, in Moscow, was a point of departure for weekend-holiday destinations south of the border: Yerevan, Istanbul, Baku. In the first week of March, as tens of thousands of President Vladimir Putin's troops advanced into Ukraine, Vnukovo teemed with anxious travellers, many of them young. The line for excess baggage split the giant departure hall in half. These people weren't going for the weekend.

In a coffee shop, a skinny young man with shoulder-length hair and steel-framed glasses sat at a tall counter. "I haven't done much in the last day," he told someone through his headphones, sounding more nervous than apologetic. "I've been busy with my move. I am flying to Yerevan today, then overland. I'll be settled tomorrow and back to work." The flight to Yerevan, the capital of Armenia, was later cancelled. Two of my friends who were also scheduled to go to Armenia that day ended up flying seven hours to Ulaanbaatar, then three hours to Seoul, ten to Dubai, and a final three to Yerevan. My friends, a prominent gay journalist and his partner, were among the Russians—more than a quarter of a million, by some estimates—who have left their country since the invasion of Ukraine.

From Moscow, it's a four-hour flight to Istanbul. There, you could spot the recently arrived: they had the disoriented look best summed up by the Russian expression "hit over the head with a dusty sack." Snippets of conversations I overheard in the streets concerned possible next destinations. Istanbul is easy to get to, but it's pricey, and Russian citizens can stay in Turkey for only two months without a visa. At a low table on a restaurant terrace, a crew of Russian journalists in their twenties scrolled through their phones looking for tickets ("There are two seats left to Tbilisi for next Sunday!" "Got one!"); they tried to figure out whether they'd ever be able to access their bank accounts, which were frozen by new restrictions from both Russia and the West; and they watched as the world as they knew it disappeared. Independent media outlets, now blocked in Russia, were deleting their Web sites and hiding YouTube videos and social-media posts

to protect staff members who could face prosecution under new censorship laws. At home and abroad, Russians were wiping their social-media accounts to shield themselves and those who had liked or left comments on antiwar petitions, or even posts simply containing the word “war”—acts that were now punishable by up to fifteen years in prison. Russia was fast becoming an economic pariah: the lights were going out at *Ikea*, H&M, and Zara. Hundreds of thousands of people were losing their jobs.

My world, too, was vanishing. I moved to New York from Russia eight years ago because of government threats against my family, but most of my friends had remained in Moscow. As political pressure grew, they adjusted. Journalists and academics changed professions. Activists replaced organizing with charity work. But there remained a community of homes open to one another, an endless series of meals shared, and a conversation that had lasted decades. I missed this world desperately, and in the months since *COVID* restrictions began lifting I had visited often. Now almost everyone I knew was leaving. One long going-away party flowed from house to house. “Party” is the wrong word, of course, although there was a lot of drinking. When people raised a glass to one another, they added a wish to meet again. When they toasted the host’s home, they were drinking to a place they might be seeing for the last time.



Ilya Venyaykin, a historian of the Stalin era, left Moscow for Tbilisi with his wife and children on the seventh day of the war. “What I see is the insanity of one man, Putin,” he said. “I am refusing to internalize his madness and to feel defeated by it.” Photograph by Dina Oganova for The New Yorker

Some of the conversations—about elderly parents who couldn’t make the journey, or teen-age children forced to separate from their first loves—were familiar to me from the nineteen-seventies, when a small number of people, mostly Jews, were able to leave the U.S.S.R. But this was different. The old Russian émigrés were moving toward a vision of a better life; the new ones were running from a crushing darkness. “It’s like watching everyone you know turn into a ghost of themselves,” a friend, Ilya Venyavkin, said.

Venyavkin, who is forty, is a historian of the Stalin era. The week the war began, he and his wife, Vera Shengelia, the development director of a foundation that supports adults with mental disabilities, were at their dacha, outside Moscow. They have three kids, ages ten to eighteen, who were at home in Moscow. On Thursday morning, when Venyavkin checked Meduza, an independent Russian-language publication, he saw the word “War” on its home page. He and Shengelia didn’t say anything to each other, no “Did you see?” or “How awful.” Venyavkin felt like a blender had been switched on inside his body. His outer shell existed, but couldn’t move. After two days in a stupor, he and Shengelia drove back to Moscow, to be with their children. And they started talking about leaving.

Time slowed and sped up in the first week of the war. Each day stood apart from the previous one, as though it were a distinct historical era. On February 27th, Venyavkin and Shengelia felt that they had to do something, go somewhere. It was the seventh anniversary of the murder of the opposition politician Boris Nemtsov. With their ten-year-old son, Goga, they bought flowers and went to the bridge where Nemtsov was killed. Police had sealed off the pedestrian pass with barricades; people could move through only a narrow corridor, in a slow, steady trudge. “I don’t want to go,” Goga said. “It feels like we’re being led to prison.” On the other side of the bridge, Goga demanded to be taken to McDonald’s as compensation. (McDonald’s suspended its operations in Russia two weeks later.) There, a young woman at the next table was talking nervously on the phone. It seemed that she was speaking to her relatives in Kharkiv, the second-largest Ukrainian city, which was being shelled by the Russian Army.

When she got off the phone, Venyavkin addressed her. “I hear that you are from Ukraine,” he said. “I want you to know that not everyone in Russia supports Putin and his war. I am sorry that we failed to stop him.” They

talked. The woman was a chemistry teacher who happened to be in Moscow for a day when the war started. Now she was trying to make sure that her parents took her dog with them whenever they went to the bomb shelter.

After that conversation, Venyavkin and Shengelia had no doubt about whether or when to leave. They headed to Tbilisi with their two younger children on Wednesday, the seventh day of the war.

People have fled Russia because they fear political persecution, conscription, and isolation; because they dread being locked in an unfamiliar new country that eerily resembles the old Soviet Union; and because staying in a country that is waging war feels immoral, like being inside a plane that's dropping bombs on people. They have left because the Russia they have built and inhabited is disappearing—and the more people who leave, the faster it disappears.

Dmitry Aleshkovsky is one of the leaders of Russia's volunteer movement. In the summer of 2012, when a flood destroyed the town of Krymsk, in southern Russia, and authorities tried to cover it up, Aleshkovsky quit his job as a news photographer to work as a relief volunteer. He later started a foundation, Nuzhna Pomosh (Help Needed), and a media clearing house for charitable projects, Takie Dela (So It Goes). When news of the war broke, he knew that this was the end—not of Ukraine, but of Russia. Aleshkovsky, who is thirty-seven, has spent a lot of time thinking about the Gulag. (His great-uncle Yuz is a labor-camp survivor who has described the experience in novels and songs.) Long ago, he concluded that if Putin ever wanted to re-create Stalinist terror there would be nothing to stop him. If he was bombing Ukraine now, he would imprison more of his people before too long. The morning after the war began, Aleshkovsky got in a car with his wife, the film director Anna Dezhurko, and their toddler daughter and drove west, to the Latvian border.



Ilya Kolmanovsky, in Tbilisi. A week after Russia invaded Ukraine, thirty-three members of his immediate and extended family had left the country. Photograph by Dina Oganova for *The New Yorker*

Alexandra Primakova, a forty-two-year-old marketing researcher in Moscow, woke up at seven that Thursday to get her kids ready for school. She saw the news and decided to let her husband, Ilya Kolmanovsky, a forty-five-year-old science educator, sleep a bit longer. Kolmanovsky had been having panic attacks about the possibility of a full-scale war in Ukraine. For a year or so, the couple had discussed leaving the country; both of them had been active in anti-Putin protests. Now they called a large family council in their apartment. By the end of the following week, thirty-three people in their immediate and extended families had left Russia, flying to four different countries. This group included journalists, academics, natural scientists, a developmental psychologist, a doctor, a musician, and a Russian Orthodox deacon.

Lika Kremer, a forty-four-year-old media executive, and her partner, the thirty-eight-year-old podcaster and editor Andrey Babitsky, attended a protest in Pushkin Square on Thursday night. Babitsky had been detained at a protest in September, and a second detention in less than six months could lead to a prison sentence. But they couldn't *not* go. The traditional place and time for such a demonstration is Pushkin Square at seven in the evening—people have been prosecuted for social-media posts announcing protests, so it's good to have a default plan. Kremer and Babitsky went with Babitsky's

twenty-year-old daughter. The square was sealed off by police. It was dark and wet. People milled about in front of the metro, slogging through rainy sidewalks. An uninitiated onlooker might not have identified them as protesters: they had no placards and chanted no slogans. Babitsky did get detained, along with several hundred other people, but he was held only briefly. The next day, Kremer and Babitsky flew to Venice for a seventy-fifth-birthday celebration for Kremer's father, the violinist Gidon Kremer.

They arrived in a strange state. A sense of everything happening for the last time prompted them to take a hundred-and-thirty-euro motorboat ride from the airport, rather than a thirty-euro taxi. Babitsky badgered the other attendees, who he felt weren't sufficiently disturbed by the war. He was growing convinced that his family had to leave Russia immediately. Under this new wartime regime, he would either end up in prison or drink himself to death. But all their children—he and Kremer have six between them, ages ten to twenty—were in Moscow, and the couple's return flight was cancelled, as were all flights between European Union countries and Russia. Ultimately, Kremer and Babitsky went to Riga and then to Tbilisi and arranged for the children to leave Russia with Babitsky's ex-wife. That group flew out on the eleventh day of the war. Babitsky speaks of himself, sarcastically but self-consciously, as a normal Russian dude who never cries. But on that day he wept.

Grigory Sverdlin, the forty-three-year-old director of Nochlezhka, Russia's foremost organization for the homeless, walked around St. Petersburg with the words "No to war" on the back of his jacket. He joined protests and pickets. This was normal for him. He'd been detained before; once, his car was towed because the slogan "Free political prisoners!" was taped to the rear window. But Sverdlin found himself acting weird: usually standoffish, he was hugging people and telling friends that he loved them. Most of all, he felt restless—as if there were no place for him in his country anymore. The only thing he could visualize was getting sent to prison. Then an acquaintance told him that he was on a list of people targeted for political prosecution. Sverdlin packed his car and went to say goodbye to his parents. He found them getting ready to have their house searched; they boasted that they'd stashed some valuables at a neighbor's home.

Leonid Dzhalilov, who is forty-three, worked as a high-school math teacher and served as a deacon at a Moscow church. His wife, Elizaveta Miller, who is thirty-eight, was a concert musician and an assistant professor at the Moscow Conservatory. The evening of the invasion, Dzhalilov was arrested at a protest. The following morning, he and Miller took stock. They had the pulpit, the stage, and the classroom, and if they used any of those to speak out against the war they could lose their jobs, endanger their colleagues, and possibly go to jail. They had three young sons. They decided to leave.

Sergey Golubok, a thirty-seven-year-old lawyer in St. Petersburg, had resolved to stay. He had moved back to Russia ten years earlier, after several years of studying and working in the U.K. and France. He had represented many political activists. On March 1st, he had a new A.C. unit installed in his apartment and congratulated himself for preparing for the looming hot summer. Still, he urged his ex-wife to flee with their three-year-old daughter, so that the child wouldn't grow up behind the new Iron Curtain. Then, on the ninth day of the war, Russia blocked the Web sites of virtually all remaining independent media outlets. If there wasn't going to be any reporting, Golubok reasoned, he wouldn't be able to make any difference in the courts. He decided to leave.

They flew. They drove. Golubok and his family walked across the bridge from Ivangorod, in Russia, to Narva, in Estonia—they were once one town. When Primakova, Kolmanovsky, their children, and their French bulldog, Chloe, landed in Yerevan, someone asked, “Are you here for the show?” The person explained, “I assumed there must be a dog show, with so many people coming with dogs.”



Lika Kremer, a media executive, and Andrey Babitsky, a podcaster, in Tbilisi, where they stayed in a hostel with Kremer's three children. Photograph by Dina Oganova for The New Yorker

They didn't take much with them. Primakova packed sixty-seven children's books and a small suitcase with clothes and two pillows. Kolmanovsky brought a backpack with high-end photo equipment, a suitcase with tea and ceramic teapots, and, separately, a collection of scents. Sverdlin took a folding bike and rock-climbing equipment. Kremer and Babitsky, who had planned only for a weekend in Venice, had a few T-shirts and, for her, a velvet dress. The couple came across a square in Venice strewn with confetti ribbons in the blue and yellow of the Ukrainian flag. They picked up a few; Kremer tied hers to a buttonhole of her long black coat. Babitsky decided to collect objects that signified the start of a new life. He washed out a large crab shell that had been used to serve salad at Gidon Kremer's birthday party and put his blue-and-yellow ribbons in it. At a pay-what-you-want used-book stand, he dug up a graphic novel about Jan Karski, the Polish officer credited with telling Western leaders about the Holocaust. Babitsky decided that the book would make a good first volume for his new library.

Some of these émigrés are my close friends and former colleagues; others I know through work. They represent a small sample of the current exodus. It is impossible to imagine that I could now return to Moscow, my city, but if I did about four out of every five people I knew, well or at all, would be missing.

Many of those who have left Russia are I.T. professionals; a number of them appear, at least temporarily, to be staying in Yerevan, a regional tech hub. Others are journalists, academics, and N.G.O. leaders, who are landing in Berlin, Tbilisi, Tallinn, and Vilnius. Their departure accelerates a long-running process of shutting down Russia's civil society, without the state having to persecute and imprison people individually. During a meeting in the Kremlin on March 16th, Putin apparently referred to the exodus, saying, "The Russian people can tell true patriots apart from those traitors and will simply spit them out as if they'd accidentally swallowed a fly. . . . I am sure that this natural and necessary cleansing will only strengthen our country, our solidarity, our cohesiveness, and our readiness to face any and all challenges."

In Tbilisi, Kremer rented a room in a hostel, with a mattress on the floor. (Kremer's three children, ages eleven, twelve, and fourteen, took a room down the hall.) Babitsky remarked that Kremer would never have tolerated this kind of setup "in regular life." Kremer often says, "We are in Purgatory. This is as it should be." Another phrase she repeats is "Check your privilege." They are lucky: they are together, and they had savings—Kremer had been hoping to buy a bigger apartment. She withdrew several thousand dollars in cash before her bank cards stopped working. Two days after her kids arrived in Georgia, she handed over the entire amount to a private Russian-language school as a partial tuition payment. Babitsky wasn't sure that it was the right call. But, Kremer said, at least the children would "be occupied for half the day, and fed, and given care at a time when I have little to give." On the kids' second day at the school, Kremer's twelve-year-old daughter went to visit a new friend, and life felt almost normal.

Around the corner from the hostel, Primakova and Kolmanovsky, the couple at the center of the giant extended family, were occupying an entire ramshackle guesthouse. Its temporary occupants included two very quiet, very young people. They are among the many Russian teen-agers in Tbilisi and Yerevan, sent into exile by their parents, who may now be unable to leave. The two young people sat at a table adjacent to an attic kitchen, eating chicken soup that Kolmanovsky had prepared. One of them put their foot down into something wet and sticky: Chloe had had an accident. "Give me your sock," Kolmanovsky commanded. "I'll stick it straight in the washing machine." Primakova went to get a clean pair.

Dzhalilov, the math teacher and deacon, and Miller, the musician, were staying a few blocks away. (Dzhalilov is one of Kolmanovsky's stepbrothers.) They had already spent time in Yerevan and were about to depart for their next destination, in Montenegro, where Dzhalilov had secured a short-term teaching gig. He walked the cobblestoned streets pushing a stroller with his three boys hanging on and off it in various configurations, and, whenever he ran into an acquaintance from Moscow, he asked smugly, "What is your plan?" No one but Dzhalilov seemed to find this amusing. "I have no plan," Primakova said. "I have no ideas, and no sense of anything."

On their first morning in Tbilisi, Kolmanovsky took a walk with the couple's three-year-old daughter. For a half hour, he felt that the weight of being in Moscow was off his shoulders. He could imagine living here, in this hilly, sunny city, maybe even putting down roots. But, in Telegram chats, new émigrés to Tbilisi were sharing their experiences of being turned away by landlords, hotels, and banks. Russians weren't welcome here.



Elizaveta Miller and Leonid Dzhalilov, pictured with two of their children, spent time in Yerevan and Tbilisi and planned to move on to Montenegro. Photograph by Dina Oganova for The New Yorker

Georgia is a sentimental favorite destination for Russians, both tourists and expats. It is scenic and affordable, and allows Russians visa-free stays of up to a year. Georgia was itself the object of Russian military aggression in 2008; about twenty per cent of Georgian territory is occupied by Russia.

Less than an hour outside Tbilisi, Russian soldiers are building a barbed-wire fence along a line that keeps edging closer to the capital—a process that Georgians call “borderization.” (Neighboring Armenia, for its part, depends on the presence of Russian troops to maintain a ceasefire with Azerbaijan, and this makes some Russian exiles fear that Armenia could send them back if Russia asked.)

Georgia has refused to join international economic sanctions against Russia over the war in Ukraine. “What choice do we have?” Zurab Abashidze, who holds the unenviable job of the Georgian government’s special representative for relations with Russia, told me. “Joining the sanctions would collapse the Georgian economy in a week, and Russia wouldn’t feel a thing. And with the Russian military right here we have a responsibility to avoid acting in ways that would complicate the situation further.” Sheltering tens of thousands of Russians on the run from the Putin regime would count as a complication.

Ordinary Georgians, meanwhile, are wary of the Russians simply because they are Russian. Online and in the streets, Tbilisi residents have accused Russians of coming to Georgia solely to escape economic sanctions. Blue-and-yellow flags seem to hang in every other storefront. At a restaurant where I met a member of the diplomatic corps, the front door featured a sign: “Glory to Ukraine! World should stop Russian aggression! Russia is an occupier!!! Putin is evil!!! If you do not agree with these statements, please do not come in!!!” The Bank of Georgia started requiring potential clients who are Russian citizens to sign a statement declaring that Russia is an aggressive occupying power and pledging that they will not spread Russian propaganda. Venyavkin, the Stalin historian, was happy to sign, but the bank rejected his application anyway.

When Miller arrived in Tbilisi, she was looking for a harpsichord, to prepare for an upcoming audition. She contacted a local orchestra that has Baroque instruments. After six days, her request was denied. When she pressed, she said, her contact implied that she had been turned down because she was Russian.

On my first night in Tbilisi, I saw another old friend, Katja Petrowskaja. She was born in Kyiv to a Russian-speaking Jewish family, went to high school

in Moscow and university in Estonia, finished graduate studies in Moscow, and, eventually, with her German husband, moved to Berlin, where they started a family and she became a prominent German-language writer. Their kids grew up, and Petrowskaja and her husband moved to Tbilisi. Now Russia was bombing Kyiv, and Petrowskaja's mother, an eighty-six-year-old retired history teacher, was there alone, refusing to be evacuated.

Petrowskaja and I met briefly: my flight landed in Tbilisi at one in the morning, and she was flying out at six. She was going to Berlin, where she would aid in an effort to secure bulletproof vests for the Ukrainian Army, organize refugee relief, and make media appearances to advocate for Ukraine. She had barely slept since February 24th. She had no patience for some of her close Russian friends, who were posting poems and soul-searching essays on the themes of guilt and responsibility. "There is no time for that," she said. "You have to work." That these friends didn't share her sense of urgency, that they could be contemplative and solipsistic, struck her as a moral failure. "Space has split apart, and I'm not sure how I'll be able to speak to any of them again," Petrowskaja said. "They are fascinated with their own misfortune. I get it—you can go to prison for fifteen years for protesting. Meanwhile, my friends in Kyiv are, suicidally, staying there, because it's their city, and they are working to believe that *it* can't happen—as long as they are there, *it won't*."

No comparison is possible between Kyiv, a city under bombardment, and Moscow. Except perhaps this: *it*—the surrender to Putin's tyranny—had already happened in Moscow. "There will be actual terror," Primakova said. "We will be watching it from afar. There are people there willing to step into the fire. It would be easier for them if we could step into the fire with them." Primakova is about five feet tall; Kolmanovsky is a few inches taller. They both wear glasses. They have six kids between them. Both have repeatedly faced down Moscow cops in full riot gear. "I did all I could," she continued. "But I'm not a hero. I don't feel guilt toward Ukrainians, because I don't feel that what's happening in Ukraine is being done in my name, but I do feel guilty toward the people who stayed behind in Moscow. And, every time someone I care about leaves, I breathe a sigh of relief and realize just how scared I was for them. It's a selfish feeling, this relief, because it means I get to feel a little less guilty."



Sergey Golubok, in Tallinn. He decided to leave Russia after the government blocked the Web sites of virtually all remaining independent media outlets. Photograph by Marta Giaccone for *The New Yorker*

Responsibility, culpability, guilt, shame, whether individual or collective—the many gradations of these feelings are close to the surface in each of the new exiles. “I couldn’t stop my hands from shaking for the first five days,” Aleshkovsky said. “I would have preferred to literally burn up in shame. All of us are responsible for this war. Even those who did a lot to prevent it didn’t do enough—because the war started.”

In 1968, Babitsky’s grandfather Konstantin Babitsky was one of seven people who were arrested in Red Square for protesting the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia; he served three years in internal exile. Babitsky’s grandmother Tatyana Velikanova was arrested in 1979, for editing an underground publication on political persecution. Sentenced to four years in prison and five in internal exile, she rejected an offer of amnesty during perestroika and served out her sentence. Babitsky was five when she rejoined the family in Moscow. “She was made of steel,” Babitsky said. That’s not the part of her he feels he has inherited—rather, it’s her absolute willingness to accept responsibility. “If I’m going to continue considering myself Russian, if I am going to carry Russian culture around like a jewel,” he said, “then I have to acknowledge that Russian culture contains the possibility of this war—that one can read Tolstoy, author of the best antiwar texts ever written, and do *this*. ”

How does one live as a Russian while Russia is bombing Ukrainian homes, schools, and maternity wards? “I don’t know what I can say to a Ukrainian,” Babitsky said. “I can’t pretend that it’s Putin bombing Ukraine and I have nothing to do with it. I can’t ask for forgiveness, because forgiveness cannot be given while Kharkiv is being bombed. So what I say is that I have a giant hole inside of me, and I ask them to tell me what I can do. And that’s not fair to them.”

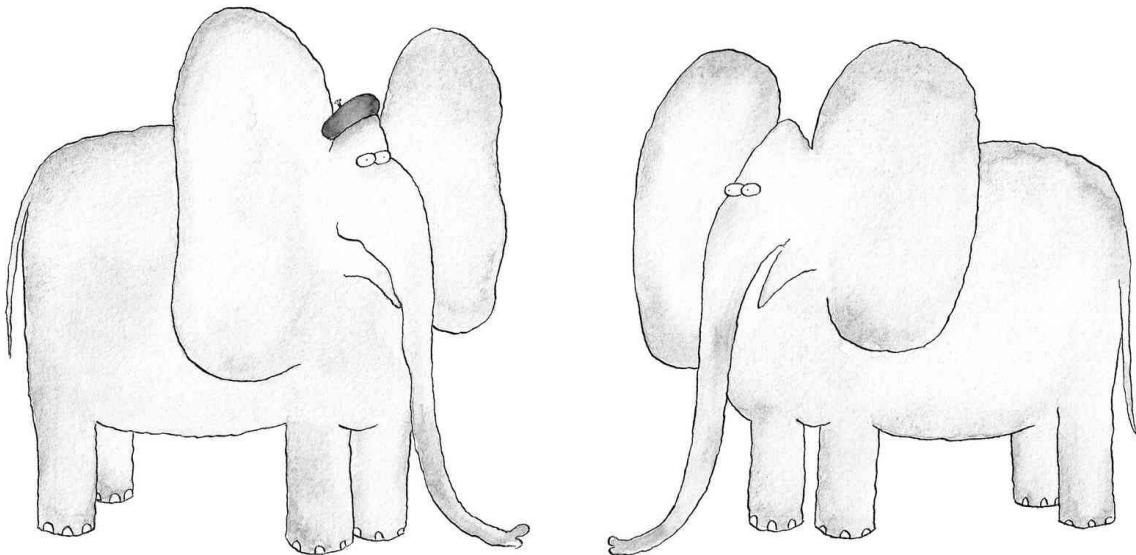
Kremer, a former news anchor, is a founder of a podcast company, based in Moscow, called Libo/Libo (Either/Or). Kolmanovsky had a hit podcast about science, and Babitsky co-hosted a show on ethics; the company also created programs for corporate clients. Libo/Libo existed mostly outside politics, and this was what allowed it to function. “Some advertisers would ask that there wouldn’t be a word about politics in the ads that played alongside theirs, or even in the entire podcast,” Kremer told me. Now, though, the category of “political” was expanding to engulf all of life. After Russia passed new censorship laws, on the ninth day of the war, Libo/Libo removed Babitsky’s last pre-invasion podcast episode, because it featured an interview with a moral philosopher about war, and altered one of Kolmanovsky’s podcast episodes, about canine intelligence, because he had noted, “This podcast was recorded before the war.” All three Libo/Libo founders have left the country, as have about a third of its roughly twenty staff members. All day, every day, in the common room of the hostel or at the guesthouse, Kremer was convening Zoom meetings with her co-founders, staff, and clients, trying to figure out how to keep the company going. “It’s like I keep solving a labyrinth puzzle in my brain, and every path is a dead end, but I can’t stop,” she said.

Babitsky’s main source of income, aside from his podcast, was an editing gig for a book publisher. “It’s a good nonfiction publisher, and I can’t imagine what its future might hold,” he said. Primakova, who has a stake in a market-research company that her mother owns, was still fielding calls from large corporate clients, but, she said, they would soon realize that there was no market left to research. These jobs had the advantage of being portable, but the world to which the exiles could telecommute was becoming a mirage. “Right now, people are talking about where they are going to go and how they are going to get money out of their Russian accounts, but soon people are going to start returning,” Kremer said. “They left in protest,

because it felt unbearable to stay. But you need a lot of money to sustain this kind of protest.”

Years ago, I found a picture in my great-grandfather’s papers. It was taken in 1913, a year of unprecedented prosperity in Russia. My great-grandfather, then a prominent political journalist in his mid-thirties, was with a group of people, all dressed in white linen, all looking as though they had invented friendship and good living. Most of that group emigrated during the decade of wars and revolutions that followed. My great-grandfather stayed, found ways to work in and around publishing while keeping out of politics, and lost everything he owned and clawed his way back to relative prosperity at least twice. Through the rest of the century, his family lugged around redwood furniture, fine china, and silverware from the glorious past—not as family heirlooms but as objects of use in a country that no longer made such objects. Now Russia was entering another era when things—clothes, furniture, cars—would come primarily from the past.

In Moscow in December, Irina Shcherbakova, a historian of the Gulag, took me on a tour of a show that she had curated at Memorial, Russia’s first and biggest history and human-rights organization. One of the show’s exhibits was a faded blue dress, patched and mended an uncountable number of times, one of those material objects which captured the vicissitudes of the Soviet century—its owner had worn it to the theatre, where she was arrested, and then to a year’s worth of interrogations in prison. Now Shcherbakova was in Tel Aviv, hoping to travel soon to Germany. Memorial had been ordered closed by the courts on February 28th and was ransacked in a police raid on March 4th. The same day, the Sakharov Center, a museum and educational institution named for the dissident and Nobel Peace Prize winner, closed to the public. Its director and his family fled to Europe by way of Tashkent.



"Forget painting—I'd rather stampede any day."
Cartoon by Victoria Roberts

"I want to go back and wake up in my own bed," Kremer said. "But all my people are gone."

On March 12th, a couple of thousand newly arrived Russians gathered in front of the building that used to house the Russian Embassy in Tbilisi. (Georgia severed diplomatic relations with Russia in 2008.) They held aloft a giant blue-and-yellow flag and chanted, "No to war!," "Peace for Ukraine, freedom for Russia!," and all the Russian protest chants from the time when Russian protests still had chants: "Russia will be free!" "Russia without Putin!" The chants sounded half-hearted; each died out after a few repetitions.

A group dispersed and gathered again, like mercury: Venyavkin and Shengelia, Babitsky and Kremer, Primakova and Kolmanovsky, and assorted kids and grandparents. "I can't chant anything," Primakova said. "What is the point? I understood the point when we were taking a risk, when we were surrounded by riot police, and when the drivers honking in support were taking a risk, too." As hard as it is to talk about guilt and responsibility, it's harder to figure out what the people who used to make up Russia's civil society should do now that they are no longer in Russia.

Sverdlin, the director of Nochlezhka, the organization for the homeless, spent his first few days of exile in Tallinn, helping other people flee Russia by arranging seats on flights chartered by tech executives. He held a Zoom meeting to tell his staff that he was resigning; remaining at the helm would put the organization at risk. He planned to drive through Eastern and Southern Europe to Georgia, where many of his friends had ended up. “I believe that I will return” to Russia, he said. “I am mindful of all those people who left in 1918-1919, thinking they’d be back in a couple of years, and then it was seventy years later. But I think the regime is in agony now, one that is very painful for the patient and for the world around him, but I think it will end in a couple of years and I will return.”

Aleshkovsky, who landed in Vilnius, also planned to make his way to Georgia, where he has spent a lot of time. He had resigned from his foundation in December, after struggling with depression and burnout, but now, it seemed, he had no choice but to start another N.G.O., to help other exiles. “I saw that everyone else—the Ukrainians, the Belarusians—had their own diaspora, while the Russians are coming with nothing and then can’t even access their savings,” he said.

He wasn’t looking far into the future. “Who knows if there is even going to be a Vilnius or a Tbilisi in a couple of months?” he said. Putin, he went on, “is threatening nuclear war, and these are not empty words—these are words uttered by a man who *is* waging war.” I asked him, Why not go someplace like Zanzibar? Aleshkovsky responded, “My favorite place in the world is the Chatham archipelago,” off the coast of New Zealand. “But, even assuming that it wouldn’t be affected by nuclear war, a life with the knowledge that everyone you loved perished in a nuclear war and you did nothing to stop it wouldn’t be worth living.”

Venyavkin, to his surprise, found himself growing optimistic. He had spent the previous decade running education projects—summer schools, debate clubs, lecture series—outside the official university system. Like the other exiles, he had worked to create a small, humane alternative world inside the vast Putin autocracy. Now that this parallel society was gone, Venyavkin could think only of the future, which had become strangely clearer. “I refuse to look at this as some kind of personal disaster,” he said. “Disaster is what’s happening in Ukraine.”

He went on, “It’s a black-and-white time now. One might say that postmodernism is over and history is back. Either Russia will be scorched earth or we are going to have to do a lot of very complicated work of reckoning.” He didn’t feel demoralized. “Things are awful,” he said. “Some people are feeling existentially crushed. But what I see is the insanity of one man, Putin, who has flooded a huge number of people with shit. I am refusing to internalize his madness and to feel defeated by it. If a pipe bursts in your house, you don’t consider yourself defeated by the sewer. You fix the pipe.”

Golubok, the lawyer, knew as soon as the invasion began what he wanted to do. He is one of only a few Russian nationals certified as trial participants by the International Criminal Court, in The Hague. He wants to be in the court, in whatever capacity, for cases resulting from the war. During the second week of March, he sent me regular text messages, updating me on his journey, and the court’s. “We are going to go to Oslo soon,” he wrote from Tallinn. “The prosecutor of the I.C.C. has asked for warrants for the arrest of three Russian citizens,” for alleged war crimes during the Russian invasion of Georgia, in 2008.

“The prosecutor has made a statement on Ukraine,” Golubok texted the next day. “They are moving very fast—that’s very unusual! We are in Stockholm. It’s a quick layover.”

He texted next, “I’m planning to go to The Hague next week. I don’t have any insider information, but I can tell you that they are moving at unprecedented speed. They’ve already sent a group of investigators to Ukraine.” And if he couldn’t make himself useful in The Hague, Golubok told me, he’d find something else to do with the rest of his life. ♦

Fiction

- “After the Funeral”

By [Tessa Hadley](#).

Content

This content can also be viewed on the site it [originates](#) from.

Audio: Tessa Hadley reads.

After the funeral, the two little girls, aged nine and seven, accompanied their grief-stricken mother home. Naturally, they were also grief-stricken, but, then again, they hadn't known their father very well and hadn't enormously liked him. He was an airline pilot, and they'd preferred it when he was away working; being alert little girls, they'd picked up intimations that he preferred it, too. This was in the nineteen-seventies, when air travel was still considered glamorous. Philip Lyons had flown 747s across the Atlantic for B.O.A.C., until he died of a heart attack—luckily not while in the air but on the ground, prosaically, eating breakfast in a New York hotel room. The airline had flown him home free of charge.

All the girls' concentration was on their mother, Marlene, who couldn't cope. Throughout the funeral service she didn't even cry; she was numb, huddled in her black Persian-lamb coat, petite and soft and pretty in dark glasses, with muzzy licorice-brown hair and red Sugar Date lipstick. Her daughters suspected that she had a very unclear idea of what was going on. It was January, and a patchy sprinkling of snow lay over the stone-cold ground and the graves, in a bleak, impersonal cemetery in the Thames Valley. Marlene had apparently never been to a funeral before; the girls hadn't, either, but they picked things up quickly. They had known from television, for instance, that their mother ought to wear dark glasses to the graveside, and they'd hunted for some in the chest of drawers in her bedroom, which was suddenly their terrain now, liberated from the possibility of their father's arriving home ever again. Lulu had bounced on the peach candlewick bedspread while Charlotte went through the drawers. During the various fascinating stages of the funeral, the girls were aware of their mother peering surreptitiously around, unable to break her old habit of expecting Philip to arrive, to *get her out of this*. "Your father will be here soon," she used to warn them, vaguely and helplessly, when they were running riot, screaming and hurtling around the bungalow in some game or other.

The reception after the funeral was to be hosted by their grandmother, Philip's mother. Charlotte could read the desperate pleading in Marlene's eyes, fixed on her now, from behind the dark lenses. "Oh, no, I can't," Marlene said to her older daughter quickly, furtively. "I can't see all those people."

[Tessa Hadley on building a story from details.](#)

So Charlotte took charge, arranging things with the funeral director, who was willing to give them a lift home in his hearse, and then breaking the news to Nanna, who was affronted but couldn't be surprised by any new revelation of Marlene's inadequacy. Nanna was a tall, straight-backed widow, whose white hair was cut sensibly short. She collected old Delft and read all the new novels and taught piano: only not to Lulu, who had wriggled and slid down off the piano stool, wanting to press the pedals with her hands. Charlotte practiced religiously but wasn't musical, Nanna said. Of course, Nanna was grieving, too, for her youngest son. Her other sons were a doctor and a dentist, and although she used to talk deprecatingly about Philip's flying, as if it were something rash, like running away to join the circus or a pop group, the girls understood now that this meant he'd been her favorite. She'd lost her baby boy and was inconsolable, like a tragic actress in a film. Charlotte and Lulu looked volumes at each other.

At home, they fussed around Marlene, who submitted limply to their ministrations; they kissed her and took off admiringly, piece by piece, in reverse order, all the items they'd dressed her up in for the day's drama—sunglasses, black chiffon head scarf, royal-blue gloves because she didn't possess black, high-heeled black patent-leather slingbacks. The beloved Persian lamb they returned tenderly to its clinging polythene. Then they sat her down on the sofa in front of the television and turned on "Children's Hour." Lulu, pressing up against her, stroked her left hand with its wedding ring, which radiated now a new significance. Charlotte, feeling grown-up, boiled the kettle and made tea in the pot for them all, stirring two teaspoons of sugar and a not extravagant dollop of whisky into each mug, plus extra milk in Lulu's. She got out the biscuit barrel from where it was supposed to be hidden in a high cupboard by standing on a stool, as usual. Marlene couldn't reach the high cupboard, either, without using the stool. They ate a

lot of biscuits and Charlotte made them toast under the grill, with its real flames.

Later, their uncle Richard, the dentist, turned up to make sure they were all right, bringing leftover food that Nanna had sent from the reception—sandwiches and coleslaw and Madeira cake, and also two servings of jelly with mandarin oranges set in it, for the little girls. The sisters felt a hostility to this uncle that wasn't rational but was based on their sessions in his terrible chair, so exquisitely equipped for torturing them. Now it was Richard's turn to be made uncomfortable. Clearly, he didn't know where to look, in the face of his nieces' and his sister-in-law's predicament, and what he assumed were the excesses of their emotion. His brother's death was an embarrassment: brash and scene-stealing, he thought, like everything Philip had ever done. Not only that, but the black cocktail dress Marlene was wearing—it was the only black thing she had—was very low cut; for the duration of the funeral, the girls had made sure she kept her cardigan buttoned over it. Richard was rather like Philip in appearance—tall and burly and sandy. As soon as Marlene saw him she lunged into his arms, breaking into hysterical weeping. Uneasily, he extricated himself. "Now, come on, Marlene. You have to buck up, you know."

"But I've lost everything," she said, sobbing.

"Well, not everything. You've got your girls. You have to be brave for them."

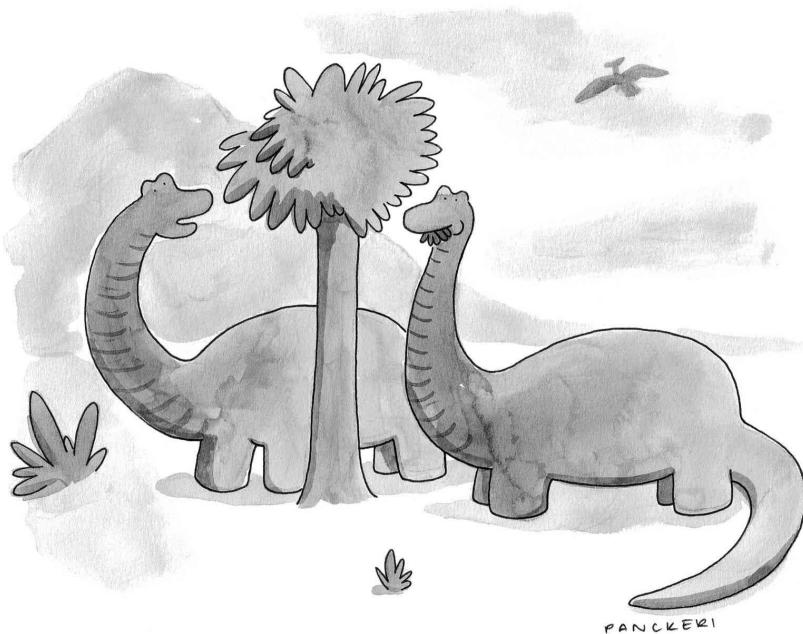
"I can't be brave without Philip! I can't be!"

"You have to look to the future."

"I don't want the future. I want Philip back! I should have thrown myself into his grave today! I wish I was dead, too!"

Impressed, the sisters exchanged glances, and Richard saw it.

"Isn't it time these girls were in bed?" he said severely.



"Sometimes I cheat and I'll have a lizard or two."
Cartoon by Drew Panckeri

Then Lulu, too, burst loudly into tears, hiding her face against her mother's half-bare breasts, arms squeezed around Marlene's small waist so that she couldn't unfasten them. Richard was out of his depth. Only Charlotte could calm them all down.

When he'd gone, she looked in the *Radio Times* and found that at nine-twenty-five on BBC1 there was an episode of one of their favorites—"A Man Called Ironside." They watched it while eating ham sandwiches and crisps, snuggled together, as always for the telly, under a wool blanket on the sofa. Charlotte only just remembered not to exclaim, "Isn't this cozy?" Marlene used to put the blanket back in the spare room whenever their father was due home, but now there was no one, ever again, to prevent them from enjoying themselves. By the time "Ironside" was over, Marlene was fast asleep, exhausted by sorrow, snoring lightly with her mouth open and her eyebrows, plucked to a thin line, raised quizzically.

The girls crept into the kitchen; Lulu stood on tiptoe to see over the top of the kitchen counter, surveying what their uncle had brought them from the party.

"Nanna sent us jelly," Charlotte said. "In her special best glass dishes, for a treat."

Lulu was small, like her mother, and her wide face was as pink and creamy as an angel's in a painting, dark eyes set far apart under thick lashes, the mass of her dark-brown corkscrew curls shivering with impatient energy. She took one of the jelly dishes carefully in her two hands, lifted it up over her head, and—before Charlotte had time to grasp what she intended—let it fall deliberately onto the tiled floor, where it smashed in a satisfactory splat of red jelly and orange segments. Shards of glass went skidding over the floor and under the cupboards; they heard their mother stirring in the sitting room, but knew she hadn't woken, because she would have called out to them. After a moment's frozen outrage, Charlotte stepped over the mess to smack her sister hard across the face. Charlotte was tall for her age and very thin, with her pale hair cut short like a boy's; her gray eyes were huge, and their heavy lids, dropping over her expression like shutters, conveyed her burden of responsibility. As Lulu prepared to break out in wailing, Charlotte shook her urgently by the shoulders. "We have to clean this up," she said. "We'll tell them it was an accident; they're bound to forgive us, today of all days. But we can't ever be naughty again, now that Daddy's dead."

Lulu protested indignantly, "Why not?"

"Because then Nanna will adopt us and we'll have to live with her."

This was a sobering prospect even for Lulu.

Once the excitement of the funeral was over, the girls took in the solemnity of their loss. It was shocking, for instance, when Uncle Richard's wife, Hilary, came round, with their other aunt, Deirdre, to deal with Philip's clothes. They were sorting out what his brothers could use and what had to go to the Salvation Army; this felt like a violation to Marlene and she couldn't watch, only sat seeping tears in the living room, unable to shake off a dread that Philip would hold her accountable. He'd never been able to stand his brothers' wives, and hated anyone poking around in his wardrobe. There was something unseemly, even gloating, in how Hilary and Deirdre were holding up his suits now for judgment, sniffing the armpits of his shirts and even the crotch of his trousers. After a while, the aunts forgot to use their subdued voices, and Marlene and the girls overheard Deirdre saying suggestively, "Well, at least he wasn't alone when he died." That was the

first they'd heard of it. Mother and daughters looked wide-eyed at one another, but didn't dare ask.

Even though their father had so often been absent, the idea of him had given the girls' daily life its particular flavor, they realized now, and they paid anxious tribute to him in retrospect. He may not have wanted them under his feet all the time when he was home, but sometimes he'd tickled them and thrown them in the air, and also he'd brought them costume dolls for their collection, from all over the world. Some of their treats—supper in front of the TV, jumping from the kitchen roof onto a mattress they'd dragged outside, eating condensed milk from the tin—seemed less pleasurable now that they didn't fear his disapproval. They were haunted, too, by the scene of his death, which they had to imagine because the details were kept from them, like something hidden behind a curtain in a horror film. *At least he wasn't alone.* Whatever beast had felled their father, so fearless and bursting with life, must have been potent in ways that were also shaming and disgusting. For a while, Lulu had to sleep in Charlotte's bed at night, because she could see Daddy's picture when she closed her eyes.

"Don't be silly," Charlotte said firmly, although she rolled over toward the wall resignedly, and punched out the pillow that had been scrunched under her head, so that there was room on it for both of them. "He no longer exists."

"He exists inside my eyes."

By the time she awoke the next morning, Charlotte would be pressed, she knew, into the narrow margin of her own bed, while Lulu luxuriated unconsciously in possession of the rest of it, sprawled on her back with her pajama top twisted under her armpits and her dark curls sweaty, breathing noisily, the fine red V of her lip drawn up, showing the little baby teeth like seed pearls.

Once it became clear that Marlene had no idea about money, Philip's brothers carried off from his desk all the papers that Marlene superstitiously wouldn't even touch, in case she messed something up. It turned out that Philip hadn't had much idea about money, either. The Lyoneses convened a family conference; there was grim satisfaction in how Nanna broke the news

to them. Philip hadn't taken out any life insurance, and there was very little pension: they would have to move out of the bungalow, which was the only home the girls could remember, because the rent was too expensive. Philip's brothers would club together to keep the girls at their fee-paying school, but to cover the rest of their costs Marlene would need to go out to work. Deirdre had heard of a job that might suit her, as a receptionist for a doctor who'd gone to medical school with Dennis. Marlene protested to her daughters afterward, in an uncharacteristic gush of resentment against their grandmother—for the most part, she submitted meekly to her authority—"I used to have it over her, because she was a widow and I had a husband living. Now she thinks she knows everything." The girls consoled her: Nanna wasn't half so pretty or nice as she was.

They were all three looking with different eyes already at the bungalow that had been the shape of their family life so far, and seemed shabbier and sadder on the eve of parting.

Another revelation at around this time—which Nanna certainly didn't know about—was the appearance on the scene, at least briefly, of Marlene's own relatives. Or two of them, anyway, a woman and a man purporting to be her sister and her cousin, although the girls weren't convinced—and, as they never appeared or were mentioned again, a doubt persisted. Charlotte and Lulu hadn't wondered much about the absence of family on their mother's side: she had seemed a one-off, *sui generis*. Now that gap was filled with a vengeance by this improbable pair, who had driven down from Great Yarmouth, apparently, squeezed into a bubble car. They must have hoped—when Marlene contacted them out of the blue, self-important with her loss, a few weeks after the funeral—that there was an inheritance involved. "Stuck-up cow," Charlotte overheard the sister say, as they departed. Marlene had poured tea in the best beige-and-pea-green china, shaking with the effort of lifting the pot two-handed. "We knew you had to get married," the sister had said to her. She was a poisonous puffball in a mushroom-colored trouser suit; the cousin was wispy, with dyed yellow hair and an earring and sky-blue nylon flares. It wasn't easy to believe in their connection to Marlene, who cared about appearances and wanted everything to be lovely, was so proud of the way she dressed her girls. They had looked rather like orphans even before their father died, because she went in for "Victorian style," as she called it: smocked plaid Viyella dresses, velvet-ribbon hair bands, black

ribbed tights, which shrank in the wash and dragged down on their legs, so the girls were always having to tug them up.

Marlene's employment worked out well. Dr. Cherry was much nicer than Uncle Dennis. He was tall and jovial and stooped like an awkward boy, with black-rimmed glasses and shirt collars greasy from his hair; Marlene thought that his wife didn't look after his shirts properly. Because he was so educated and passionate about medicine, he sometimes offended his patients, particularly the old ladies, by dismissing their illnesses too cheerfully; it was Marlene's role to soothe and charm them, and she was a great success at it. She carried over her reassuring manner from when she'd been an air hostess, before she married. Her daughters, when they were little, had loved playing airplanes with her, getting her to put on the syrupy, posh air-hostess voice that was a part of her mystique for them, setting out the chairs in rows in the bungalow's dining room, taking turns to bring round beakers of squash with ice cubes, fastening imaginary seat belts for takeoff. *Ladies and gentlemen, we're now flying at thirty thousand feet. . .*

But the girls had grown too old for those games. Now they came to the surgery every afternoon after school, a picture in their matching maroon uniforms: blazers in the summer, gabardine macs in the winter, felt hats secured under the chin with elastic. Charlotte, with her disenchanted, cool look, was disconcerting, her gray eyes the color of rain or marsh water, her skinny long arms and legs; she would set to work right away, sorting out the chaos of filing that had built up by this time, out of sight behind the reception hatch, where her mother presided with such aplomb. Lulu, meanwhile, lay on her stomach on the carpet in the waiting room, absorbedly filling in the outlines in her coloring book and returning each crayon, when she'd finished with it, to its place in the spectrum in the plastic wallet. She got up occasionally to sharpen one into the wastepaper bin.

It was peaceful at the surgery, among the waiting patients on winter evenings, with the gas fire hissing, Lulu's crayon murmuring steadily on the paper, every so often Marlene calling out a patient's name from her list. Of course, the girls were always catching some bug or other; their mother protested that Lulu did it on purpose, so that she could stay home from school. Charlotte liked school, or at least liked coming top in her lessons. Lulu hated it—she was bored to death, neither clever nor good at games.

And yet she was popular with the other girls; they liked to hold her hands and touch her hair as if she were their pet. She played French skipping with them in the rose garden beside Main House, rubber bands knotted into long ropes around their ankles. Or she folded fortune-tellers for them out of paper: *True Love*, or *Better Luck Next Time*, or *Not Lightley!*

Dr. Cherry's Bemstead Heath surgery was miles from their new flat, above a solicitors' office in Purley, and they had to take two buses to get home: often the doctor gave them a lift, driving out of his way. And he came in for a drink sometimes, on sleety dark evenings when they all three coaxed him, Lulu laying her cheek against his tweedy rough sleeve, clinging to his shoulder and refusing to let go, Charlotte hurrying upstairs ahead of the others, to turn on the lamps and the three-bar fire and draw the curtains across the windows of their front room, which looked onto the High Street—fortunately, this was rowdy only at weekends. All the heavy old furniture from the bungalow had been squeezed somehow into this cramped little flat, even the piano; their grandfather, Nanna's husband, travelling long ago in the Far East, had brought back a sideboard and two huge chairs like thrones, carved in black wood, which dominated the insignificant space. Charlotte fetched down cut-glass tumblers from the drinks cabinet, and a bottle of ginger ale to mix with the grownups' whisky. She and Lulu drank Cokes, which might have a dot of whisky in them, too; she put out stuffed olives and salted nuts in little lacquered dishes.

Even after a long day at work, Marlene was in her element at these "intimate soirées," as she called them—she couldn't really speak French, but she'd picked up the accent when she was flying, and was a good mimic. "Quick as a little monkey," Dr. Cherry teased her, intrigued and skeptical, sunk rather deep in the low sofa, as if he were keeping out of sight for some reason, although no one could possibly have seen through those thick curtains. He nursed his drink to his chest with his knees jackknifed, his eager boy's limbs overlong in that space so crowded with furniture, his face alight with reason and cleverness. Perched on the edge of the sofa beside him, legs elegantly crossed in her sheer nylons, Marlene would smoke Sobranie cocktail cigarettes and interrogate him earnestly about health issues and slimming diets, or reminisce about trips she'd made before she was married, to Paris or Venice, singing snatches of song, waving her cigarette in the air for emphasis. The girls knew all these songs; they joined in, too. Their mother

would loosen the doctor's tie and ease the shoes off his feet, declare that he was working too hard. "I wish you'd let me have a go at those shirts." The doctor—resigned and expansive, relaxing into the heat of the electric fire—said he thought they were crazy, the whole family. He didn't know what he was doing here in their crazy world, he added complacently—slurring just slightly, as much from fatigue as from the drink—when he ought to be behaving himself at home. At a sign from their mother, Charlotte and Lulu went down to the High Street with a pound note, getting fish and chips all round.

Later, seeing the doctor glance pointedly at his watch, Charlotte would announce that it was bedtime, and march Lulu off into the bathroom to do her wee-wee and clean her teeth; if she didn't watch out, Lulu might scamper back into the front room, showing off in her pink baby-doll pajamas, bashing out a snatch of "Chopsticks" on the out-of-tune piano, screwing up her face comically at the ceiling, wagging her curls and her bottom, making the doctor laugh until Charlotte dragged her away again. The girls slept in bunks: Lulu would push up hard with her feet on the underside of Charlotte's mattress until Charlotte peered down crossly over the guardrail, telling her off.

On nights when Dr. Cherry was there, they left the bedroom door ajar, not wanting to be cut off entirely from whatever fun was unfolding in the front room. Sometimes the doctor helped Marlene make coffee; sometimes they watched telly, or Marlene put a record on and tried to persuade him to dance. Sometimes the girls woke up to overhear snatches of talk that was not like conversation at all, but warm and sweet and very low, like something bubbling or fermenting, an urging male voice rumbling alongside their mother's fluting, charming, parrying one, the two wrapped around each other fluently. And they knew when the doctor left, because the closing of the front door at the bottom of the staircase, beside the entrance to the solicitors', gave out a certain twanging sound, subdued but resonant, which reached the girls like a signal, resolving something even in the deep chambers of their dreams.

When Charlotte was in the fourth year, beginning to study for her O levels, Marlene took driving lessons. To everyone's surprise, she was a natural and passed her test the first time, then adored the little red Honda Civic that

Uncle Richard chose and helped her pay for. She amazed her daughters, bombing along a clear stretch of road on the way home from Bemstead Heath, checking proficiently in the rearview mirror, or backing with deft movements into a snugly fitting parking space, swivelling in her seat to look over her shoulder. Hilary and Deirdre could both drive, but Nanna had never learned, and Uncle Richard told it as a great joke that Hilary was terrified behind the wheel, went for miles out of her way to avoid turning right against the traffic. Now Marlene and her girls could go on their own holidays, instead of depending on Richard to drive them to his cottage in North Wales, where there was no phone or television, usually it rained, and they spent the week playing Cluedo and Monopoly until he came to fetch them home again. Hilary had encouraged them heartily: *so good to get away from it all!* Yet even after Marlene passed her test the girls still heard a male voice in the flat sometimes, rumbling in the night. How could it be Dr. Cherry, when Marlene had driven home from the surgery by herself? Yet it sounded like Dr. Cherry. On occasion, it sounded like Uncle Richard.

“It’s funny that they still come,” Lulu said, “now that she can drive.”

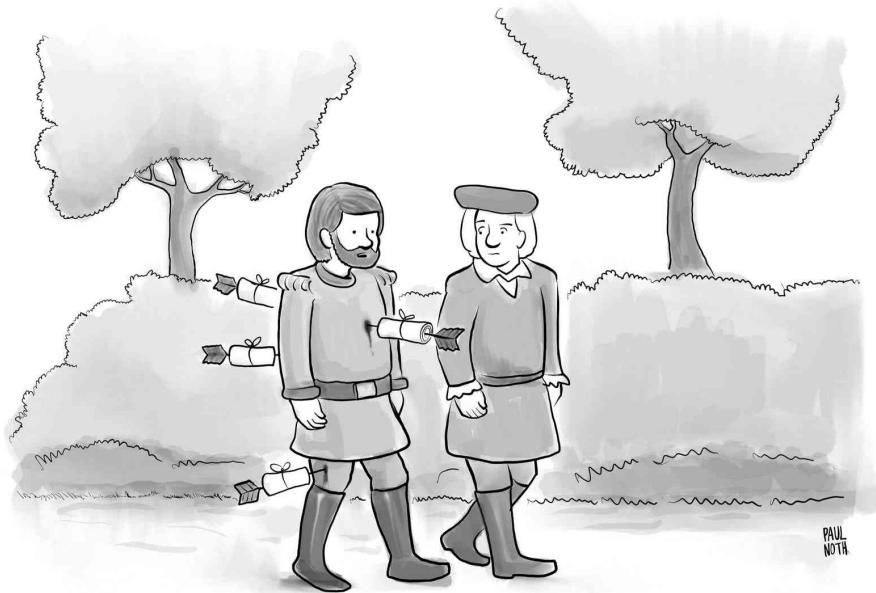
Charlotte instructed her sternly, “Don’t you know what they come for?”

Lulu stared into her sister’s face, drawing down insight from it, taking Charlotte’s knowledge inside herself and connecting it to a diagram of a drooping plant that a lady doctor had sketched on the blackboard, in a special class they were given once a year at school, excused for the afternoon from ordinary lessons. Love is the root, this lady had explained, labelling the diagram in her neat handwriting. Friendship is the stem and leaves, and physical passion is the flower and comes last. Lulu had heard all about sex in the gossip that went around at school. But she hadn’t until this moment connected it with the flower of physical passion, let alone with her own mother.

Then, when Charlotte was in the sixth form, there was a kerfuffle at the surgery and Marlene lost her job. Ostensibly, this was because Dr. Cherry’s surgery was amalgamating with two others to form a brand-new Bemstead Heath Health Centre, which would not need so many receptionists. But it was obvious, even to the girls, that there was more to it. Their grandmother paid them a visit, to remonstrate with Marlene and accuse her of *going off*

the rails. Didn't her dead husband's family mean anything to her? Didn't she owe something to Deirdre and Hilary, for finding her that job?

"I can find a job perfectly well myself, thank you," Marlene said stiffly, not without dignity.



"I'm trying not to check my messages so often."
Cartoon by Paul Notch

"We'll see about that."

Then it emerged that Marlene had found something already, beginning the following week, at the checkout in a little supermarket along the High Street: this seemed only to antagonize their grandmother further. It was the first time she had visited them in the flat. They were invited to her house once a month for Sunday lunch, and Charlotte still went for piano lessons, in a spirit of dutiful compliance, though there wasn't much point, Nanna had said. Now the old lady stared around, as if she were taking an inventory of all the furniture that rightfully belonged to her. She held herself very upright in one of her dead husband's carved thrones, with her coat still on and her handbag on her lap; she had refused tea and sherry. Charlotte had made tea, nonetheless, in the beige-and-green pot, which looked old-fashioned now, and poured it for the three of them, and passed around biscuits. Probably the biscuit plates were Nanna's, too.

“I’m afraid for my grandchildren,” Nanna said. “When I see the way you live.”

“There’s nothing wrong with having a bit of fun,” Marlene said stubbornly.

Nanna was frozen, offended to the soul. “Is that what you call it? Fun?”

“You don’t need to worry about us,” Charlotte reassured her.

Lulu had just learned to do French knitting. Sitting beside her mother on the sofa, she wasn’t taking much notice of the conversation, engrossed in weaving her wool, with a fine crochet hook, around the four nails knocked into a cotton reel: it was a craze at school. From time to time, she stopped to peer with one eye, shutting the other one tightly, down the hole in the reel, and into the interior of the long snake of striped knitting emerging from its far end. “And it’s high time you talked to a professional about that one,” Nanna burst out, at the limit of her patience. “It’s clear there’s something missing. She needs help.”

Marlene contemplated Lulu in surprise. “There’s nothing wrong with her.”

“I knew as soon as I met you that you were trouble, bringing bad blood into the family. I’m only glad that poor Philip isn’t here to know what’s going on.”

“If Daddy were here,” Charlotte remonstrated reasonably, “then Mummy wouldn’t have needed a job in the first place.”

She had remembered guiltily, however, when she heard “bad blood,” the puffball sister in her mushroom suit and the yellow-haired cousin with his earring. Nanna shifted her scrutiny from Lulu to her older sister, perched sideways on the piano stool. Charlotte looked nothing like her mother, but wasn’t wholesome and substantial like Philip, either. She was angular, with apologetic small breasts prodding her polo shirt, lavender-colored flares sagging on jutting hip bones, colorless limp hair, a rash blooming on her jaw. No wonder she doesn’t have boyfriends, thought Nanna, whose other granddaughters, Charlotte and Lulu’s cousins, were talented and popular. Charlotte’s air of martyrdom was unappealing—and that bustling,

precocious way she had of putting herself forward. In fact, her tragic, heavy-lidded eyes were like Nanna's own: Hilary and Deirdre had remarked upon this. Yet she experienced her grandmother's gaze, which was the same milky blue as her Delft pottery, as a sensation of cold, as impersonal when it passed over her as a lighthouse beam.

"And as for you, Charlotte . . ."

But Charlotte couldn't bear to hear sentence pronounced. Swivelling abruptly on the piano stool, she turned her back to the room and launched into playing "*Für Elise*," very badly and loudly, pumping on the sustain pedal like a bellows. She could picture perfectly, from her piano lessons, her grandmother's expression of long-suffering.

Marlene was happy working in that supermarket, which smelled of onions and stale water leaked from the frozen-food cabinet. The fluorescent lights flickered sometimes and gave her a headache, but the pay was just as good as at the surgery, and she liked the camaraderie with the other women—she had known right away not to put on her air-hostess voice. There was more excitement in the shop than at the doctor's: shouting in the aisles, sudden illnesses, and shoplifting, even one or two local drug addicts. And once an actual armed robbery, although only a small one, when a panicked shrimp-looking man threatened them with a bread knife and took forty packs of Benson & Hedges.

Charlotte ought to go to university, all her teachers said. She got as far as filling in her ucca form, and going for interviews at York and Durham and Warwick; it was the first time she'd ever travelled on a train by herself. She was offered places at York and Warwick, to do sociology and psychology, but decided to look for a job at home instead. Uncle Richard came round to the flat especially to reason with her, and reported back to Hilary that his niece was a funny sort of girl, bit of a cold fish, very set on her own ideas. "And you've always taken such an interest in their education!" Hilary said, brushing out her graying hair at the dressing table, meeting her husband's look neutrally in the mirror, stranding him yet again in tormented speculation. Did Hilary know about his fling with Marlene, or didn't she?

“How could I go?” Charlotte said to Lulu. “What do you suppose would happen, if I weren’t here to keep an eye on everything?”

“I don’t know,” Lulu said unhappily. “What would happen?”

“She can’t take care of herself, you know. Like at the surgery, when she never could grasp the system for the filing. She couldn’t have kept that job for as long as she did if I hadn’t helped her.”

“But she manages at the shop O.K.,” Lulu said. “Working the till, stocktaking.”

“Well, goodness me,” Charlotte said contemptuously. “Couldn’t anyone?”

And Charlotte found a post herself soon afterward, in Resource Planning with the West Surrey Water Board. Meanwhile, one of the Saturday boys at the shop had fallen in love with Lulu, and Charlotte disapproved of him. Damian was nice-looking—with wiry dark hair and wide-apart brown eyes flecked with gold—but characterless to the point of oddity. Visiting them in the flat, he sat leaning forward, hands clasped, staring down at his polished black platform shoes with intensity; it was a struggle to keep conversation flowing, around the blockage of his silence. His wordlessness, however, didn’t mean he couldn’t express his passion in other ways: when Lulu took him into the bedroom, to listen to Culture Club on the girls’ Dansette record-player, Marlene insisted they leave the door open. But she needn’t have worried. Lulu was vigilant on her own behalf, and had taken in, with a fervor that was almost mystical, how the permitted and forbidden areas were marked out on her compact, neat little body. In puberty, she’d shed some of the wildness of her childhood, like a domesticated animal losing its high sheen and nervous quiver.

They hadn’t seen Dr. Cherry for long months. And then one evening, when the memory of a macaroni-cheese supper still hung thickly about the flat, and they were watching the latest episode of “Nicholas Nickleby,” he erupted once again into their lives. Charlotte went down to open the door when the bell rang; agitated and proud, she presented him in the sitting room, where the others were still cuddled under the telly blanket. “Look who’s here!”

The doctor appeared dishevelled and emotional, slightly unhinged, his glasses steaming up from the cold night outside. With just the faintest shade of reluctance—she was so involved in the story!—Marlene turned off the telly. Graham Cherry, apparently, was leaving his wife and three children; he was staying in a bed-and-breakfast in Purley, around the corner from their flat. It occurred to Charlotte immediately that he was the solution to all their problems. Already, she was imagining him married to Marlene, and putting his foot down in relation to Damian; vaguely, in the background to this happy picture, she herself might, at last, be away at university, doing wonderfully in all her exams. They warmed up some leftover macaroni cheese for the doctor, and poured him a stiff whisky; Marlene rinsed his shirt and socks in the bathroom sink, hanging them over the bath to dry. He sat ensconced among the sofa cushions, in her flowered dressing gown. “How I’ve missed you all!” he said with a tremor in his voice. “It’s been awful at home. If you knew how often I’ve thought about this cozy little place.”

“We’ve missed you, too,” Charlotte said tenderly. “We missed our conversations.”

She had a qualm lest, with her away at university, the doctor might be starved of rational companionship, left with only her mother and her sister to talk to. It would be worth any sacrifice, she thought, to keep him sweet—but, for the moment, that difficulty still lay in an unknown future. The succeeding weeks were feverish with planning and possibility. On one joyous occasion, the doctor took them all into London to see a show; they went for a hamburger afterward and then walked in the crowds along the South Bank, past the illuminated G.L.C. building, whose reflection glittered in the black river water, where the dark forms of boats came and went mysteriously. Marlene was lovely that evening, after a few brandy-and-Babychams, in her pearl earrings and the precious Persian lamb. She was hanging on one of the doctor’s arms, Charlotte on the other, Lulu dawdling alongside them, drinking everything in: they were like a real family, Charlotte thought. When they got back to the flat in Purley, eventually, and the girls had retired to bed—surely, they couldn’t stay too much longer in these awful bunks, absurd at their age—the doctor really did broach the idea of marriage.

Yet unaccountably, on the brink of the future, Marlene hesitated.

“Oh, dear, I don’t know,” she said, sighing, the following evening, when the doctor was absent—partly sulking because Marlene hadn’t leaped at her chance, partly cheering on his daughter in a swimming gala. “He says he’d want me to give up my work.”

“He’s a *doctor*, Mummy,” Charlotte exclaimed, incredulous. “A doctor’s wife can’t work in a *supermarket!*”



“I had that dream again where I was covered in honey and wearing no pants.”
Cartoon by Pia Guerra and Ian Boothby

“But I don’t mind it. I like to pay my own way.”

“You wouldn’t need to pay your own anything, once you were married to him.”

The doctor was wounded by Marlene’s doubt, withdrew his warmth, and stopped coming to see them. Charlotte began going out in the evenings, with an anxious, important face, to visit his lonely bedsit and negotiate the next step with him. They were like co-conspirators. Sometimes she didn’t come home until past midnight.

One gray Sunday morning in February, the doctor and Marlene agreed to a family walk in the Recreation Ground: this felt more like a truce than like an end to the war. “I *am* thinking about it, I promise,” Marlene had said to

Charlotte. “What’s the hurry? I don’t want to rush into anything I’ll regret later.”

They were all subdued and chastened in a bitter wind, under a white sky spitting rain, swathed in scarves, pushing gloved hands deep in their pockets. Damian and Lulu hung behind, bubbling with amorousness, shoving at each other’s muffled shape. Damian whispered into Lulu’s ear, probing past her woolly hat and springy curls with his long, fine fingers. Marlene did her best to keep up a flow of inconsequential chatter about her friends who worked at the shop: one had a funny digestion, another had sciatica; she wondered if the doctor had any advice for them? He said, “Not really, they should go to their own doctor,” exuding an air of quiet desperation. The path ran alongside a row of municipal pines, astringently resinous, whose red bark hung down in strings; lolly sticks and sweet papers and caches of dog dirt, with smeared tissue paper, were tucked in among the tree roots; the light was thwarted and desolate.

The doctor stopped suddenly. “Oh, God, this is bloody,” he said, not looking at anyone. Then he swerved on his heel and strode off without a word more, back in the direction of the car park, stooping with his head bent into the wind, his long legs working like scissors. Luckily, they’d come in two cars.

“Well, that was uncalled for,” Marlene said, staring after him. “If there’s one thing I can’t condone it’s rude behavior.”

“Wasn’t he supposed to be having dinner with us?” Lulu wondered.

Charlotte stood staring at nothing on the ground, heavy lids sealing off her usual vigilance. Beside the path was a steep bank overgrown with tall grass, bleached and stained and flattened by the rain and wind; she struck off suddenly, descending the bank at an angle, up to her knees in grass, stumbling and nearly losing her footing, as if she were wading through water. At the bottom of the bank, she stopped with her back to them.

“Whatever’s got into her?” Lulu asked in astonishment.

It was as if some gauzy and confusing veil had been pulled away from Marlene’s eyes, and she saw her older daughter clearly for the first time.

Everyone had always worried about Lulu, but Lulu was fine. It wasn't Lulu standing there looking so solitary and thin and dejected, bedraggled like a migrating bird blown off its course. "You go on back," she said, handing the car keys to Lulu. "Wait for us in the car. I'll talk to her."

"Really? What's wrong with everybody?"

"Just leave me alone," Charlotte said loudly without turning round. "Go away and leave me here. I want to die."

Lulu and Damian exchanged quick glances of comical surprise but set off obediently, walking back in the direction they'd come, huddled together and faintly huffy—they hadn't wanted to come out for a walk in the first place. Marlene picked her way down the bank toward her daughter and put her arms around Charlotte, frozen and resisting, from behind; she could smell the Anaïs Anaïs that Charlotte had sprayed on her neck. "You know, if you'd got into trouble, Char," she said hesitantly and quietly, just for the two of them to hear, "I wouldn't mind. I wouldn't care what people thought. We'd love having a baby in that flat. I've still got your old carry cot put away somewhere."

In a scornful voice, flat with despair, Charlotte told her not to be ridiculous. She wasn't pregnant. She wasn't quite that much of an idiot. But she allowed her mother, all the same, to stroke her hunched shoulders through the thick winter coat. "Don't worry, darling," Marlene said, making little soothing noises. "You will get over it, I promise, whatever it is. You're young, you've got your whole life ahead of you."

"But I don't want my life. I hate my life."

Marlene was remembering those evenings when Charlotte had gone round to conspire with the doctor in his bedsit, then come home and let herself into the flat so late, with such a guilty, heated, angry, happy face. She had been waiting up for her daughter each time, in her dressing gown and slippers in front of the electric fire, dozing over the local paper. "Well? What did he say?" And Charlotte had snapped at her crossly, frowning, unwinding her long scarf from around her neck. Marlene could smell the cold night air that

she brought in with her. “I can’t tell you all about it now. It’s too late. I’ll tell you in the morning.”

The doctor, meanwhile, as mother and daughter stood facing certain realities in the park, was on the road for home: his rightful home, with his wife and children. Hardly caring what reception awaited him there, he felt strong enough for anything. He’d awoken out of a fever dream. As if all the years of his education, and his hard graft in medical school, could have been meant to end in that ghastly bedsit, or in a stuffy flat in Purley! Batting aside a bothersome slide show of images—Charlotte’s goose-fleshed, greenish-white limbs, abandoned like something drowned, against pink nylon sheets that had crackled with static—he shifted in his seat and glanced uneasily in the rearview mirror. There had been an excruciating scene with his landlady, who complained about “night visitors.” Dr. Cherry had made a few wrong diagnoses in his career: missing the spinal tumor, for example, that had caused one patient’s back pain. And he’d sent away with reassurances a child who turned out to have meningitis; that child hadn’t died, but hadn’t made a complete recovery, either. Everybody makes mistakes, the doctor consoled himself, turning on the windscreen wipers. You just have to be strong enough to learn to live with them. The rain was really lashing now. It was coming down in torrents. ♦

By [Deborah Treisman](#)

Letter from Daytona Beach

- [Retirement the Margaritaville Way](#)

By [Nick Paumgarten](#)

Content

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The first person I met at the Bar & Chill was a bald guy in a black T-shirt, black drawstring shorts, and flip-flops, with a Harley-Davidson tattoo on his right arm and a claddagh ring on his left hand. He was drinking and laughing with a few friends. He gestured to the empty stool next to him and said, “We don’t bite.”

I offered an expression of if-you-insist, and he said, “Bring it.” His tone was cheerful, as you might expect at the Bar & Chill, the principal drinking-and-dining establishment that looks out on the town center of Latitude Margaritaville, an active-living community for Jimmy Buffett enthusiasts, aged “55 and better,” in Daytona Beach, Florida. The Bar & Chill was open to the evening. A gentle breeze fanned the lanai. On a flat-screen, the Providence Friars led the Vermont Catamounts by a few buckets. A bartender brought a Perfect Margarita in a plastic cup.

The bald man, drinking a vodka soda, said his name was Phil. Phil Murphy, from Arlington, Massachusetts, aged sixty-four. Formerly a research director at Forrester, retired since 2015. “I was in the air for twenty years,” he said. He looked and sounded less like my idea of a Parrothead, as Jimmy Buffett’s diehard fans are called, than like Mike Ehrmantraut, the melancholic fixer in “Breaking Bad.” Standing off his left shoulder, his wife, Betty, red hair cut short, added a dash of urbanity, a spritz of Allison Janney. Phil and Betty had organized an emergency fund for the restaurant’s staff during its *Covid* shutdown. One of their friends declared them “the king and queen of the Bar & Chill.”

“True story,” Murphy said. “We read about Latitude Margaritaville. It was 2019. April-ish. I said, ‘Oh, my God, this fucking place is going to be awful. All these people with parrots on their heads. Jimmy Buffett playing twenty-four hours a day.’ We thought, Let’s go look, as a goof.”

At the time, the Murphys had retired to a third-floor oceanfront condo down the coast, in Melbourne Beach: the perfect forever home. “We gutted it and

did it up like we were going to die there,” he said. They walked up and down the beach every day, but even a beach can get old. “In four years, we made four friends. Everyone was a part-timer. So we did some retirement math. We assessed the carrying costs.” The math, and a yearning for friends, told the Murphys to move to Margaritaville.

They were early adopters but not true pioneers. In November, 2017, more than a hundred and fifty prospective buyers had camped out overnight in the parking lot of the sales center, in anticipation of opening day for down payments. The parking-lot scene was on brand: it had a festival air, with tents, a steel-drum band, food trucks, and stacks of pizzas. A movie played on a giant screen: “Jurassic World,” in which Buffett has a cameo as a bartender rescuing a couple of margaritas from an outdoor table before some pterosaurs swoop in. Strangers befriended one another and decided, overnight, to become next-door neighbors.

“We left oceanfront to come here,” Murphy went on. The base cost for their Latitude Margaritaville house—of a configuration called the Breeze, from the Beach Collection of options, with three bedrooms, three bathrooms, and a two-car garage—was three hundred and thirty thousand dollars. The extras—tile floors, chef’s kitchen—ran them another hundred thousand. “It’s done,” Murphy said. “It’s nice.”



A swim class at Latitude Margaritaville. Photograph by Tobias Hutzler for The New Yorker

The housing stock, a range of villas and cottages, is, by today's standards, compact and tasteful—single-story buildings with sensible layouts and patios that, typically screened in, can look like aviaries. People covet three-car garages, for their golf carts and motorcycles—there are a lot of both in Margaritaville—but most have two-car garages. A popular indulgence is eight-foot-tall interior doors. Tracts of development radiate out from the town center, where, in addition to the Bar & Chill and the sprawling puzzle-piece-shaped Paradise Pool, with palms, cabanas, and tiki huts, there is the Fins Up! fitness center, the Last Mango theatre and banquet hall, and an outdoor band shell and plaza, with a movie screen, for concerts, Sunday N.F.L. games, and such. There is also a beach club on the coast, in Ormond-by-the-Sea, twenty minutes away by shuttle van, with pool, bar, and cabana set into the dunes, on the former site of a run-down motel, across from Hanky Panky's Lounge. “Glory Days” on the speakers, bull sharks in the sea.

At the Bar & Chill, and everywhere on the grounds, light classic rock plays all day. You hear it in the village square, in the locker room at the gym, in the model villas that have been staged with plastic cheeseburgers and plastic margaritas. Sometimes it's Jimmy Buffett songs, sometimes it's something else. At that moment, it was Steely Dan, “My Old School”—“I remember the thirty-five sweet goodbyes.” Murphy wasn't actually a Parrothead, he said. He preferred Bonnie Raitt, Little Feat, Stevie Ray Vaughan. “But do I like some of Jimmy's music? Yes, I do. I had a brother, Dave, who died on July 11, 1988. He was forty-eight. Congenital heart disease. He was working on the space shuttle for Siemens. He was a Jimmy Buffett fan. My mother wrote to Jimmy. To thank him for the music. Jimmy wrote her back. He wrote her back! I eulogized my brother with the lyrics from the song ‘The Captain and the Kid.’ You know it?”

I didn't. Murphy was now crying. He turned away to collect himself. Changes in attitude. After a few moments, he apologized and introduced me to his friends. One of them was his neighbor from across the street in what was known as Phase 2—the second neighborhood to have been built. (Phase 5, consisting of six hundred and forty-one homes, is now fully developed, and half sold, and lots are for sale in Phase 6. There is room and approval for nearly four thousand homes.) The neighbor was Jack Sjursen, a retired ironworker from Patchogue, on Long Island, who was turning sixty-two the

next day. “It’s my birthday, bitch!” he called out. He appeared to have momentum. He’d also just learned that he had a new grandson, and was going saltwater fishing at dawn. “I fish and I golf,” he said. “I’ve been here for two and a half years, loving every minute of it.”

The citizens of Latitude Margaritaville testify so consistently to a life of gratification that one suspects, but finds no evidence for, a regimen of happy pills or talking points. Disgruntlement and curmudgeonliness must exist, but not in view of a visitor susceptible to such traits.

“My husband doesn’t own pants.”

“We’ve got four bars in our villa.”

“The freshman fifteen is real here.”

Stuart Schultz, a former summer-camp director who, as Latitude Margaritaville’s head of residential community relations, serves as a kind of cheerleading pooh-bah, told me, “It’s like being in college, but with money and without having to study. You have a great dorm room, you never have to go to class, and there’s always a party.”

One resident said, “In our previous life, we could do paper calendars. Here we had to learn Google Calendar.” Some had college- or adult-aged children living with them who were startled by their parents’ social lives. “My daughter’s always, like, ‘You’re going out *again*?’” one woman said. Men with guitars set up outside someone’s garage, and the golf carts appear out of nowhere. Commence the beer pong. Pool parties, poker nights, talent shows, toga parties, pig roasts. Cigar-club meeting, group renewal of wedding vows, a pub crawl in old St. Augustine. Oktoberfest this fall had a “Gilligan’s Island” theme; “Hoodstock” was hippies, Fireball, and multicolored jello shots. The golf carts zip and swerve. “By the time we got to Phase 3, we were driving on people’s lawns!” one participant told me. (“Open containers are encouraged,” he said.) An Andrea Bocelli concert in Orlando, or a pajama party at the Last Mango, with a screening of “The Polar Express.” Proximity to Port Canaveral means easy cruise-ship access; the residents set sail, often in big groups, on vacations from their permanent

vacation. A couple of hundred of them were booked on a cruise to Bermuda this spring.

If it's isolation that ails us—our suburban remove, our reliance on cars, our dwindling circles of friends, our lack of congregation and integration and mutual understanding, of the kind described by Robert Putnam in "[Bowling Alone](#)"—then the solution, especially for those tilting into their lonelier elderly years, would seem to be fellowship, activity, fun. In the Margaritaville calculus, the benefits of good company outweigh the deleterious effects of alcohol. Merriment is medicinal.

At a happy hour one night, I met Chuck and Christina Danner. Chuck, fifty-eight, was ex-military intelligence, now in electronic payments, as yet unretired. Christina, fifty-four, had worked in payments, which is where they'd met: this was, for both of them, a second marriage. (An underage resident, upon turning fifty-five, might have a "Finally Legal" party.) Originally from Pennsylvania, they'd moved to Daytona from Denver, and owned a Harley, two Jeeps, and an R.V. They were among the first fifty people to arrive at Latitude Margaritaville.



One of the many resident bands. Photograph by Tobias Hutzler for The New Yorker

Chuck told me, "If you don't get here and automatically relax and think, This is great, there's something wrong with you, and you don't belong here."

When Chuck was fifty-one, he had a heart attack. “I nearly died,” he said. “The E.M.T.s beat the shit out of me.” Recently, he’d been to see his cardiologist, who reported that all his vitals were almost shockingly strong: “He said, ‘I’d never be able to tell that you ever had a heart attack.’” Chuck chalked it up to the Margaritaville life style and outlook. Another resident at the happy hour chimed in: “My cardiologist told me, ‘I’m from New Orleans. I’m on call all the time down there at Latitude Margaritaville, and they throw it down pretty hard!’”

The chief executive of Margaritaville Holdings, the parent company of Latitude Margaritaville, is a New Yorker named John Cohlan. In 1994, Cohlan was an associate at Triarc, the investment firm co-founded by Nelson Peltz, which owned RC Cola and Arby’s. That year, Peltz moved the firm temporarily to Palm Beach. Cohlan, thirty-six and single at the time, didn’t know anyone there; a friend introduced him to Jane Slagsvol, Jimmy’s wife, and, eventually, Cohlan met Buffett himself. At Jazz Fest, in New Orleans, he saw the enthusiasm of Buffett’s fans during his set and had an epiphany that Buffett might be a more substantial and self-sustaining brand than any that Triarc owned. “He was a real businessman!” Buffett told me recently. Buffett had already, as he put it, “opened that vein of the mine” with a Margaritaville bar and a T-shirt shop in Key West. Disney had shown interest in a partnership but hadn’t agreed to Buffett’s terms. The investor Warren Buffett, whom Jimmy had got to know after a Buffett-clan pilgrimage to a South Pacific island populated by Buffetts (a DNA test revealed no blood relation between the two), had advised him, Ask for what you want, and if they say no someone else will come along. Uncle Warren, as Buffett calls him, was right. That someone was Universal Studios. Buffett enlisted Cohlan to help him establish a twenty-thousand-square-foot Margaritaville restaurant at the entrance to Universal’s Islands of Adventure theme park in Orlando. Cohlan also outflanked Seagram, which owned both the park and Buffett’s record label, on the question of what alcohol to stock—with Seagram, Margaritaville created its own. Buffett brought in Cohlan as his partner, saying, “I can’t pay you what you’re making on Wall Street, but you get to come to work in shorts and flip-flops.”

More than twenty million people a year pass through the doors of a Margaritaville-branded establishment. The company, with annual system-wide sales of \$1.7 billion, licenses the name to restaurants, hotels, casinos,

and resorts, and sells a wide array of branded merchandise: umbrellas, towels, beach furniture, bicycles, blenders, frozen shrimp, and Key-lime-pie mix. It recently announced plans to launch a cruise line. (Before that, Buffett himself had never been on a cruise ship.) Given the age of Buffett's fan base, and the life style he's hawking—as well as baby-boomer demographics—the move into active living was a natural one.

"Who knew people wanted to *live* in Margaritaville?" Buffett told me. "I thought for a while it was a myth."

The development in Daytona was a joint project of Margaritaville Holdings and Minto Communities USA, the American branch of a builder based in Ottawa. In 2017, Minto had bought roughly two thousand acres of brush and swamp, about seven miles from the coast, across the street from the Ladies Professional Golf Association's headquarters and its pair of signature courses. Minto had a plan to develop a retirement community there called Oasis. Cohlan caught wind of it, and Oasis became Latitude Margaritaville, taking its name from Buffett's breakthrough 1977 album, "Changes in Latitudes, Changes in Attitudes"—the one with the "Margaritaville" single. The latitude would be east-central Florida, or any place where it doesn't ice over in winter; the attitude would be strummin' the six-string on a front-porch swing. The partners developed a nearly identical one in Hilton Head, South Carolina, and last year launched the biggest one yet, in Panama City, Florida.

"We were getting polarized as a country politically, and then the pandemic comes along," Buffett said. "It's a good place to be if you like your neighbor."

Cohlan told me, "It attracts people—and this may sound corny—who have a set of common values. Those values are rooted in this attitude. A person created that attitude. But whether or not you feel connected to that person, it's not physics. It's, 'We're interested in meeting other people. We like to have fun. We don't want to be overly political. We like the idea of being happy.'"

After my night with Phil Murphy at the Bar & Chill, I looked up "The Captain and the Kid." It was on "Down to Earth," Buffett's first album, from

1970, which never really got off the ground. He wrote the song about the death of his grandfather, a ship captain who'd instilled in Buffett a love of the sea when he was growing up, on the Gulf Coast of Alabama. Buffett says that the record company wanted him to change the ending, to make the song less sad, but he refused:

We both were growin' older then and
Wiser with the years
That's when I came to understand
The course his heart still steers
He died about a month ago
While winter filled the air
And though I cried, I was so proud
To love a man so rare.

It is impressive, in that American way, how Buffett steered from there to here—from struggling singer-songwriter whom no one ever called the next [Bob Dylan](#) to surefire arena act and hospitality conglomerate. A poor man's Gordon Lightfoot grows into a drinking man's Martha Stewart, hardly having to change his tune.

Nashville, on that first go-round, anyway, didn't work out for him. His second record, "High Cumberland Jubilee," a string-band gambit without a whiff of brine, didn't get released. He had an infectious personality, a facility with words, and some mojo as a solo performer, but the charisma didn't translate onto vinyl, or onto the charts. For a while, to make ends meet, he worked as a reporter at *Billboard*. Humbled and frustrated, he retreated, in 1971, to Key West, at that time a redoubt of leathery sots and acid freaks, drug smugglers, treasure hunters, and shrimpers, along with artists and writers who weren't necessarily not one or two of those other things. Key West became material and muse. Buffett signed on as second mate on a fishing charter ("I kind of had it made") and played for drinks and tips at the Chart Room, Capt. Tony's, and Crazy Ophelia's. Among his acquaintances were the writers [Jim Harrison](#) and [Thomas McGuane](#), whom Buffett called Captain Berserko. (McGuane eventually married Buffett's sister.) Periodically, he left the Keys to perform around the country, honing his emergent Caribbean cowboy style—"trop rock," or "Gulf and Western"—and an audience took root. Still, it was a hard road. As Ryan White

chronicles in an unauthorized biography, “[Jimmy Buffett: A Good Life All the Way](#),” from 2017, Buffett was on the verge of buying a Boston Whaler to join the local marijuana-smuggling game, but, after a successful gig on the undercard at Max’s Kansas City in New York, he managed to sell a third album, “A White Sport Coat and a Pink Crustacean.” The liner notes, by McGuane, burnished the emergence of a revised persona: A “throwback altar boy of Mobile, Alabama, brings spacey up-country tunes strewn with forgotten crab traps, chemical daydreams, Confederate memories, Ipana vulgarity, ukulele madness and, yes, Larry, a certain sweetness.”

“Margaritaville” was his first big hit, peaking at No. 8 on the *Billboard* chart in 1977. He has said he wrote it in six minutes, the first half of those in a notebook after an afternoon of drinking margaritas at a bar in Austin, Texas, the rest in a traffic jam on the Seven Mile Bridge, on returning to Key West. It was a catchy and clever distillation of the happy-derelict attitude, the celebration of leisure, transgression, and good humor that he’d been describing in song and projecting onstage for years.



At Latitude Margaritaville, the pickleball courts are typically busier than the tennis courts. Photograph by Tobias Hutzler for The New Yorker

I was eight when “Margaritaville” played over and over on the AM dial—in the summer not only of Sam but of Barry Manilow and Andy Gibb. It’s easy to disdain it now, but I associated its steel-drum calypso sound and droll delivery with the good life. I had a great-aunt, Julie, who each Christmas

gave me a vinyl LP, relying on the recommendations of the record-store clerks. One year, she gave me “Anthology,” a compilation of the Band’s greatest hits. Another year, it was a Herb Alpert release called “Rise.” One wonders how she was describing me to the clerks. In 1980, it was “Volcano,” by Jimmy Buffett.

It was obvious even to an eleven-year-old that the album wasn’t in any way hip. The cover, with lettering in flamingo pink, was a garish painting in green and aquamarine of a Caribbean island—Montserrat, where Buffett had recorded it. The music was adept but soft. I learned the lyrics, as one used to, sitting with the sleeve in hand and a full batch of brain cells between the ears.

Over time, Buffett has come to be admired and complimented by an array of real aces, among them the late [Allen Toussaint](#) (who wrote a song about Buffett’s good vibes) and even Dylan himself, who once, when asked to name his favorite songwriters, chose Buffett. A Zimmy jest? Perhaps. But Dylan has covered Buffett live. Still, awards and critical acclaim have mostly eluded him, and one can detect in his recitations of his ascent to cultural iconhood, self-deprecating as such accounts are, the lightly worn shoulder chip of a self-made titan.

In the late eighties, Buffett expanded into book-writing. He has published seven works of fiction and nonfiction and is one of just a handful of authors to be No. 1 on both best-seller lists, along with Styron, Hemingway, Steinbeck, Dr. Seuss, Irving Wallace, and Mitch Albom. In his books and songs, his world view metastasized into something akin to an empire of attitude, a Margaritaville of the mind and of the travel brochure. The broader idea of Margaritaville has itself drifted over time to encompass commercial horizons that have little to do with the man or even the song. Buffett is now, if not a billionaire, then at least a half of one, with houses all over the place, and boats and planes, and high-powered friends and harried assistants who keep his schedule and ward off entanglements. (“Fins up!” is the universal sign-off among Margaritaville employees.) He turned seventy-five on Christmas Day and still surfs, sails, fishes, and flies planes, and occasionally pops up before an open mike to charm a happy-hour crowd. One thing he isn’t doing is wasting away.

On my first morning in Latitude Margaritaville, I had a slot in an exercise class. When I arrived at the fitness center, a trainer named Todd was leading seven women through suitcase lunges as George Harrison sang “Got My Mind Set on You.” Some of these women had, a few nights before, put on a dance performance during a talent show in the new theatre, doing numbers from “All That Jazz” for their fellow-residents. I was sorry to have missed it.

“Is this Butts and Guts?” I asked Todd, during a lull.

“Actually, this is Body Blast,” he said. “But we do work our butts and guts!”

Butts and Guts came next. Patrice Ambuter, the instructor, wore a headset with a microphone and had powerful arms and shoulders. She asked us to assemble an arsenal of implements—exercise ball, step-up board, yoga mat, hand weights, stretchy bands, various slidey things—and then pair up. My partner was Doreen Asselin, a retired administrative assistant from a V.A. hospital in Bedford, Massachusetts. “You picked the hardest class,” she said.

Ambuter got us started with “Fresh,” by Kool & the Gang. Fresh, indeed. At fifty-two, I was the youngest in the room by at least a decade. (The average age at Latitude Margaritaville is sixty-four.) And yet, for the next hour, at a pace and with an intensity one might associate with the seven-minute workout, the session demolished me. Ambuter inevitably noticed my attempts to cut corners and made the others do extra reps until I’d done mine right. Afterward, I hobbled to the showers, as Buffett, in some recorded concert patter playing over the gym speakers, led an audience through his customary “land shark” intro to his hit song “Fins.” The Parrotheads clasp their hands together over their heads, in imitation of a shark fin, and swerve left and right. “This counts as going to the gym tomorrow,” Buffett said onstage.

By the following morning, my glutes and hip flexors had tightened up. But I had a date to play pickleball, an adaptation of tennis that has skyrocketed in popularity, especially among seniors. There are ten courts, and they are always busier than the five tennis courts. (The absence of golf on the premises distinguishes Latitude Margaritaville. A retirement community without golf is one with more land for houses—and fewer golfers.)

My partners were among Latitude Margaritaville's top players: Allen Farkas, a retired pharmaceutical salesman originally from Canarsie, Brooklyn; Al Bobst, a retired chief master sergeant from the Air Force; and Hershey McChesney, a retired teacher and school administrator from Southern California. I had never played, but I can get around a court O.K., and we had a series of spirited games in the mounting heat, with some light hazing of the new kid.

Afterward, we sat in the shade and watered up. Bobst, seventy, from Spokane, had served in Desert Storm, and had been a survival instructor, specializing in "personnel recovery." "We were the guys who interrogate and torture," he said. He was joking. I think.



"Who knew people wanted to live in Margaritaville?" Jimmy Buffett said. Photograph by Tobias Hutzler for The New Yorker

Farkas, sixty-two, had been buyer No. 61. "I was the idiot who slept in the parking lot," he said. "My wife gave me a list of lots she liked." He'd lived in Florida for forty years. He sounded like Brooklyn, but he bled Miami Dolphins turquoise. Everyone in Latitude Margaritaville got around on golf carts, many of which were customized. (Rock Rotundo, the owner of Ace of Carts, one of Florida's biggest cart dealerships, owns a home in the community.) Many had Parrothead motifs, but Farkas's was decked out in Dolphins regalia; he'd named his bulldog Csonka.

“This is by far the greatest place I’ve ever lived,” Farkas said. “Ninety-nine per cent of the people here are wonderful. The one per cent you don’t deal with. They’d bitch and fucking moan wherever they lived. You can find miserable people everywhere. If you can’t be happy here, you can’t be happy anywhere.”

The big gorilla of retirement living is the Villages, seventy miles west, America’s fastest-growing metro area. It has fifty-six golf courses and some seventy thousand homes—and a reputation, backed up by the ballot box, as a stronghold of Trumpism. “That’s where our parents live,” Farkas said.

Several people told me that it is considered bad form to talk about politics in Margaritaville. “Many people here strive for no politics,” Murphy had said. “All you have to do is look at the fucking Villages. Leave it at the front gate, you douchebag.” During the 2020 election, this standard was tested. The residents eventually passed an ordinance against lawn signage. Still, I encountered a range of opinions about the current President and his predecessor. There was at least one golf cart flying the blue-line American flag, in support of the police. Some rolled their eyes when it passed; others waved.

McChesney had customized his golf cart with the tools of his trade, or rather of his hobbies. He had a built-in rack that held a pair of cornhole boards, and a quiver of tools for the wrangling of reptiles. He had majored in biology and is the community’s self-appointed wildlife expert. He hands out business cards for “Hershman’s Re-Homing Service” and takes regular phone calls from residents asking him to remove alligators, turtles, and snakes from lawns and driveways. To comply with environmental regulations, Latitude Margaritaville left undeveloped some patches of thicket and swamp, from which critters occasionally wander, and to which McChesney returns them.

McChesney is sixty-five. He has a mustache and a soul patch and a tattoo of a shark on one calf and one of a hula girl on his right biceps, with the name of his wife, Terry, underneath. (A sign on the back of their golf cart reads “The Hershman & his Hula Girl.” Terry is fifty-seven. She won the costume contest at a Grinch-themed pre-Christmas block party, an all-day affair for some six hundred residents. McChesney told me, “She looked hot, real hot,” and sent me a photo of Terry in a Santa’s-elf getup.)

McChesney's father had been a drill instructor based at Camp Pendleton, outside San Diego. Seeing the penguin exhibit at SeaWorld persuaded McChesney that he wanted to be a marine biologist. At San Diego State, for his senior project, he tried to align biological and geological eras. "Turned out, that time line doesn't work. They were, like, 'Are you a creationist?'" he said. He became a teacher instead, and spent more than thirty years at a middle school in the San Bernardino inner city, then a few more as a school administrator. He and Terry had been searching for a place to retire, with Terry, especially, insisting on a tropical town, maybe in Central America or the Caribbean. "But every home we looked at had bars on the windows," she said.

One day, at work, a colleague told McChesney about Latitude Margaritaville. "I closed the door and cancelled all my appointments and looked it up. When I got home, I said, 'Hey, honey, check this out.' And she said, 'Don't show me unless you mean it.'" A few weeks later, they'd bought a lot, sight unseen. Phase 2, on Jollymon Way.

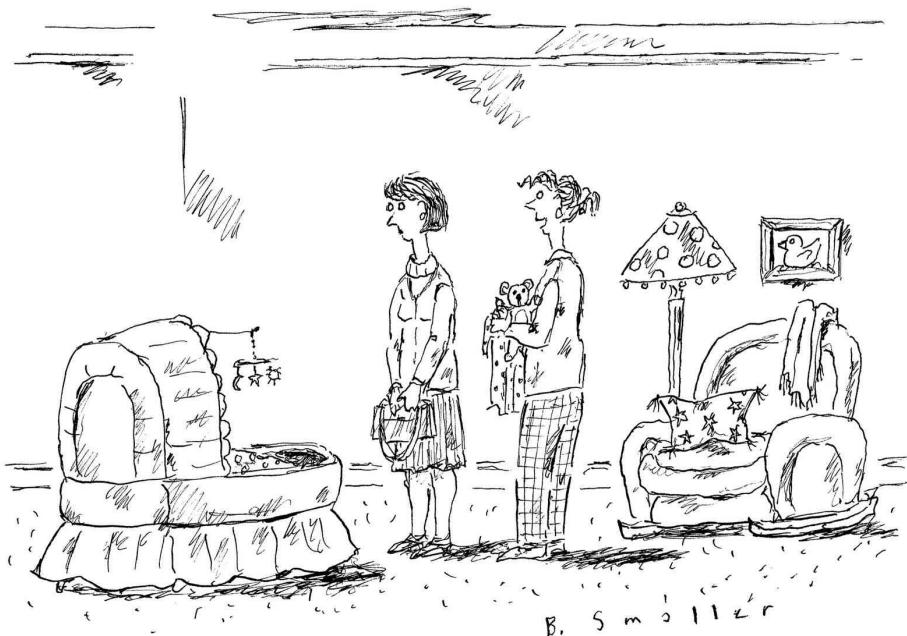
Late in the day, I found McChesney playing cornhole in the village square with some friends. I joined in for a while, and then we loaded up the cornhole boards and got into his golf cart and, beers in hand, hummed down the cart path, in the pink subtropical twilight, pines and palms whizzing by, a whiff of fry grease lingering in the air.

Every Thursday, McChesney and a bunch of the pickleball boys meet up for happy hour in a nearby strip mall, at a shop called Oil & Vinegar, which has a little bar in back. This ritual is a vestige of an earlier one, called Tiki Thursdays, when the first residents, in the absence of any amenities or communal structures, held an unsanctioned B.Y.O. party every week in the tiki hut by the street of model homes. The community's lean early months, when the new residents had little but one another for entertainment, are now deep lore, and something of a case study in the power of fellowship and the human urge to alleviate boredom.

The mall, dominated by a Publix supermarket, had been built by Minto as a complement to Latitude Margaritaville. The golf-cart-parking area was in front of the liquor store. "I don't think it's an accident," McChesney said. Inside Oil & Vinegar, eight guys were drinking beer. There was talk of

orthopedic implants, the advantages of cinder-block construction (it deters termites), and the cabling of roofs to slabs (it keeps roofs from flying off in hurricanes).

After a while, McChesney ordered a roadie, and we cruised back to the village square, where he was due to run the third meeting of the newly created Pickleball Club, of which he was the president. On the way there, he filled me in on some of the pickle politics. Apparently, a woman named Arlene Weinstein, whom he referred to as Sweet Arlene, had been making noise on behalf of beginners about how the better players were hogging the courts. The top players didn't want to mix with players well below their level; the beginners resented the emergence of a class system.



"Of course, he can't walk or talk or lift his head. Still, there are flashes of brilliance."
Cartoon by Barbara Smaller

The meeting was held in one of the community's rec rooms. We rolled in late, McChesney looking presidential in a Harley-Davidson tank top and flip-flops, Solo cup in hand. He called the meeting to order. There were several dozen members facing four officers. I sat in back with Allen Farkas and his old Canarsie buddy Tommy Leung.

Sweet Arlene, it turned out, was the head of the social committee. "I love my committee," she said. "Our group has a lot of good ideas." One was a pickleball dance party.

“Remember to drink responsibly,” McChesney said.

“I’ll try not to make my jello shots too strong,” she replied.

Farkas muttered to me, “We go from the pickleball meeting to the A.A. meeting.”

McChesney gently reminded Weinstein that the committee needed approval from the officers to implement such plans. His sunny, deflective approach to enforcing a chain of command suggested the influence of his years as an administrator in the California public-school system, and of his half-finished pint of pale ale.

There was talk of updating signage and of purchasing a wind sock, and then an officer to McChesney’s right said he had a few remarks to make about court etiquette. The room got noisy, as a discussion kicked up, and the officer called out, “I’m not done with etiquette yet.” Order restored, he spelled out the proper way to return balls that have rolled onto adjacent courts.

There was a quality of pleasure, even patience, in the way everyone kicked back and worked almost playfully through the thorny issues of the day. It was the first meeting I’d been to in years where I didn’t get the sense that the participants wished they were somewhere else. Still, there were back-row clowns. At one point, Farkas laughed at something on his phone, and, a moment later, texted me a mildly lewd meme.

Afterward, McChesney, Farkas, Leung, and a few others hit the Bar & Chill. Apparently, some of the wives were playing mah-jongg. “The women love the social part,” one of the men said, as a half-dozen men gathered around a table.

“I’m not handy at all, but, if something needs fixing, in thirty minutes I can have six guys over to help me,” Farkas told me. And one had to admit that, in the communities they’d come from, where neighbors kept to themselves and had redundant skills, this would not have been so. A point that residents kept making to me was the diversity of people, of backgrounds and talents. Chuck Danner likened the place to his men’s-league hockey team back in

Pennsylvania, for the mix of blue- and white-collar guys. It was like a hockey team in other ways, too: I saw hardly any people of color at Latitude Margaritaville.

Putting aside the plumbers, carpenters, and electricians next door, and the real-estate agents and snake wranglers, there were several rock bands' worth of musicians, a few generous oenophiles, and even a go-to source for wild game. Earl (the Pearl) Snyder, a former professional bodybuilder in a Pittsburgh Penguins jersey, strode up to the table and mentioned that he had recently made a batch of venison jerky, seasoned with fennel and liquid smoke, if anyone wanted some. He also had elk meat. He said he'd just shot a nine-point elk in New Mexico with a rifle, from three hundred and twenty-five yards. "It was bleeding out on the fourth shot," he said. "The guides paid an Indian kid to haul the elk out."

One day, I had a late-afternoon beer on the patio outside the Bar & Chill with four retired first responders, who had stories to tell about their traumatic experiences during the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The anniversary is a rare solemn occasion at Latitude Margaritaville—there's a ceremony in the village square, where a resident, a retired N.Y.P.D. bagpiper, plays "Amazing Grace." "The month of September, we practically sit shiva," one of the officers said. Andy and Marta, sixty-two and fifty-two, who are married, had been with the Washington, D.C., airport police. Mickey, sixty-six, who was an N.Y.P.D. detective, had been dispatched on 9/11 to New Jersey to chase down an alleged terrorist bomber. Pete, sixty-six, a cop with the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, had gone to Yankee Stadium the night of September 10th for a game that never got started, owing to foul weather. He wound up getting drunk at a bar in Manhattan, then, to his wife's dismay, driving home to Jersey City. He called in sick. More than half of the officers in his squad died that day. "You don't get over that," he said, with tears streaming from beneath his sunglasses.



"In lieu of barking, he recorded a sweet diss track about you."
Cartoon by Jeremy Nguyen

They'd sold their homes and come south, in large part, they said, because of the high taxes in New York, New Jersey, and Maryland. This was a near-universal refrain. Low taxes, low homeowner's-association fees, warm climate, like-minded folk: you can't knock it. In one sense, it was heartening that men and women who'd put their life on the line had got a chance to live out their next chapter in a place like Margaritaville. But I couldn't help thinking, home-town-centrally, of all the retired public-sector employees I'd met in Latitude Margaritaville from high-tax blue states who'd got their pensions, which were funded (or underfunded) by those high taxes, and had withdrawn to this low-tax red state. It wasn't just one-per-centers who were fleeing to Florida to escape the state and city tax regimens of the Northeast. Our ramshackle system of interstate tax arbitrage had provided incentives for teachers, bureaucrats, health workers, firefighters, and police officers to exacerbate both the exodus and, perversely, the burden on the taxpayers left behind. Whatever one's politics, it wasn't hard to see Latitude Margaritaville as a manifestation of an economy out of whack. The excesses and segregations of the Jupiter Island and Mar-a-Lago sets were one symptom of misalignment; here, less conspicuously, was another. Latitude Margaritaville came off both as an escape from America and as the most quintessentially American setting of all.

This is good business, of course. At Daytona and Hilton Head, demand for homes has outstripped supply. The parking-lot party on Night One set the script. Each cluster of new lots—each phase—sells out, making the resale market robust.

Kelley Sarantis, Latitude Margaritaville's top real-estate agent and buyer No. 9 in Daytona, is from Massapequa, on Long Island—her father had a forklift business, in Queens, before moving down to Fort Lauderdale for a second career as a yacht broker. Sarantis worked in real estate in South Florida for almost thirty years, the last five for an old-line firm called Bob Hodges and Sons Realty. “I sold homes in Century Village,” she said, referring to another fifty-five-plus gated community. “It’s depressing. It’s like people were just going there to be warm and die.” When she and her husband, a retired Fort Lauderdale cop, moved to Latitude Margaritaville, she stayed on the Bob Hodges payroll and began handling sales and resales. If she walks into the sales office with a buyer, she gets a commission of three per cent. She has five residents working for her as agents. In 2021, there were sixty-five resales in the Daytona Latitude Margaritaville. “I did seventy-five per cent of them,” she said. “I get five calls a day. I would have never imagined it would be like this. It blows me away.” The least expensive resale, of an attached villa called the Nevis, was five hundred and sixty-five thousand dollars, up from three hundred and fifteen thousand. By the end of 2021, resale prices were thirty to fifty per cent higher than the original sale price. You might say that Margaritaville is Bitcoin for boomers.

Even Buffett himself has a house: a Bimini model. He’d visited Latitude Margaritaville at Daytona four times, Sarantis said. “One day, he came to my house,” she added. “He’d bought a house and wanted to meet the residents. He literally knocked on my door. ‘Hi, neighbor.’ Are you kidding me? I have yellow Labs. He was showing me pictures of his dogs.”

At dawn, I was on the road to Panama City, Florida, some three hundred and fifty miles west along the panhandle. Minto was building its third Latitude Margaritaville there, on a hundred and ten thousand acres of pineland in an area called Watersound, five miles from the Gulf Coast. The owner of the land, and the third partner in the project, was the St. Joe Company, a timber barony turned real-estate developer—and one of Florida’s biggest landholders. The partners had got approval to build as many as a hundred

and seventy thousand homes, which would make it the largest private community in the country.

A small city out of nothing: it's hard not to think of the subprime housing collapse of a decade and a half ago, especially as we're many years into another asset bubble that may or may not be bursting. For now, the developers have committed to building just thirty-five hundred homes, which, though still a lot of Margaritaville, doesn't quite trigger the same visions of foreclosure and abandonment in Florida (and elsewhere) as in 2008. Sarantis, however, thinks that Latitude Margaritaville is not as vulnerable to a downturn or a recession as the market in general. "In 2008, I saw how the Villages was only narrowly affected," she said. "I didn't see the values go down. If the residents didn't need to sell, they didn't. We have mostly cash buyers here. This is why I'm not expecting a big jolt to this community."

When I arrived in Panama City, a hard mist was billowing in off the Gulf. The region, the Emerald Coast, is famous for its powdery white sand and green water, but on this afternoon it was all duns and grays. The stores, bars, and hotels had a bedraggled appearance that got me trying to remember the names of the season's tropical storms. The Watersound site was about five miles north, on Route 79, past Wild Thang Airboat Tours, and just short of the Southern Hay Company Feed & Supply depot and the Laguna Beach Christian Retreat. The sales center for Latitude Watersound, as it is called, was on a corner across from a vast clear-cut expanse that was destined to be a shopping center. The density of a Latitude Margaritaville supports commercial growth, which encourages more development. A standard line at the Bar & Chill was that Daytona Beach, by reputation a run-down town occasionally saturated with bikers, spring breakers, and Nascar fans, was coming up in the world, and that the revival owed a lot to Margaritaville.

Because of the weather by the Gulf, and the rawness of new construction in this stretch of sand and mud hacked out of the pines, the site didn't feel like anyone's idea of paradise, but inside the sales center an immaculate Florida Keys-cum-offshore-bank aesthetic prevailed. It was nearly identical to the one in Daytona. Pastels, potted palms, murals of beaches and hammocks, displays of Margaritaville products, smiling faces. A signature fragrance—

evocative (to me, anyway) of sand, coral, and skittering lizards—was being piped in.

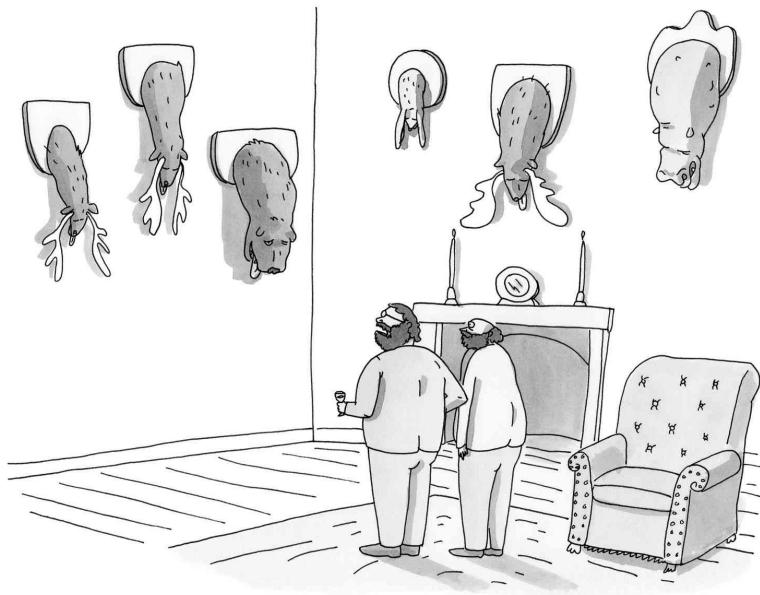
That evening, a few dozen of the Latitude Watersound pioneers—several of whom had moved in already, the rest of whom were awaiting the completion of construction—gathered for some happy-hour hang time at the Margaritaville restaurant in Panama City. There was as yet no place to congregate at the Watersound site. They had an upstairs loft space to themselves, beneath a fake palm tree and a life-size model, hung from the rafters, of Buffett's seaplane Hemisphere Dancer, which was forever flying toward a giant mural of a partly cloudy sunset sky. The ceiling was painted with a vast pirate-style map of the Caribbean. Cocktails arrived, with platters of nachos and wings. Everyone had already got to know one another, even prior to moving in. "We all party together," one woman said. "We already know a hundred people." Many of the men were retired members of the armed forces, the panhandle and its environs having a high concentration of military bases. I met a teacher, a college-admissions administrator, an air-traffic controller, a firefighter, a corrections officer. Some had missed out on Daytona; others had been coming to this stretch of coast for years, or even already owned a condo on the beach, but, like their counterparts in Daytona, had chosen to retreat inland to be among like-minded extroverts. They still staked a claim to the shore, however. The thought of Daytona's orange beaches caused a few to grimace. This was the place, even if it wasn't.

At one point, "Margaritaville" came over the bar's stereo, and everyone perked up, dutifully intoning the standard Parrothead chant after the line "searching for my lost shaker of salt"—"Salt! Salt! Salt!"—in a way that was at once, or maybe variously, sincere, joyful, dutiful, and abashed. I can't say that I didn't mutter along, too. Once you hear it, you can't not.

Twenty-eight-plus hours later, I was in Orlando, hearing it again, in a sold-out basketball arena. Jimmy Buffett and the Coral Reefer Band were performing in front of some twenty thousand fans.

Two busloads of residents had come down from Daytona for the gig, under the supervision of Stuart Schultz, who entertained his charges with trivia games and a Margaritaville history lesson. Before the show, the Latitudeners

assembled outside the arena to pre-game at the Big Storm Brewing Company.



"I did all the taxidermy myself."
Cartoon by Zachary Kanin

The Daytona Latitude Margaritaville had got an allotment of about a hundred tickets, which were distributed to residents, at face value, by lottery. Some had procured tickets on their own. Chuck and Christina Danner had paid twelve hundred dollars for a pair in the second row. They called me over to their table outside, where they and some friends were working through a stand of tall boys. I was introduced to Rich, a former sailing and swimming coach at Rollins College, and to Ruth and Dale, who'd met as teen-agers but started dating at Latitude Margaritaville, and to Kimberly, a pilot for JetBlue.

“This is our life all the time!” Christina said. “Every day is a good day, every day is a vacation.”

Buffett later told me that, one night in the Parrothead mecca of Cincinnati, he realized that this scene—the costumes, the booze, the performative exuberance—was another kind of Mardi Gras: he was on a parade float, throwing candy. “I thought, Everybody needs it. That pure part of us that needs to have a little fun, no matter where you are. I was brought up to think that fun was the essence of life. So I was just passing it on. That’s really the

nucleus of the whole thing, my coming out of that Creole culture and taking it with me wherever I went.”

Christina was dressed in a red elf costume, having come straight from the Grinch block party up in Daytona. I’d heard many refer, facetiously or not, to their costume closets, and the concertgoers had dug into theirs.

We were soon joined by a Nancy and a Rhonda, who was wearing a parrot on her head.

“Are you Phase 2?” Rhonda asked me.

I said I was no phase at all, being much too young—a remark that went from sincere to flirtatious before it was made.

Rhonda didn’t believe it. “You weren’t in the pool doing stuff?”

“I don’t think so.”

Before I went to Florida, I had thoughtlessly anticipated a convocation of fogies, or at least of people more of my parents’ generation, within range of eighty, or even that of my grandparents, a few of whom I saw wither away years ago at well-appointed but thoroughly depressing old-age enclaves outside of Philadelphia. But many if not most of the people I met in Daytona felt more like peers than elders—at least according to my ever-expanding delineation of my cohort. Here was a world of people a little older than I who had reached a stage of life that I hadn’t considered myself to be on the verge of. These people had made their decision to squeeze as much pleasure out of life as their circumstances, and the country’s economic construct, would allow. It was fun, more than fulfillment, that drew them here. The Edenic lure of retirement had once been a bit of a mirage: by the time you got to it, you were hardly able to make the most of it. But now earlier retirement (or semi-retirement), better health, increased longevity—at least for some—and the emergence of an infrastructure to accommodate these circumstances have created a stage that may not have existed before. It’s hard to know whether this is something to look forward to or to dread.

We funnelled into the arena, amid that turnstile exuberance I recognized from playoff games and Grateful Dead shows. Hawaiian shirts, group photographs, parrots on heads. We had floor seats. The stage was set with fake boulders and sprouts of seagrass, with big foam models of a crab, a pelican, and an octopus. (The “SpongeBob” scenery reminded me that Buffett had produced a Margaritaville musical on Broadway some years ago —a rare flop for him.) The backdrop was a giant screen, which, as the band took the stage, displayed various shark patterns and cartoons. “Hello, Orlando!” Buffett called out, and kicked into a new song called “Down at the Lah De Dah”:

Down at the Lah De Dah
There's a perfect margarita in a mason jar
At the end of the world in a sea of dreams
Where the ocean smiles and the seagulls scream
We all know just how lucky we are.

Buffett wore flip-flops, shorts, and a Hawaiian shirt. Tanned and fit, he hopped around and smiled broadly, a paragon of health—attitude, movement, money. He was backed by a dozen musicians, many of them legit hot shit, on drums, percussion, steel drums, pedal steel, two keyboards (featuring Buffett’s longtime bandleader, Mike Utley, and his son Mick Utley), horns, bass, two guitars (including Buffett’s trusty sidekick, the Nashville ace Mac McAnally), and a pair of backup singers in light, flowing multicolored prints. The next song, following the land-shark intro I remembered from the gym, was “Fins.” Thousands of grownups sang along while holding their hands together over their heads and swerving left and right. Few were wearing masks. When in Orlando: I had pocketed mine, too.

I knew more of Buffett’s work than I’d thought. The night went by in a wash of gentle, well-rehearsed and well-worn folk rock, amid video imagery of reefs, coves, beaches, sailboats, cocktails, Jet Skis, cheeseburgers, and resort developments—a kind of subliminal indoctrination into the blurred line between the wild and the tame, the pristine and the industrialized. His patter was humble: “I was a nobody from nowhere and now, thanks to you all, we’re somebodies up here.” “I was just trying to go to Key West to score some weed and find a girlfriend.” “Simply put, if you don’t like Tom Petty, you ain’t shit.” He finished his set with “Margaritaville”—salt, salt, salt. In

the row in front of me, a man who looked to be in his sixties was making out with a woman on his left and one on his right. I assumed they were from the Villages. Next to them were two young frat guys who, as the crowd cheered for an encore, attempted, without success, to start a chant of “Let’s go, Brandon.” They could have been from anywhere.

Three more numbers—“A Pirate Looks at Forty,” “Southern Cross,” “Floridays”—and the masses poured out into the streets. The Latitudeners boarded their buses and headed home. I said my farewells and flew back to winter, pants, and high taxes. Five days later, I had *Covid*, and I couldn’t get the chorus of “Margaritaville” out of my head. ♦

Night School

- [The Krav Maga Subway Survival Guide](#)

By [Carrie Battan](#)

There are certain professions that fluctuate depending on the headlines: stockbroker, news anchor, oligarch. Also, self-defense instructor, a job whose duties grow or shrink according to how afraid the general public is. These days, in New York City, an uptick in felony-assaults has made Matan Gavish's life much busier. Gavish, a former Israeli special-ops officer, has been teaching people how to defend themselves against bad guys for two decades. Lately, he said, the demand for courses tailored to women is "insane."



Matan Gavish Illustration by João Fazenda

"I had a seminar last night," he said the other day. "A packed house, all women." One student had told him beforehand that she was scared to travel to class from her apartment in Alphabet City. "How ridiculous is that?" he said. "She's afraid she's going to get hurt on the way to self-defense class."

Gavish, who is forty, has the kind of excess brawn that would deter most people from picking a fight. He is compact, with tidy black curls and a groomed beard. (The tabloids once falsely reported that he was the inspiration for an antiterrorism specialist in Sacha Baron Cohen's TV series "[Who Is America?](#)") Since he moved here, he's been teaching Krav Maga, the Israel Defense Forces' system for hand-to-hand combat. Military units

all over the world have adopted it because of its efficiency. “You learn it fast,” he said.

That’s part of its appeal to overscheduled young women in New York who are hellbent on learning how to feel safe on the subway. On a recent Thursday, a group of about thirty women and three men paid thirty-three dollars each for a class at FIT HIT, a Chelsea facility that Gavish launched in 2020. Walls were lined with punchable dummies called *BOBs*, short for “body opponent bags.” The night’s focus was subway safety and weapon disarmament.

“There are a whole lot of bad things happening in New York City today,” Gavish told the group. He started with methods to avoid being shoved onto the subway tracks. Partnered up, the students locked bodies in a bear-hug move, trying to position the other person’s back just so. After a few minutes of jostling, Gavish gave notes. He pointed to some students clustered behind a line on the floor denoting an imaginary platform edge. “Those of you over there are basically on the third rail and being electrocuted,” he said. “So please move.” Nervous titters.

Next came blunt weapons: hammers, lead pipes, and batons—especially timely given that, in recent weeks, two subway riders had been attacked with hammers. Again, Gavish emphasized alertness. “What was your attention span like if you didn’t notice there was a man with a hammer walking around?” he asked. “If you ever get hit by a hammer, first of all, be angry at yourself.”

He enlisted a female assistant to demonstrate a victim’s first line of defense: running away. She tore across the room, evading Gavish’s pretend attack. “She’s fast,” he said, breathless. Then he explained how to disarm somebody: forming an arrowhead with your arms and diving into the assailant at shoulder level is the best way to mitigate injury.

“What if they’re smart enough to use the other arm and start hitting you?” a woman asked.

“Then you’re in a fight,” Gavish said. “That’s the nature of violence. It’s better to get hit with a punch than get hit with a weapon. Your punches are

going to be better than their punches, because you're trained.”

He set up increasingly extreme scenarios, culminating in a swarm of what he called “random violence.” A third of the class was left defenseless, another third was given padded batons, and the last group was given pads designed to absorb the shock of blows. “Group 1, wait for the 6 train. Groups 2 and 3, go pick a fight.” Gleeful chaos ensued.

After class, Gavish took questions. A woman raised her hand. “I know being trained and doing this is part of the answer,” she said. “But when you say, ‘Tear their ear off’ and stuff—I feel like I would freeze.”

“Mind-set training is a big part of it,” Gavish said, then hawked a longer-term program, called Legacy. “We have more time to deal with the psychological parts.” He told the class about his physically unimpressive adolescence. (He was an overweight kid who went to chess camps, until his teen years, when he became fixated on becoming an Air Force pilot.) “I was the guy getting beat up because I didn’t want to hurt the freaking bully,” he said. “That’s what a bitch I was.”

Another young woman raised her hand. “Is there a specific time of day where attacks happen more on the subway?” she asked.

“Nope,” he said. “Subway works 24/7. Bad guys, they don’t show up to work at a specific time.” ♦

Personal History

- [Getting Accustomed to My Second Tuxedo](#)

By [Calvin Trillin](#)

I'm on my second tuxedo. The first one I bought in college at the Yale Co-op in the spring of 1954, having calculated, in one of my rare moments of shrewd financial planning, that, given how often I'd need it by the time I graduated, buying made more sense than renting. The possibility of postgraduate amortization had not occurred to me. But, largely from that tuxedo's being called into service when I was the m.c. or a speaker at black-tie events, it was costing me something like two dollars and fifty-five cents a wearing when I finally, reluctantly, abandoned it. By then, comments from family and friends who'd been urging me to get a new tuxedo (e.g., "This one lasted you thirty-five years—one more ought to do you") were beginning to darken my mood on black-tie evenings.

I have not previously enumerated the events that brought about that fateful decision at the Yale Co-op. First, there were four annual *Yale Daily News* banquets to take into account. Then I factored in the occasional débutante party. People who know me tend to respond to that last bit of information with an astonished "*You* were invited to débutante parties?" Well, sort of. There seemed to be a shortage of males at débutante parties. Apparently, the girls (as we called them then) enjoyed dancing to the bouncy rhythms provided by what I used to refer to as Lester Lanin and his No Sex on the Dance Floor Orchestra or Meyer Davis and his No Sex on the Dance Floor Orchestra, and, the era of taking to the dance floor solo still being far in the future, the girls needed boys (ditto) to dance with. For that reason, or for reasons beyond the ken of a public-high-school boy from Kansas City, Missouri, about all a male needed in those days in order to be brought along to a débutante party by some legitimate invitee was a tuxedo and a pulse. I, not to boast, had both.

As must be increasingly clear, I did not come from a tuxedo-wearing background. In fact, when one of my freshman-year roommates—an amiable boarding-school product I've sometimes referred to in stories as Thatcher Baxter Hatcher or Hatcher Baxter Thatcher—told me that after the war his family no longer dressed for dinner, I really did think he meant that he felt free to come to the table in his undershirt. At Yale in the fifties, undergraduates entering the dining hall at dinnertime were required to wear a coat and tie. From that same Tush Hatcher (the people with three last

names tended to have itty-bitty nicknames), I bought an ancient garment that became my dining-hall sport coat; the price, arrived at after protracted negotiations, was two dollars and seventy-five cents.

I bought my second tuxedo at a fancy Manhattan men's store, at a cost considerably greater than I had paid at the Yale Co-op. I wish I could say that it proved to be considerably more resilient than the Co-op version. The problem was with the lapels. I'd been impressed when the salesman told me that the lapels were grosgrain, although I'm not prepared to offer a detailed explanation of what "grosgrain" means. Within a year or so, however, the edges of my new tuxedo's lapels seemed to be losing their blackness.

I returned to the fancy store. "I'm not claiming that it's under warranty," I told a salesman, "but should this really be happening this quickly?" Here's what the salesman suggested: black Magic Marker. In other words, it's up to me, while preparing for a black-tie event, to decide whether I want to attend with somewhat whitened lapel edges or if I prefer giving off the aroma of a midsize law firm's supply closet.

By the time of my second tuxedo, my involvement with what I think the salesman at the fancy men's store would call the accoutrements had become more complicated. I had no problem with the studs—those difficult-to-manipulate little gewgaws that are used to fasten and decorate a dress shirt. Early on, I had acquired a ribbon whose strategically placed buttons allowed a dress shirt to go studless. If I got anything from a Yale education, it's the realization that one can always eschew studs. In fact, some of the ur-preppies of my undergraduate days thought nothing of showing up at black-tie events wearing white button-downs instead of dress shirts. I took that as a declaration that, for them, formal dress was no big deal—the same sort of message that was sent by wearing their boarding-school letter sweaters inside out.

Some years ago, during a trip to my home town, I purchased a pair of cufflinks that I thought would do me. Each of them sported, in what I suppose you could call mini-bas-relief, a handsome Hereford bull. Kansas City, not to boast, is the headquarters of the American Hereford Association, and on visits back home I always made it a point to stop in at Hereford HQ

—the old building featured a huge fibreglass statue of a Hereford perched on top of a ninety-foot pylon—for some bovine merch.

Sooner or later, though, one of those cufflinks went missing. I can't remember why I wasn't able to replace it. Maybe the American Hereford Association had stocked only that single pair, on the assumption that it was unlikely to prove to be a popular item. Now that I think of it, one does not ordinarily picture a cowboy wearing cufflinks.

When I substituted a cufflink from a pair that featured the crest of Kansas City, I thought my cufflink problems were over. No such luck. Gradually, all three of my cufflinks began to lose the ability to lock in place, and thus provide the stiffness nearly essential to being thrust by one hand through four layers of fabric. I contemplated that problem for thirty or forty years, during which time, I must confess, some harsh language was used. Finally, I devised a solution, which I am willing to share with others. You put the cufflinks in before you put the shirt on, thereby enabling the use of both hands. Then you force your hands through the closed cuffs—confident, because you are following the technique of someone so experienced that he is on his second tuxedo, that the tight squeeze when you get to the widest part of your hands will not cause the shirt to rip. Just in case, a white button-down can be held in reserve.

Over the years, tying the black bow tie gradually became routine, until one day, not long ago, I suddenly forgot how to do it. There was no warning. I didn't forget how to tie a four-in-hand knot or my shoelaces. I wasn't experiencing stiffened fingers from arthritis. The problem was neurological and specific. Naturally, I turned to the Internet for one of those demonstration videos. It proved to be useless. Several videos later, I faced the fact that I'd have to turn to a pre-tied bow tie. I would not be that cool guy at the after-party who, Scotch in hand, is leaning back into the couch with his feet on a priceless coffee table, his jacket off and his tie untied. A pre-tied tie does not untie.

I went to another fancy men's store and bought a pre-tied bow tie—the sort that is secured by a black ribbon that hooks in the back. I told myself that at least it wasn't a clip-on. All was well until I got home rather late from a black-tie event at the New York Public Library. Undressing for bed, I

couldn't seem to unhook my bow tie. I tried moving it around toward the front, so that I could see what I was doing, but it barely budged, and the turning seemed to tighten it. Harsh language ensued. I live alone, and showing up at a neighbor's house at a late hour for assistance extricating myself from a bow tie did not appeal.

At some point, I considered cutting the ribbon, but that brought me face to face with one of the perils of living in an inflationary economy: the pre-tied bow tie cost about the same as the tuxedo I bought at the Yale Co-op. I thought about simply going to sleep with the bow tie on, and giving the hook another try in the morning when I was fresh. But that could be dangerous. What if the tie tightened its grip on my throat while I tossed and turned during sleep? The prospect of choking to death was scary enough. It was made worse by the thought of how the tabloids would play the story. Although I'd be found in bed alone, some accounts would imply that something kinky was going on. Despite the absence of a note, some columnist would see this as a precursor of a wave of formal suicides. The headline that came to mind, just as the hook came free of the clasp, seemed inevitable: *HIS FINAL BLACK-TIE EVENT*. ♦

Poems

- “Vinegar Hill”
- “For My Light Skin”

By [Colm Tóibín](#)

Content

This content can also be viewed on the site it [originates](#) from.

Audio: Read by the author.

The town reservoir on the hill
Was built in the twenties.
If you lifted a round metal covering
And dropped a stone, you could

Hear it plonk into the depths.
There were small hollows in the rocks
That, no matter how dry the weather,
Were filled with rainwater.

These rock pools must have been here
With different water in them
That summer when the rebels
Fled toward Needham's Gap.

From the hill, as the croppies did,
You can view the town, narrow
Streets even narrower, and more
Trees and gardens than you imagined.

It was burning then, of course,
But now it is quiet. There is,
In the Market Square, a monument
To Father Murphy and the Croppy Boy.

We can see the hill from our house.
It is solid rock in the mornings
As the sun appears from just behind it.
It changes as the day does.

My mother is taking art classes
And, thinking it natural to make
The hill her focal point,
Is trying to paint it.

What color is Vinegar Hill?
How does it rise above the town?
It is humped as much as round.
There is no point in invoking

History. The hill is above all that,
Intractable, unknowable, serene.
It is in shade, then in light,
And often caught between.

When the blue becomes gray
And fades more, the green glistens,
And then not so much. The rock also
Glints in the afternoon light,

Which dwindle, making the glint disappear.
Then there is the small matter of clouds,
Which make tracks over the hill in a smoke
Of white, as though instructed

By their superiors to break camp.
They change their shape, crouch down,
Stay still, all camouflage, dreamy,
Lost, with no strategy to speak of,

Yet resigned to the inevitable:
When the wind comes for them, they will retreat.
Until this time, they are surrounded by sky
And can, as yet, envisage no way out.

By [Toi Derricotte](#)

Content

This content can also be viewed on the site it [originates](#) from.

Audio: Read by the author.

I can only be forgiven by Black people
for the million times I walked down a street
and no one knew I was there—
as if I were tiptoeing,
as if I took my self back from existence.
For the hundreds of times my mother and I
walked the galleries at Hudson's—
not a dark soul to be found!—
the furniture behind red ropes, untouchable.
For all the places she and I
kept eating our sandwiches.
My mother liked minestrone soup
on the thirteenth floor where the white
waitresses wore dull green dresses & caps.
I always enjoyed a hot-fudge sundae.
Only Black people can judge me. Only they know
the anguish inserted in history when some
ancestor of mine took the place of one
who went to the back. What was done
made me. Only Black people can know—
who I loved most;
for whom I have done good.

Pop Music

- [Koffee's Début Album Blends Old Reggae and New](#)

By [Carrie Battan](#)

Last month, the twenty-two-year-old Jamaican singer and rapper Koffee appeared as a musical guest on the “*Tonight Show*. ” The studio’s stage had been outfitted to look like a casual and haphazard dance party, with a couch, rugs, strings of lights, and a crew of dancers performing seemingly unchoreographed moves. A structure made of speakers and red, green, and black storage crates served as a d.j. booth. The scene was a monument to one of Jamaica’s most cherished musical traditions: the sound system—a giant portable wall of speakers used for parties and d.j.’ing competitions.

In front of the set, Koffee (born Mikayla Simpson) sang “*Pull Up*,” her new single, which is a bit less beholden to the trademarks of her native country than the art direction onstage was. Produced by *JAE5*, a Ghanaian Brit known for his work with the U.K.’s biggest Afro-Caribbean talents, “*Pull Up*” is a gentle party anthem with an international appeal, its sweet bounce more reminiscent of the most effervescent strains of West African pop than of reggae or dancehall. On the track, Koffee has a warm swagger as she casually reels off, in Jamaican patois, the luxury items—Prada, Audi, Cartier, Ferrari—that she plans to show off at a party. “I nah watch nobody but you,” she teases.

The performance’s meld of musical styles and visual signifiers was apt for Koffee, whose work reconciles the demands of local history and tradition with those of the contemporary global pop marketplace. Born and raised in Spanish Town, Jamaica, Koffee developed her musical sensibility within the Seventh-day Adventist Church, where she absorbed the rhythms and melodies of hymns and chorales. Later, as a teen-ager, she was drawn to reggae not so much through its big names but through a group of emerging young talents. In recent decades, roots reggae has yielded to dancehall, a style that’s often faster, more digital, smuttier, and more aggressive—which is to say, better suited to the commercial mainstream. But in the early twenty-tens these young artists—intent on paying homage to reggae’s traditions—began proudly revisiting their country’s musical history, and together they forged a movement that was widely described as the reggae revival.

Chief among them was Chronixx, a twenty-nine-year-old (also from Spanish Town) with a honeyed voice and a knack for the hypnotic offbeat grooves

that standard reggae is known for. It was Chronixx, along with another contemporary reggae star called Protoje, who inspired Koffee to begin recording. She taught herself guitar and studied music theory and vocal technique as a member of her high-school choir. After her conservative religious upbringing, Koffee was captivated by Chronixx's and Protoje's righteous ideologies and their musical styles. Like Bob Marley and many of his contemporaries, Chronixx and Protoje have an almost messianic desire to provide uplift, unity, and social awareness to their listeners. "For every pain, there's a melody," Chronixx sings on one of his most popular songs, "Skankin' Sweet," from 2017. (The song has been streamed more than forty-two million times on YouTube and twenty-four million on Spotify.) When Koffee recorded her début single, "Burning," she adopted the unity approach as well. "Neva be ungrateful, life is such a teacha," she sings with soulful wisdom.

The history of music is a constant push and pull between the past and the future, between continuity and disruption. Just as the music industry runs on novelty and innovation, it also heavily rewards talented newcomers who have a taste for tradition. In 2017, Koffee, who was unknown at the time, recorded an acoustic tribute to the sprinter Usain Bolt that showed off her musicality and her reverence for Jamaican culture. "Ah so mi know, you're a legend," she sings, her voice clear and full of awe. A video of her performing the song spread so widely that Bolt himself reposted it, launching her into the music business. Shortly afterward, she began appearing on major stages and working with her idols, Chronixx and Protoje among them. By 2018, she was collaborating with high-profile names such as Walshy Fire, of Major Lazer, the d.j. collective best known for translating Caribbean music for hard-partying crowds at festivals around the world. Koffee's single "Toast," an anthem of gratitude, became a smash, and her début EP, "Rapture," won the Grammy Award for Best Reggae Album in 2020. She was the youngest artist and the first woman to win the prize, a testament not only to her talent but to the award's woeful limitations. Since the category was introduced, in the nineteen-eighties, a third of the awards have gone to projects with the name Marley in the title. The year before Koffee won, it went to an album made by Sting and Shaggy.

One of Koffee and her contemporaries' goals is to broaden global understanding of reggae beyond the Marleys. This month, Koffee will

release her début album, “Gifted,” in which she delicately walks the tightrope between heritage and innovation. The record’s first track, “x10,” starts with a sample of Bob Marley’s “Redemption Song,” but before he can utter his opening line, about marauding pirates, Koffee cuts in: “Hot ina sun, ina snow, live by the sweat of mi brow.” From that point on, the Marley sample fades into an echoey interpolation, a spectre of history.

Marley’s is one of the only voices besides Koffee’s that we hear on “Gifted,” an album shaped in part by the pandemic. Koffee was inspired by the solitude of lockdown to strip some of the noise away from her still-developing sound, and several of the songs have an acoustic, off-the-cuff feel. (One can imagine an overly produced version of the record, featuring a dozen of-the-moment collaborators, awkwardly grafted onto the music.) On these songs, Koffee adheres to earlier eras of reggae tradition in both sound and sentiment. “Felonies, bad energies don’t look good ‘pon you,” she sings on “Shine,” a featherlight acoustic track with a signature reggae backbeat. She switches effortlessly between buttery-smooth singing and zealous rapping, the default hybrid mode of so many of today’s pop and hip-hop stars. But this versatility also places her neatly into Jamaica’s lineage of singjays—the rapper-singers who came to prominence in the country decades before the style began to dominate Western pop charts.

On “Gifted,” Koffee seems to understand that traditionalism has its pitfalls. To adhere too strictly to any strain of reggae music would be a disservice to her talents and to her audience. The second half of the record is much more in step with the constantly evolving styles of the broader Afro-Caribbean diaspora, a musical network that mixes Nigerian pop with U.K. hip-hop, pugnacious West Indian dancehall, and American electronic music, often to thrilling effect. The growing influence of these styles is one of the most exciting developments in Western pop over the past decade, echoing across nearly every style of radio hit. A handful of the songs on “Gifted,” including “Pull Up,” subtly incorporate wider Afro-Caribbean ideas, transforming Koffee from a local hero into a globally minded stylist. These moments sound more like carefully considered experiments than like concessions—opportunities for growth rather than bald commercial grabs.

Koffee’s stylistic influences also allow her to play with new themes in her lyrics. She sounds just as ready for a party as for a protest or a sermon, and

she imagines various forms of reverie. Still, there is a chasteness to “Gifted.” (Koffee proudly sports braces on her teeth.) When she sings a line like “Put your body ’pon lockdown,” on a track called “Lockdown,” about the celebrating she’ll do post-quarantine, she sounds as if she is carefully tiptoeing up to a libidinal line, wondering who might be eavesdropping. It’s the sort of moment that transcends time or place—it’s the sound of growing up. ♦

Profiles

- [The Monumental Success of Simone Leigh](#)

By [Calvin Tomkins](#)

Content

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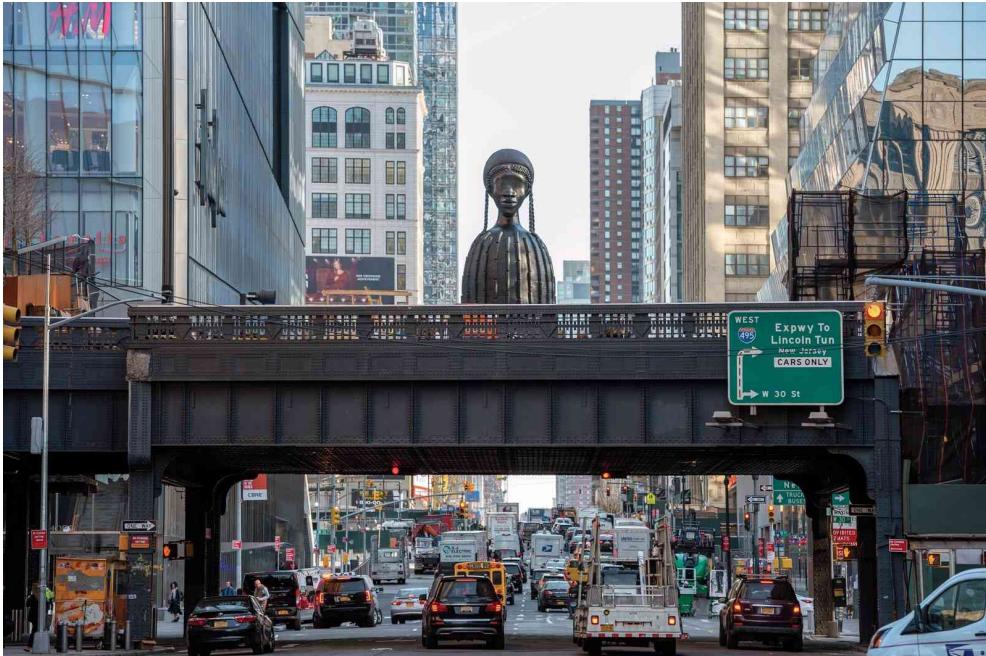
A modern-day Tocqueville, surveying American life from a friendly distance, could easily conclude that we are living in an era of Black ascendancy. This might sound crazy to Black people who cope with oppression and injustice on a daily basis, but in the cultural sphere the prominence that African Americans have held for more than a century in music is increasingly evident across many genres. It is unmistakable in contemporary art, where market-savvy galleries scramble to add Black artists to their rosters, and such major figures as Kerry James Marshall, Kara Walker, David Hammons, and the late Jean-Michel Basquiat bring record-shattering prices at auction. At the Venice Biennale, the oldest and still the most important international exhibition of recent art, the United States was represented on the last two occasions by an African American artist—Mark Bradford in 2017 and Martin Puryear in 2019. When this year’s Biennale opens, on April 23rd, the artist in the United States pavilion will be Simone Leigh, the first Black woman to be designated for this honor.

In late October, I spent a day with Leigh at the Stratton Sculpture Studio in Philadelphia, where all the bronze works for her Venice show have been fabricated. Bronze is a relatively new material for Leigh, who made her mark as a master of ceramic sculpture. She met me at the front door, and introduced me to Shane and Julia Stratton, who own and operate the studio. Just inside the door was the bottom half of a huge sculpture based on a West African *D’mba* ritual mask, the kind that rests on the wearer’s shoulders and rises to an imposing height. The finished work will be installed outdoors in Venice, in the forecourt of the U.S. pavilion. Next to it stood a sixteen-foot, semi-abstract female figure whose spoonlike body was encircled by a giant serpent. This one will not be going to Venice. Leigh’s work is in demand worldwide, and the spoon woman was for Prospect New Orleans, a citywide exhibition that would open in January. (Venice will have a similar version, though without the snake.)

“It’s entitled ‘Sentinel (Mami Wata),’ my interpretation of a West African water spirit, a deity who has destructive powers as well as creative-

generative ones,” Leigh explained. (A few days later, when there was a flood in the apartment she had rented in Philadelphia, she blamed it on the *mami wata*.) The Prospect New Orleans curators had wanted to install her sculpture on an empty pedestal in Lee Circle, where a statue of Robert E. Lee had once stood. Leigh had balked at that. “With all the furor about Confederate statues being pulled down, I saw that I was being caught up in a big American problem that I hadn’t planned on addressing,” she told me. “I also realized that a sixty-five-foot pedestal with a sculpture on top of it was absolutely ridiculous.” Her *mami wata* was installed at the base of the pedestal.

Leigh, who is fifty-four, has the calm, deep-seated confidence of someone who goes her own way. Her physical presence makes her down-to-earth manner seem regal. A tall, handsome woman with long, braided hair, she buys the ankle-length dresses she wears from Casey Casey, a shop in Paris whose owner, Gareth Casey, uses patterns that resemble those of French work dresses from previous centuries. “They’re so well made, and they last forever,” Leigh said. “My style is international auntie.” Leigh didn’t call herself an artist until 2001, when she was a single mother raising her daughter, Zenobia, in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn, and for years after that she had to struggle with an art world that looked down on ceramics, her chosen medium, as a material for hobbyists or studio potters. Her boundless energy, superb craftsmanship, and expanding vision kept her going, and the breakthrough, when it came, was so decisive that an invitation to represent her country at the Biennale seemed foreordained.



Leigh's sculpture "Brick House" (2019), on the High Line. The sixteen-foot bust of a woman was her first work in bronze. Photograph by Timothy Schenck

Her bronze sculptures were cast from clay models, which Leigh makes in a large room on the top floor of the Stratton studio, a century-old, three-story building with a rope-operated elevator. Leigh had used eleven thousand pounds of imported French clay to build the figures; after each was cast in bronze, the clay was recycled and used again. Throughout the casting process, Leigh has worked closely with Shane and Julia Stratton and their senior staffer, Pavel Efremoff, and a crew of four assistants, who make ceramic molds for each section of the sculpture, pour in the bronze, weld the parts together, and do the chasing and finishing. "It's the same process that's been around for three thousand years," Julia said. "We're dinosaurs." The *D'mba* piece was so big—twenty-five feet high—that its top grazed the ceiling, so the Strattons had raised the roof and put in a four-sided skylight. The Strattons have worked with other well-known artists, including Matthew Barney and Hans Haacke, but for the past three years Leigh has been their main client. "Our preference for this time in our lives is to be Simone's backup singers," Shane told me. "We love her, and we love her work."

Two nearly finished clay figures were in the big room when I was there, both of them realistic and more than twice life-size: a standing woman, nude and headless (the head would go on later), and a woman bent at the waist, with both arms extended outward. "Women washing clothes in a river became a typical postcard in Jamaica during the late nineteenth century,"

Leigh said. Leigh's parents are Jamaican, and she spent time there when she was a child. "I think there's a line going through this show that's about the souvenir—the idea that we like to bring other worlds into our world. The souvenir is a seemingly harmless object that has actually proven to be quite devastating. This one is a very racist image." The live model for the washerwoman and the standing woman was Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts, a writer and teacher who is one of Leigh's closest friends. "There are very few projects of mine that she hasn't been involved in," Leigh said. When Leigh was working on a video for a show she had at the Guggenheim Museum in 2019, she asked Rhodes-Pitts and several other friends to try to remember and assume positions they had been in when they gave birth. "Sharifa was just leaning against the wall, thinking, and that was the start of this sculpture," Leigh said, referring to the headless woman. ("It was about me being completely into myself," Rhodes-Pitts recalls.) Even without the head, the figure conveyed for me a sense of inward gazing. I asked Leigh if it was also a portrait—she had told me she never did portraits. She thought, and said, "Yes. I would describe it as a portrait, the first portrait I've ever done."

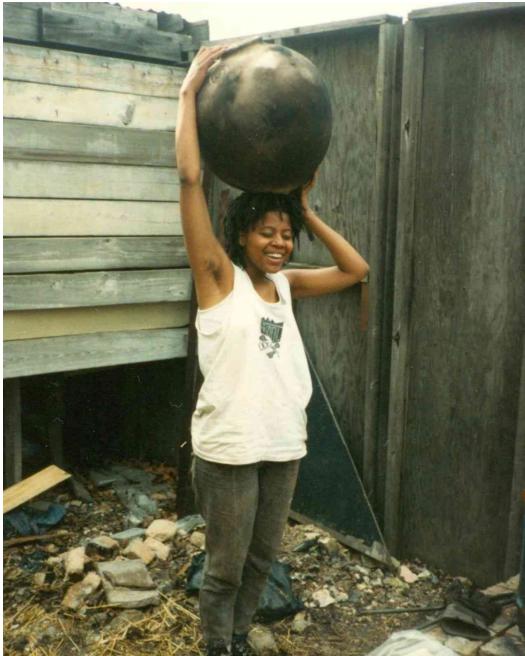
Across the room, pinned to the wall, was an enlarged photographic image of an African American woman in a floral dress, sitting at a table on which there was a jug with a grotesque human face. Leigh explained that the photograph, taken in 1882, was a parody of Oscar Wilde, who had travelled throughout the United States on a lecture tour that year. His tour had given rise to dozens of newspaper and magazine cartoons and parodies of his flamboyant clothes, effeminate mannerisms, and poetic descriptions of the aesthetic movement in England. Some showed Wilde as a monkey, and in this image a photographer in Aiken, South Carolina, had depicted him as something that, in Aiken, could be considered even more insulting: a Black woman.

"What's interesting is that this is the first known photograph of a face jug," Leigh told me. In the U.S., pottery jugs with human faces (often caricatured) originated before the Civil War in the Edgefield District, in South Carolina, where they were made secretly by slaves, for their own amusement, and then openly by freed workers after Emancipation. "We don't know what they mean, but I think they are in the class of power objects in African art, objects that do things in the world," Leigh said. "Anyway, I decided to reproduce this entire—tableau, shall we call it?—in ceramic for Venice, a 3-

D version of a souvenir portrait that was done to mock Oscar Wilde. The funny thing is that it's a stunningly beautiful photograph.”

Leigh recently staged a public burning of an eight-foot paper effigy of the Oscar Wilde woman. Two years earlier, she had been to the carnival in Martinique, where the climactic event is the ritual burning of an effigy of the Vaval, the carnival king, who also personifies the bad things that have happened during the past year. Leigh’s burning took place on a stretch of the waterfront near her studio in Red Hook, Brooklyn, and the effigy stood for racist images in general. In discussing the event with me before it happened, she saw connections to the controversy over pulling down monuments. In 2019, Leigh was invited to participate in a competition for a sculpture to replace the statue, in Central Park, of J. Marion Sims, a doctor who had made advances in gynecology by performing experimental operations on enslaved women. Her design won, but it was not used. Leigh says that she will never again have anything to do with commissioned public monuments. “I feel weird responding to questions of what a monument should be,” she said. “But if I had to offer something it would be this Vaval idea.”

When I talked with Leigh in Philadelphia, she hadn’t made a final decision on the works that will be in her Venice exhibition. She planned to include a number of her new clay pieces, in addition to the bronzes. “I’m still very much someone who works with clay,” she said. She and the Strattons had, in defiance of contemporary trends, returned the practice of clay-modelling for bronze to a handmade process. “Some works being made today are objects that were scanned electronically and then blown up and rendered in marble or whatever, and they often look kind of machined, like something from Disney,” Leigh said. “Shane and Julia suggested that I make mine to scale, in clay. Until I met them, I didn’t know I had that alternative, and it’s made a big difference. What I’m learning, getting better at, is how things look in bronze—things like drapery and clothes and shoes, how they translate.” Leigh is in control of the process from start to finish. She also pays for it. “If your gallery is paying, then they’re the client,” she says. “You’re not the client. I pay for everything myself so I can be free, and that’s better for everyone. That’s the difference between being successful when you’re fifty-four and when you’re twenty-nine. It’s worked very well for me.”



Simone Leigh, photographed earlier in her career. Photograph by Heather Fox

The Church of the Nazarene, founded in 1908 in Pilot Point, Texas, is one of the many evangelical orders that have taken root in American soil. It is also very strong in Jamaica, where Gilbert Obadiah Leigh, Simone's father, is from. Her mother, Claire, was born in New York but was sent to Jamaica in her early childhood. Both of them became Nazarene missionaries. Gilbert was a preacher, and was assigned to a Nazarene church in New Jersey, and then, a year later, to one in Chicago, and Simone, the youngest of their four children, was born there in 1967. "My father was extremely charismatic, a fire-and-brimstone preacher," Leigh told me. "He's ninety-three now, and he was preaching until he was eighty-five." He was also ambitious. He formed his own corporation, and got grants from the government for his social projects—at one point he ran several day-care centers and a boys' home. A street on the South Side of Chicago is named for Gilbert Leigh. The two older Leigh children, Stephanie and Steven, embraced the Nazarene faith without question, but the younger ones did not. Whitney, a lawyer, who is fifteen months older than Simone, circumvented the church's ban on dancing, moviegoing, and other sinful pleasures by not letting his parents know that he engaged in them. "I could get away with things my sister couldn't because I was a boy," he told me. "But when we were little I didn't have the crystallized resistance that Simone had. I didn't confront our parents the way she did. Simone was always very inquisitive, and always very independent."

Her independence led to frequent punishments, with a belt or a switch. “I was definitely the most rebellious child in the family,” Simone confirmed. “When I was four or five, my parents told me I was going to die, and my body would wither away and my soul would go somewhere else, and I could not deal with the idea of my body withering away. I cried for a week. I did all the religious things. Before I was seventeen, I went to church more often than most people do in their entire lives. We had vacation Bible school, and Nazarene sleepaway camps, and I even taught Sunday school for a while. But I never became a believer.”

Their family life was far from austere. After a few years of living in the parsonage, Gilbert bought a large house in South Shore, a formerly white neighborhood near the University of Chicago. A few African American families had moved in during the nineteen-sixties, and the whites had taken flight. “I grew up in what could be called a mansion, near a golf course, two blocks from the lake,” Leigh said. Whitney Leigh added, “This was the same kind of neighborhood that Michelle Obama grew up in. There were houses by Frank Lloyd Wright in it. Our house had a walk-in wine cellar in the basement, which we used to store books.” Their mother wanted the children to absorb as much culture as possible. Leigh remembers going to André Watts concerts, and standing in line for five or six hours to see the Tutankhamun exhibit at the Field Museum. “We’d spend weekends at the conservatory, taking music lessons,” she said. “I became a serious piano player, and I also played a lot of tennis. At one point, very briefly, I was a ball girl for the U.S.T.A. For a Black person in the United States, the South Side of Chicago was a wonderful place to grow up.”

In the summer, the family sometimes visited Jamaica. When Simone was twelve, she went to her paternal grandmother’s funeral, and learned that she had a Chinese ancestor, most likely one of the many Asians brought to Jamaica as indentured servants. “My father changed the spelling of our name, from Lee to Leigh, when he immigrated to America,” she said.

The Nazarene Church condemned many aspects of secular life, but Leigh’s parents believed in education. Three of the Leigh children attended Kenwood High, a strong public school in Hyde Park, and all of them excelled. Stephanie and Steven went on to a Nazarene college in rural Illinois. Whitney, who spent high-school summers studying Russian, had

pushed his independence too far. In his last year of middle school, he skipped classes for two days to visit a girlfriend, and his parents found out. They took him out of that school, and instead of going to Kenwood he was sent to a Catholic high school, and then to a small Christian college in Michigan. After that, he persuaded his parents to let him go to Stanford Law School. He became a lawyer, founded his own firm in San Francisco, and lived there, far from the family, until this year, when he moved to New York to help Simone care for their aging mother.

Simone's escape was more traumatic. After graduating from Kenwood, she enrolled at Earlham College, a Quaker school in Richmond, Indiana. She had convinced her parents that it was a Christian college, but, once there, she "just let go of the whole belief system" that she had struggled with since early childhood. Earlham "really saved me," she said. "Quakers believe that God is in everyone, and they respect people so much. It was ideal for me to be in the Quaker environment at that time." Her newfound peace was short-lived. During the winter of her sophomore year, her mother learned that Leigh was having a sexual relationship with her first serious boyfriend. "My father hired a private investigator," she said. "He called my boyfriend's parents and threatened to bring charges of statutory rape. He said I had to come home, and I didn't."



"Hortense," by Simone Leigh, from 2016. Photograph courtesy the artist / Matthew Marks Gallery

When she did go home, at the end of the spring term, her father gave her an ultimatum: she could go to a Christian college in Chicago and live at home, or she could leave. That night, she woke up and found her mother and her older sister praying over her. Leigh, who was nineteen, packed her things in a green canvas bag and left, and her parents stopped supporting her. “They cut me off,” she said. “I barely talked with them for ten years.”

She returned to Richmond, and took a leave of absence from Earlham. “I worked at the state hospital, as a licensed practical nurse, until I got legal independence from my father and could fill out my own tax returns and get student loans,” she said. After six months, she was able to continue her studies at Earlham, where she followed a full liberal-arts curriculum. She had planned to become a social worker—the school was known for its social-justice department—but two of her teachers, Kate Wininger and Michael Thiedeman, changed her thinking. Wininger taught a course on Women in Philosophy. “That course energized Simone to speak and participate,” Wininger told me. “I thought she was a really powerful person, with a great willingness to listen. Simone was popular, but not with everyone. People who are more reticent don’t like it when you take up space. Thirty years later, I remember how she really stood out.”

Leigh’s interest in philosophy was motivated in no small part by her rejection of the harsh Nazarene morality. “Fundamentalist Christians of the variety that I was associated with don’t really respect other human beings, especially non-Christians,” she told me, in one of our conversations. “They are in the world but not of the world.” Earlham opened up new worlds and different cultures. The school had a department of Japanese studies. Leigh took courses in Japanese history, literature, calligraphy, and painting, and saw many Japanese films. Reading Edward Said’s “Orientalism,” she said to herself, “Oh, wow, that’s happening right here in this college. The Western world eats other cultures—takes from the culture and denigrates it at the same time, and it becomes part of their culture.” Wininger introduced her to the writings of Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and other post-structuralist French feminists, and to the second generation of American feminists, who argued for a less militant and more inclusive stance. “A lot of American feminism then was: Become a man,” Wininger said. “Become the rational being that you know you can be. But the Frenchwomen were saying no, men are truncated.” Leigh found all this liberating. She would eventually come to

see her own work as being addressed primarily to Black women, who so often found themselves held back not just by white supremacy but by the political and social focus on the Black male.

Michael Thiedeman introduced her to working with clay. Thiedeman was well known in the pottery world. He had studied for two years with an American master potter, Warren MacKenzie, whose teacher had been the great English ceramic artist and scholar Bernard Leach. Thiedeman had a deep knowledge of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean pottery; he liked to say that he was essentially “a refugee from a different century.” Leigh had taken a ceramics class in high school, but it hadn’t caught her interest. In Thiedeman’s beginners’ class, the attraction was immediate. She had no interest in learning how to use the potter’s wheel. “I was working with her on a simple coil pot, and *bang!* It took,” Thiedeman told me. “From then on, my work was Simone. Simone was a blessing. She was so full of life, full of spirit, full of humor. She discovered who she was and where she was headed —she was always going to make sculptures, not utilitarian vessels. I encouraged her to apply for a summer internship at the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art. She got it, and for two months she was surrounded by African vessels—great, voluminous forms, which I think were crucial to her development.” (Leigh also read Sylvia Leith-Ross’s book “Nigerian Pottery,” which made a deep impression.) “She was a wonderful student, and a truly remarkable human being,” Thiedeman said. Oddly, Leigh never thought about becoming an artist. “I didn’t want to be poor,” she explained. “And it didn’t seem like art could bring me stability or a family or any of the things I wanted.” But she continued to work with clay and with Thiedeman. “I became an art major so I could have a studio,” she said.

Leigh graduated from Earlham in 1990 and moved to New York, where she lived at first with a friend in Harlem, and got a job at a ceramics-supply store in Greenwich Village. The store had a studio in the basement, and in the evenings she was able to continue working on the large terra-cotta water pots that she had been making at Earlham. “For ten years, I was obsessed with these water pots,” she told me. “It was a kind of perfect form, and it was something women had been making all over the world for centuries, this anonymous labor of women.” She loved working with clay—the warm feel of it, and the excitement of the firings. By this time, Leigh had read “A

Potter's Book," "The Unknown Craftsman," and other classic texts on ceramics, and she knew that pottery could be a way of life. "Things weren't working out in New York, though," she said. "I didn't get a great internship, or into a graduate school."

In 1992, she went to live in a yurt near Charlottesville, Virginia, where a group of white bohemians had established a commune. "There were people who described themselves as Sufis, and people who taught the Japanese tea ceremony, and others who were living out all kinds of utopian fantasies," she recalled. There was also a group of would-be ceramic artists, who fired their work in a Japanese-style anagama kiln. It was her first experience with American studio pottery, an informal brotherhood of amateur and professional craftspeople who worked outside the commercial marketplace. "I'd thought I just wanted to live in the woods and make objects," Leigh said. "But I had entered an environment with a lot of bitter and angry people, people who had expected to eke out a nice living, and it didn't happen. The others were all making functional pottery. I really enjoy and appreciate the craftsmanship of many American studio potters, but I think it's a sort of failed utopia. Quakerism is another. I guess the biggest failed utopia right now would be America. At any rate, I've never been interested in purely functional pots. I've never made one mug. The water pot that I would spend an entire week building made no sense in that context. And I didn't realize how much I would miss the city, and how alienating it would be to live in the country. I learned that I can't exist outside a Black community."



"Trophallaxis," by Simone Leigh, from 2008-17. Photograph courtesy the artist / Matthew Marks Gallery

Leigh went back to New York in 1993. She shared an apartment in Williamsburg with a professional photographer named Yuri Marder, whom she didn't know, and supported herself with a succession of temporary jobs. Estranged from everyone in her family except her brother Whitney, she said, "I was poor all the time. There were periods when I didn't have any money at all." For several months, she made and fired yellow, green, and blue stoneware tiles for two Brooklyn subway stations, Prospect Park and Parkside, which were being renovated, and she taught art to very young children. Somehow she managed to find studio spaces where she used her free time to work with clay. "It's strange, because I had a kind of confidence that I was making important work," she told me. Now and then, someone would buy one of her big water-pot sculptures, but she was pretty sure the pottery world would never accept her work, and several people had assured her that, in the art world, ceramic sculpture was not considered art. Eventually, she thought, she would save enough money to move to San Francisco, where Whitney lived. "But then I married my roommate in Williamsburg," she said, and burst out laughing.

Marder, four years older than Leigh, was the son of an Austrian refugee from Hitler who had become an English professor, and an American-born opera singer whose parents were from Poland. He and Simone were married in 1994, at the Marders' summer house on Monhegan Island, in Maine.

Leigh's sister Stephanie and her brother Whitney came to the wedding, and so did her father. Simone hadn't seen him for years, and he had not been invited. He came alone. Gilbert and Claire were separated by then—they never divorced, but Claire had left the house in Chicago and moved to Harlem. Gilbert made a good impression. "I was really amazed that he came, and after that we started having a relationship again," Simone said. It was not a reconciliation. They rarely see each other. She has become closer to her mother, who lives in a house in Brooklyn that Leigh bought for her, two blocks from her own. Both of her parents are ill, and I was unable to interview them for this Profile.

Zenobia was born in 1996, and for the next five years Leigh was a full-time mother. She stopped going to her studio. This self-imposed hiatus may have put a strain on the marriage, and it ended when the marriage ended, in 2001. Simone and Zenobia had to leave the Brooklyn brownstone where they had been living, and they moved into a two-thousand-square-foot loft in Crown Heights, near the Brooklyn Botanic Garden. It was a beautiful, open space, with skylights and plenty of room to work. "She behaved as though we had money before we had money," Zenobia, who is a graduate student at U.C.L.A., recalled. Leigh poured her energy into making clay objects in a variety of mostly abstract shapes. "I started creating materials for sculptures—for example, the thousands of small rosettes that I'd later use to build larger objects," she said. "I also began using chicken wire and metal armatures to hold things together, and hanging pieces from the ceiling." When she had enough work to fill a kiln, she would pile it into her vintage Volvo station wagon and take it to be fired at one of various kilns around the city.

Her friend A. O. Scott, a freelance journalist at the time and now a film reviewer for the *Times*, described some of her new work as "large vessels in sort of breast forms." Scott and Leigh had met a few years earlier, pushing their babies' prams in Prospect Park; his son, Ezra, and Zenobia were the same age, and they are still close. Scott was struck by Leigh's self-confidence. "I really felt she was doing something that could turn out to be major," he told me. Leigh was coming into her own then as a social energizer. Remembering the gatherings in her loft, Scott said, "There would be maybe a dozen people, kids and grownups, artist friends of hers like Wangechi Mutu, but also her own mother, and the director of the nursery

school where Zenobia had gone. She was a magnet for remarkably interesting academics, filmmakers, radical feminists. Simone can be a bit overwhelming—calling you at six-thirty in the morning to talk at length—but that's the flip side of her greatness.”

Zenobia’s master’s degree at U.C.L.A. is in sculpture. “I wasn’t overjoyed when I realized that she was going to be an artist, but there it is,” Leigh told me. Zenobia had seen how difficult an artist’s life could be: “I watched my mom struggle for a long time when her work wasn’t being recognized. As a young child, I didn’t understand why she was so exhausted and physically unavailable to me. She was working a full-time job, taking me back and forth to school, doing residencies, and trying to have a studio practice.” The full-time job was teaching art at Studio in a School and other early-childhood programs in the city. “I loved, loved, loved teaching art to children,” Leigh told me. “They’re wonderful artists, and they don’t need outside approval.” She had also discovered “the divorced woman’s dirty secret”—built-in child care. Zenobia spent weekends and summers with her father, and that meant hours of uninterrupted work time.



“Men only want one thing: to form an alliance between your two nations.”
Cartoon by Sofia Warren

Leigh had finally realized that she was an artist. She had her first show in 2001, at the Rush Arts Gallery, on West Twenty-sixth Street, where Derrick Adams was the curatorial director. It opened in September, shortly after

9/11, and Leigh will tell you that no one ever came, but a few people did. One of them was the collector A. C. Hudgins. He didn't buy anything, but he remembers seeing a hanging, chandelier-like clay sculpture. What struck him about Leigh's work was the presence of her hand in it. "She wasn't just taking some image and popping it into the computer," he told me. "It's all about the hand." Hudgins became a mentor and one of Leigh's most important supporters over the years, along with Peggy Cooper Cafritz, the Washington collector and civil-rights activist, and the artist and writer Lorraine O'Grady. "Simone has nerves of steel," O'Grady told me. "She understood the situation of the culture and where it was headed before the culture itself knew."

Leigh's sculptures were in a solo show at Momenta Art, in Brooklyn, in 2004, and she was featured in several group exhibitions. She also began to get residencies—invitations to work in community spaces such as the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council and the Henry Street Settlement, where her work was seen by other artists and museum curators. In the summers, when Zenobia went to Monhegan Island with her father, Leigh travelled abroad. "That was a really big thing," she told me. "I went to South Africa and Nigeria in 2007, for three weeks. Each year after that, I'd go to a different country." In Namibia, she learned from descendants of the Herero people about the genocide that took place between 1904 and 1907, when the German colonial government responded to an uprising by starving thousands of people to death. Bisi Silva, a Nigerian-born curator who had returned from Europe to start a contemporary-art space in Lagos, became another of Leigh's mentors; she introduced her to many African curators and artists. "So I started having a different art career outside of the U.S.," Leigh said. At home, though, recognition still seemed far off and uncertain.

This began to change in 2010, when Leigh received a coveted residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem. It included an exhibition there, and Leigh's show impressed a number of art-world insiders. Derrick Adams included her in a group show that he was curating at the Jack Tilton Gallery, on East Seventy-sixth Street. Tilton and Leigh took an instant liking to each other. She joined his gallery, and had two very well-received shows there. For the first time, she was able to stop teaching and live on sales of her work. Leigh and Tilton went to jazz concerts and museums together, and had long, philosophical discussions about art. "He really understood how to work with

artists—something he said he had learned from Betty Parsons,” she told me. (Tilton had worked for the Betty Parsons Gallery, and Parsons had put him in charge of the gallery when she retired.) “I don’t know how to explain it,” Leigh added. “Jack was the kind of white person who doesn’t change when Black people come into the room.”

In 2012, a show at the Kitchen, a nonprofit alternative-art space in Chelsea, featured three large, hanging sculptures. Hudgins, making up for his earlier failure to buy a work, acquired a Leigh sculpture that was in the shape of a watermelon and covered in blue rosettes. Also on view was Leigh’s first video, a five-minute, futuristic study of Uhura, the only Black character in the main cast of the original “Star Trek” series, which Leigh had watched as a child. (Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts was Uhura.) Leigh had always resisted working in any form except clay, but she enjoyed the collaborations with other people which video required. Encouraged by Rashida Bumbray, who had curated her show at the Kitchen, Leigh branched out into social practice, in 2014, with the “Free People’s Medical Clinic,” sponsored by the public-arts institution Creative Time, which turned the Stuyvesant Mansion, in Brooklyn, into a medical center offering free H.I.V. tests, health screenings, yoga lessons, and other benefits. (It was modelled on the Black Panthers’ community actions.) In 2016, at the New Museum, she organized “The Waiting Room,” another social initiative with guides to physical and spiritual health. “Even though many critics and artists think ‘The Waiting Room’ is my most important work, I see it as one of my failed projects,” Leigh told me. “It didn’t feel like it was my work. I’m uncomfortable calling something my work that’s out of my control. After that, I was really stubborn about doing anything besides making sculpture.”

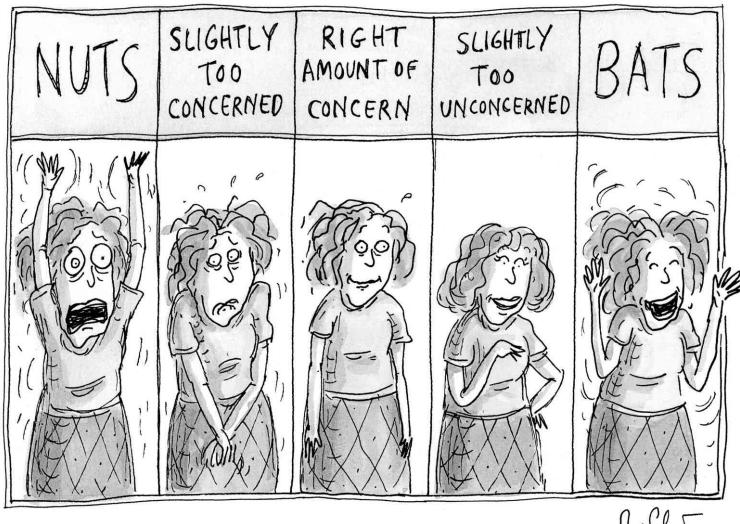
Two other shows in 2016, at the Tate Exchange in London and the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, introduced her ceramic sculpture to a wider audience. Tilton had arranged for her to show at the Park Avenue Armory in New York, for which she made six small busts of imaginary women, with multicolored ceramic rosettes for hair; all of them sold at the preview. “There was something about them that stopped people in their tracks,” Lauren Hudgins Shuman, A. C. Hudgins’s daughter, recalled. Shuman worked for Jack Tilton, and to her the show was clearly “a turning point in terms of recognition.” It was also Leigh’s last show with Tilton. His gallery lacked the resources to handle Leigh’s expanding career as a major artist,

and Tilton was not well. After the Armory show closed, Leigh decided, with great reluctance, to leave the Tilton Gallery and move to Luhring Augustine, a larger gallery with a strong roster of artists. Breaking the news to Tilton, she said, was agonizing.

“Simone is never comfortable, and so her work never stops expanding and growing,” Rashida Bumbray told me recently. (Bumbray is now the director of culture and art at the Open Society Foundations.) It would have been unthinkable for Leigh to repeat herself with more of the ceramic busts that had been such a success at the Park Avenue Armory. In 2018, she won the Hugo Boss Prize, and the following year she appeared in her first Whitney Biennial. She also began doing full-length sculptures of Black women. The figures are bare-breasted and seven or eight feet tall, and they wear voluminous hoop skirts made of raffia. A few of them have generic facial features; in others the eyes are missing, or the face is blank. One has what looks like a floral wreath where her face should be. (“I toggle back and forth between abstraction and figuration,” Leigh told an interviewer.) “Only in retrospect did I see that this was a natural evolution of form, from the water pot to the full figure,” Leigh told me.

In the spring of 2019, a sixteen-foot bronze bust of a Black woman appeared on the High Line in New York. Mounted on a plinth, it was clearly visible to pedestrians and people in cars and taxis on Tenth Avenue, and its power caught and held their attention. Her hair was done in long braids, and her torso had an architectural dimension, which echoed the traditional building styles of the Mousgoum people of Cameroon. (Two years earlier, Leigh had been similarly inspired by dome-shaped, mud-and-raffia kitchen houses, called *imbas*, from Zimbabwe; she had built three of these structures for a show at Marcus Garvey Park, in Harlem.) Her monumental High Line sculpture was figurative and abstract, a mysterious and majestic goddess of Black womanhood.

CONCERN CHART



Cartoon by Roz Chast

Cecilia Alemani, the High Line's curator of art projects, had commissioned the piece in 2016. "I was very impressed by her work at the Kitchen show," Alemani told me. "It was definitely something unexpected compared to what was going on at the time, and I could see that with the right support she could push her practice to another level." The High Line gave Leigh a quarter of a million dollars to make the sculpture, and Alemani and her team introduced her to the Strattons. It was Leigh's first bronze sculpture. She made the full-scale clay model in the Stratton studio, and rented an apartment in Philadelphia so that she could be there for the casting, which took seven months. "Somehow my thirty years of working with clay had made me really good at clay modelling for bronze," she said. "I had no idea I would be so comfortable working at that scale."

"Brick House," the sculpture's title, came from a documentary film Leigh had seen about St. Louis, a city made largely of brick, but it also referred to an expression in Black culture. "If I called someone a brick house, any Black person would know what I was talking about," she explained. "It's a woman who's—I hesitate to use the word 'strong,' because of the stereotypes of Black women as towers of strength. It's about the idea of an ideal woman, but very different from the Western ideal woman, who is fragile. Unfortunately, I think people just related it to the song 'Brick House,' which was released by the Commodores in the nineteen-seventies."

("Ow, she's a brick house / She's mighty-mighty, just lettin' it all hang out.") Leigh now wishes she had called it something else, even just "Untitled." But nothing could lessen the sculpture's impact as a work of public art. "The Strattons said something I thought was really significant," Leigh added. "They said that 'Brick House' was the first time in their career they had made a work that wasn't making fun of something else. It's not ironic, it's straightforward."

Leigh authorized three other castings of "Brick House." She owns one, and Glenn and Amanda Fuhrman, influential New York collectors, bought the two others—they kept the first and donated the second to the University of Pennsylvania, their alma mater, where it stands on ground level outside the arts building. Leigh took me there when I was in Philadelphia, so that I could see, as she put it, "how different it is when you can relate it to your own body, without the plinth." Cecilia Alemani is directing this year's Venice Biennale. She has arranged for "Brick House" to travel by boat to Venice, where it will occupy a prominent spot in her big international exhibition.

Leigh and I met again in July, at her waterfront studio in Red Hook. The studio is on the ground floor of a warehouse building that overlooks a large section of New York Harbor, including the Statue of Liberty. Leigh had moved into it a few months earlier, after a yearlong, million-dollar renovation that included a complex ventilation system for three kilns. Leigh, wearing a bright-orange, ankle-length dress and white clogs, showed me around. "This is the big deal," she said, standing in front of a six-foot-high salt-and-soda kiln. "It's an atmospheric kiln—the closest that ceramics come to true alchemy. At the height of the firing, around two thousand and three hundred degrees, you introduce salt, which is dispersed throughout the atmosphere of the kiln and combines with the silica in the clay to create a unique kind of glaze. You change the object by changing the atmosphere. The results are often not what you'd expect. After thirty years, I still don't know exactly what's coming out of the kiln, and I love that. I lose between twenty-five and fifty per cent of what I build—things that don't make it through the firing." Two smaller kilns, one of which is about to be replaced by a state-of-the-art Blaauw model, from the Netherlands, occupy separate spaces in the studio. "We can experiment with temperatures and glazes. It's just endless play."

In the main workroom, a large, rectangular space with glass doors that lead to a promenade on the water, a studio assistant—one of six—was working on the raffia skirt of an eyeless woman. Five other female figures, finished or nearly finished, each one different, took up the rest of the space. All of them were leaving in a few days for Zurich, where Leigh’s first exhibition with Hauser & Wirth, her new gallery, would open in September. Leigh had left Luhring Augustine in 2020. The gallery had done very well with her work, raising her prices significantly, getting her sculptures into museum collections, and connecting her with the David Kordansky gallery in Los Angeles, but Leigh had found that she disliked the complications of working with more than one dealer. Invitations to show her work were coming from a wide range of museums and galleries, and she had decided that she would be better off with one of the big international galleries like Hauser & Wirth, which has branches in all the major art centers and would assign one person to represent her.

The large sculptures in her Zurich show were priced at seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars, and they all sold in the first week. By then, though, Leigh had decided to leave Hauser & Wirth. “It’s just not appropriate for me,” she said. “It wasn’t a good fit.” Her second gallery change in less than two years drew notice inside and outside the art world. The story broke in *ArtNews* on October 29th, with statements of mutual love and respect from Leigh and from Hauser & Wirth, and the news was widely reported. In an Instagram post (now deleted) that went viral, a clip from the 2004 German film “Downfall,” about Hitler’s final days, which has been parodied repeatedly in recent years, was adapted to depict Iwan Wirth, the gallery’s co-founder, as the Führer, screaming imprecations at his cowed staff. (“We look like goddam idiots! . . . And don’t fucking tell me she went to Pace!”) Leigh weathered the brouhaha, with irritation and some amusement. A month later, after receiving offers from many top galleries, she joined Matthew Marks, whose roster includes Robert Gober, Jasper Johns, Vija Celmins, Katharina Fritsch, Martin Puryear, and Charles Ray. “I feel honored to be in that gallery,” she told me, sounding not a bit demure.

Leigh’s exhibition at the Venice Biennale was commissioned by the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston. Jill Medvedow, the institution’s director, and Eva Respini, its chief curator, had conceived the show in 2019, as a mid-career retrospective, and it will be re-created as such, with additions and a

catalogue (the first major one on her work), in 2023. For Venice, Leigh hired her own project manager, Susan Thompson, who speaks Italian fluently, and her own architect, Pierpaolo Martiradonna, who designed her Red Hook studio. Martiradonna reinforced the gallery floors so that they can support the large bronze sculptures, and carried out Leigh's request to give the somewhat prissy, faux-classical U.S. pavilion a thatched roof. (The costs were largely offset by major grants from the Mellon and Ford Foundations.) Leigh subsidized the making, with Madeleine Hunt-Ehrlich, of a poetic film about the ethnographic portrayal of ceramic work, which will be on view in one of the galleries. This was in keeping with what Zenobia describes as her mother's "Act like you've got it until you get it" approach to life.

Leigh, who admits to being "a little bit of a conference whore," and her friend Rashida Bumbray are currently organizing a meeting of Black women artists, writers, and academics, called "Loophole of Retreat," which will take place at the Biennale from October 8th to the 11th. It is a continuation of a gathering, with the same title, at the Guggenheim in 2019, the year Leigh had her show there. The title refers to an 1861 memoir called "Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl," by Harriet Jacobs, who spent seven years in a crawl space in her grandmother's attic (the "loophole of retreat"), hiding from her brutish owner. Leigh recruited the scholars Saidiya Hartman and Tina Campt, both of whom she met at the Berlin Biennale in 2018, as curatorial advisers. "It will be an intellectual free-for-all," Leigh said, "part two of an ongoing project to create a place for Black women intellectuals. Saidiya said that the academy does not believe there is such a thing as a Black woman intellectual, and that struck me." Naomi Beckwith, the deputy director and chief curator of the Guggenheim Museum, talked to me recently about Leigh's unwavering focus on womanhood. "I think Simone is through and through a feminist," she said. "In form, in material, in subject, in objects, and even in her literary inspirations, she's always coming back to some kind of conceptual language around womanhood, and what that does in the framework of an American art history."

Unable to travel to Venice until recently, because of the pandemic, Leigh is looking forward to spending time there this spring. "I'm going to have my own water taxi," she said, laughing. For the past five years, Leigh told me, she has been running to catch up with her career. We were talking on Zoom last month, and she was in a reflective mood. "I feel like I'm moving into a

different phase of my life,” she said. “I’m going to slow things down. I could have twenty people working for me and make three times as much work as I make now, but there’s no way I could supervise or have my hand in everything, or have relationships with all those people.”

Her success still surprises her. She now lives in a brownstone in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn, a house that is not unlike the one she grew up in. (“I don’t think it would be incorrect to call it a mansion.”) Recently, she acquired a goldendoodle named Margot, whom she adores. I asked her if she ever thought about getting married again. Leigh said no, then reconsidered. “I’m just getting to think about it, now that my daughter is in college and out of the house,” she said. “I’ve had a lot of lovers, but no serious partner.” And then, her confidence resurgent: “I probably will find someone soon.”

When I first met her, Leigh had said, “It looks like I may not suffer the fate of most of my forebears, who have ten years of success and then they’re forgotten.” After a pause, she added, “Maybe that’s not going to happen to me. I feel like I’m in my prime, so far as work is concerned. I’ve had thirty years to make a ton of mistakes. Now I feel ready, and for some reason I’m not intimidated.” ♦

Second Acts Dept.

- [Jay Newman Wants to Be the Wolfe of Wall Street](#)

By [Sheelah Kolhatkar](#)

Jay Newman, a semi-retired sovereign-debt investor, was in the European Paintings galleries at the Metropolitan Museum of Art the other day, hunting for a specific picture. “Excuse me,” he said to a ponytailed security guard. “Do you know where the Bastien-Lepage ‘Joan of Arc’ is?” The guard pointed toward the Robert Wood Johnson, Jr., Gallery; Newman traversed it and made a left at a Rodin bronze. “There she is!” he said, spotting a large canvas. The painting shows the teen-age martyr in a garden, a trio of ghostly saints hovering behind her. “Oh, my God,” he said. “This is one of my absolute favorite paintings.”



Newman had silvery hair and a Florida tan (he'd flown in from Vero Beach that morning), and wore a pair of practical moccasins. He made his fortune as a hedge-fund investor, buying defaulted bonds issued by near-bankrupt countries and then suing the governments to repay the bonds in full. He may be best known for a fifteen-year legal fight with the government of Argentina, during which time the Argentinean President called him and his fellow-investors "[vultures](#)" engaging in "economic and financial terrorism." After nearly forty years in finance, Newman has published a novel, a political thriller called "Undermoney"—a word, he explained, that means "money that's unknown to the public that influences people and events,"

such as corrupt or ill-gotten gains used to manipulate politicians. Newman sees undermoney flowing everywhere.

The book combines espionage, financial intrigue, and geopolitics with a cynicism developed through years of observing politicians and Wall Street titans up close. Helicopters, mega-yachts, and parties full of bankers, lawmakers, and “scantly clad” Eastern European beauty queens feature prominently, along with oligarchs and a scheming [Vladimir Putin](#), making the book unexpectedly timely. The critical response has been mixed: *Publishers Weekly* called the book an “overstuffed debut,” while the *Journal* described it as “‘Mission: Impossible’ meets ‘[Wolf of Wall Street](#).’”

Newman said that his protagonist, a sexy C.I.A. operative named Greta Webb, was partly inspired by Bastien-Lepage’s painting. With knives strapped to her forearms, Webb helps a group of Americans who join with Russian mercenaries to secure billions to fund a U.S. Presidential candidate. “Here was this visionary, mystic woman, reaching out, haunted by angels and ghosts,” he said, gesturing at the picture. “What is she thinking? I think about Greta having that kind of intensity.”

Newman regards the kind of art that most hedge-fund types buy—Damien Hirst, Jeff Koons—as “complete nonsense.” He judges the art world as he judges most everything else, as entirely corrupt: “We got this museum and all the works in it because ruthless people made a lot of money, and then decided their legacy involved making these beautiful objects available in perpetuity. What does this say about social equity?”

He headed toward the Temple of Dendur, the setting for a scene at the Met Gala in “Undermoney.” “O.K., so museums, art, whether it’s old or new, it embodies all the complexities of money and power,” he said. A chime came from the phone in his pocket, a signal that a security camera was picking up wildlife at his farm in Dutchess County, where he and his wife grow black truffles.

Newman, who grew up in Westfield, New Jersey, said that he always wanted to write fiction but never got around to it. He went to Yale, where he studied art and economics; of the latter he now says, “It’s just voodoo.” His parents, he said, “would have been horrified” if he’d been a writer, so he went to law

school. By 1983, he'd ended up at Lehman Brothers, and, in 1995, he joined Elliott Management, headed by the G.O.P. donor Paul Singer.

It's easy to see connections between Singer and Newman's fictional hedge-fund character Elias Vicker (described by one reviewer as "Wall Street's most psychopathic billionaire"). Newman denies any link. He spent two years on a first draft, inspired by Tom Wolfe, Marisha Pessl, and such spy writers as John le Carré and Jason Matthews. Through friends, he secured an agent, who sold the book to Scribner and told him he'd have to add more sex.

The manuscript "was all cerebral," Newman said, but had plenty of violence. He added some racy lesbian scenes between Greta and a Latvian central banker, and turned the book in to his editor, Colin Harrison. "You need more sex," Harrison told him. Newman discussed the matter with his family, and one of his sons was aghast. "'Dad, forget it!'" Newman recalled his son saying. Nevertheless, Newman added a threesome. Then Harrison asked him to cut the manuscript by twenty-five per cent. "That was hard," Newman said of the ruthless culling process. Finally, they got the book down to four hundred and eighty-five pages. Next, Harrison said, "Maybe there's too much sex."

Newman said, "Too bad, it's there." ♦

Tables for Two

- [At al Badawi, Bread Is Life](#)

By [Hannah Goldfield](#)

If it's been, say, some months or even years since you've eaten inside a restaurant, you could do a lot worse than al Badawi, a new Palestinian place on the border of Brooklyn Heights and Cobble Hill, as a landing pad. On a recent, fully booked Saturday night, the large, airy dining room, trimmed in charming if maximalist arrangements of faux flowers, was gently aglow. A lute-and-drum duo stationed near the entrance gave it their all. Heavy terracotta jugs with shapely spouts, full of cold water, were delivered to tables with matching tumblers that still bore a whiff of the kiln. Platters of meat and rice steamed visibly, releasing a perfume of cardamom and cinnamon, and, behind a counter, a pair of bakers, smiling shyly, methodically pinched hunks off a huge mass of dough, kneading each into a shiny, smooth softball to be stretched out and baked in a giant tiled pizza oven.



Pita is baked in a pizza oven.

In her cookbook “The Palestinian Table,” the writer Reem Kassis explains that the Arabic word *tighmees* translates roughly to “dipping” but refers to a “way of life for Palestinians”: “bread is like a utensil to scoop up food.” At al Badawi, every meal begins with a basket of warm pita, accompanied by slender, dense green olives, olive oil, and tangy, fragrant za’atar.

If you can keep yourself from tearing through the pita, thin and powdery, slightly crispy but perfectly pliant, before the food you actually ordered hits

the table, it does make an optimal utensil. I scooped up excellent hummus and baba ghanoush; I scooped up luscious, golden deep-fried cauliflower (does any vegetable other than the potato respond so well to being plunged into hot oil?), in an appetizer called *zahir*, drizzled with a thick emulsion of tahini and pomegranate molasses, and in the *zahr ma laban*, a yogurt-based stew strewn with shaggy chunks of lamb.



The mezze filistini platter includes house-made hummus, baba ghanoush, muhammara, tabbouleh, salata tahina (tomato, cucumber, and red onion tossed in tahini dressing), and labneh.

The dishes I most thrilled to, however, didn't need pita—bread was efficiently incorporated into their elegantly self-contained blueprints. Much of the food of Palestine, and at al Badawi, overlaps with that of other Middle Eastern cuisines; the restaurant is co-owned by Abdul Elenani—who also owns a smaller Palestinian restaurant in Bay Ridge called Ayat (his wife, Ayat Masoud, develops recipes for both)—and Akram Nassir, the proprietor of the wonderful, long-standing Yemen Café, across the street. (Atlantic Avenue is sometimes referred to as Brooklyn's "fertile crescent"; in the nineteen-forties, when the construction of the Battery Tunnel disrupted Manhattan's Little Syria, some businesses moved across the river.) But "if there is one dish that is exclusively Palestinian," Kassis writes, "it's *msakhan*"—and if there's one dish to order at al Badawi it's this one. A round flatbread, doughier than pita, edges bubbled and charred and glossy with olive oil, is thickly layered with supple onions made bracingly tart and

crimson from sumac, then crowned with half a bronze-skinned chicken and showered with slivered almonds and pine nuts.



The distinctly Palestinian dish known as msakhan features a round flatbread spread thickly with sumac-seasoned onions and topped with half a chicken, parsley, almonds, and pine nuts.

My other favorite plate was the *mansaf*, considered the national dish of Jordan and beloved in Palestine. It features a hulking lamb shank—which, like all the other meat here, comes from Elenani and Masoud’s farm, in New Jersey—shreddable with a fork, that’s soaked in a pleasantly pungent sauce made from goat’s- and cow’s-milk yogurts and perched atop pearly basmati rice sprinkled with parsley, all spread across an expanse of *shrak*, a flatbread with the floppy folds of a deflated parachute.



Many dishes incorporate rice.

The *mansaf* arrived with a bowl of the same creamy, cardamom-rich sauce —“in case you need more,” a server explained. We needed nothing; we had finely ground bulgur, fashioned into perfectly ovoid, crisp kibbeh, stuffed with ground beef and onion, and transparent cabbage leaves wrapped around rice, ground beef, and tomato to make delicately veined cigars called *malfouf*. For *fattat*, succulent shavings of shawarma, both chicken and lamb, carved from a proper spit, were tumbled with rice, chickpeas, garlic-laced tahini, and crunchy squares of toasted pita, revived from staleness. Bread is life, and bread is saved. (*Dishes \$10-\$38.*) ♦

The Current Cinema

- [“The Outfit” Is Made to Measure for Mark Rylance](#)

By [Anthony Lane](#)

A cold Chicago street, on a dark morning, in 1956. A storefront so discreet that it could be the entrance to a funeral parlor. Look closely, however, and you see the words stencilled on the window: “L. Burling. Bespoke.” And here comes Leonard Burling (Mark Rylance), making an early start. He is a tailor by trade, though he prefers to be called a cutter, and, as he brews a pot of tea, dons an apron, and oils his trusty shears, he talks us through the mysteries of his art, in a gentle voice-over. A suit, we are told, consists of thirty-eight separate pieces of material, and it should, in all respects, become its wearer. Leonard can size up a client at a glance. “Is this a man comfortable in his station?” he inquires.

Leonard is the hero of Graham Moore’s “The Outfit.” It is a film preoccupied with stations—with the question of how people slot into society and, every so often, feel a compulsion to change slots. Leonard has a young assistant named Mable (Zoey Deutch), for instance, who grew up down the block. “One way or another, I’m getting out of here,” she says, sounding as if she might burst into song. Leonard, on the other hand, was pleased to get *into* Chicago (which he pronounces “Tchickago”), having fled from London, where he learned his craft on Savile Row, for a fresh American life. The reason that he left his native land, he claims, is “bluejeans,” meaning that the demand for formal wear tailed off after the war. You don’t really bespeak a pair of jeans. You just put ‘em on.

Chicago has furnished Leonard with a new breed of patron—folks like Roy Boyle (Simon Russell Beale), a Mob chieftain, and Roy’s son Richie (Dylan O’Brien), a poor reflection of his father’s solid self. Roy is fond of Richie, but he’d sooner rely on a henchman named Francis (Johnny Flynn). “Those customers are not gentlemen,” Leonard says to Mable, after Richie and Francis pay a visit. No, indeed. The wiseguys use Leonard’s store as a place where packages can be dropped off and collected, and you can see why. In their opinion, the tailor is barely a being: a background presence, who sees nothing and says even less.

We know better, though, because, having had the privilege of observing Rylance at work, onscreen or in the theatre, we realize that nothing is ever lost on him. The stealthy pace of “Wolf Hall,” on TV, was set by the sight of Rylance, as Thomas Cromwell, surveying great matters of state from his

haven in the half shadows. “Why are you such a *person*?” the Duke of Norfolk asked Cromwell, adding, “It’s not as if you can afford to be,” and that note of condescension recurs in “The Outfit,” as one character after another misjudges the lowly Leonard. Hence the sharpest scene in the movie, amid reports of a snitch in the gang’s ranks. Without warning, Leonard makes his confession to Richie. “I’m the rat,” he says. Long pause. Then Richie laughs, and Leonard joins in. It was a joke, obviously—I mean, how could such a mouse of a man be a rat? Yet the thought continues to scurry in our heads.

This is Moore’s first feature as a director. He made his mark as a writer, and his screenplay for “The Imitation Game” (2014) won him an Academy Award. The plot of the new film, which he co-wrote with Johnathan McClain, is all curves and no straights; even those of us who go wild for twists may wonder, as the narrative enters yet another chicane, if we are getting too much of a good thing. To be kept guessing is not quite the same as being thrilled. The gravest problem for the movie, though, is not its convolutions but its pit stops—those awkward interludes when people halt in mid-activity, sometimes with weapons in their hands, to utter a notable speech. “Mr. Boyle, why are you telling me all this?” Leonard asks, after one such peroration, and he’s right to be bemused; such candor is scarcely in Boyle’s interest. Hoodlums, like monks, shut their traps.

Aside from the external shot of the storefront, “The Outfit” is confined entirely to Leonard’s establishment, and, as with “Sleuth” (1972), it’s hard to suppress the feeling that we could, and possibly should, be viewing these events onstage. (The fact that Leonard, Francis, and Boyle are all played by British actors is not the issue; in 2014, Brits filled the roles of Martin Luther King, Jr., Lyndon B. Johnson, and George Wallace in “Selma,” and that lacked not a gram of authenticity.) What Moore’s film strives toward, and touches only erratically, is an emotional claustrophobia to match its physical squeeze. Consider the scene in which Francis, after harming Richie, exclaims, “Why’d you make me do that?” The allusion is clear and bold. Everyone familiar with Nicholas Ray’s masterpiece of 1951, “On Dangerous Ground,” remembers Robert Ryan, as a cop, advancing across a room toward a suspect and saying, “Why do you make me do it? You know you’re going to talk. I’m going to make you talk.” His voice, soft at first, becomes a rising snarl. “I always make you punks talk,” he says, then lifts his claws

like a bear and starts to maul. It's an authentically terrifying moment, the apotheosis of urban frustration and spleen. How can "The Outfit," cunningly fashioned as it is, measure up to that?

It is twenty years since Adrian Lyne's last movie, "Unfaithful," which was all about a husband who was driven to distraction, and worse, by an adulterous wife. Now, in "Deep Water," Lyne breaks new ground with the tale of a husband who is driven to distraction, and worse, by an adulterous wife, but who is able to sublimate his despair, to an extent, by raising snails. You see? A *completely* different story.

Vic Van Allen (Ben Affleck) is a wealthy slaggard, who has retired on the proceeds of the software that he designed for drone warfare. (Do I detect a super-subtle hint that his moral integrity may not be of the purest?) He also looks trashed; this may be Affleck's least heroic performance, giving us an alpha male with tired eyes and the soul of a gamma-minus. Vic lives in New Orleans with his wife, Melinda (Ana de Armas), their young daughter, Trixie (Grace Jenkins), and his beloved gastropods, which he keeps in an adjoining shed. This being Lyne's world, the heart of the house is the kitchen; think of Mickey Rourke and Kim Basinger putting the contents of the fridge to creative use in "9 1/2 Weeks" (1986), or the rabbit soup bubbling merrily away on the stove in "Fatal Attraction" (1987). In one promising exchange, Melinda suggests cooking some of the snails with garlic and butter. Vic is not amused.

Unlike the careful heroine of "Unfaithful," Melinda is far from secretive in her lusts. She makes out with young bucks of her choosing in public, at soirées, under the gaze not only of her husband but of their mutual friends. One such beau, Tony (Finn Wittrock), is invited round for dinner. "Tony was the first American I fucked," she explains to Vic, in the airy way that one might say, "We met in eleventh grade." (Where Melinda hails from is of no concern to the film.) And how does Vic react to this frankness? Is he as crestfallen as the cuckold played by William H. Macy, in "Boogie Nights" (1997)? On the contrary. The more flagrantly Vic is cheated on, the more his crest begins to rise. He is angry and jealous, naturally, but there is no denying that the jealousy turns him on, to unnatural extremes. No Iago is required. He gives Melinda an oily massage after she has embarrassed him, in company, with a blond lunk, and she, in return, goes down on Vic, in the

car, after watching him dance with another woman. How many Louisiana laws are being broken I hate to think.

You will be unsurprised to hear that this gumbo of perversity originates in a novel by Patricia Highsmith. You can also be sure, therefore, that the feelings being stirred around will boil into violence soon enough; wrath is not made to be contained. The screenplay is by Zach Helm and Sam Levinson, who do their best to leave the criminality in suspense. We see Vic apparently drowning one of the suitors in a pool, but are we watching a flashback, or is he dreaming, weakly, of the murder he might have wrought? Toward the end, “Deep Water” grows less ambiguous and more conventional, but the rest of it is actually well suited to Lyne’s fetishistic style, with its succulent closeups, and the bitter memory of Glenn Close’s character—depicted as a vengeful virago—in “Fatal Attraction” is somewhat eased by de Armas’s willful and cheerful Melinda. There is affection, as well as derision, in the mirth with which she greets her husband: “Hello, Mr. Boring!”

This movie struck me as a compelling argument against early retirement. The Van Allens and their pals seem to have nothing else in mind, or in the diary, but makin’ whoopee—swimming parties, dancing parties, and lawn parties, with guests crawling along on all fours. (Erotomania and homicide, true to Highsmith, may simply be the next step in fending off ennui.) In a weird inversion, the grownups behave like children, while the real child, Trixie, has the unnerving precocity of an adult. At bath time, she chats to Vic about the rumors. “I still think you drowned him, you’re just telling me you didn’t,” she says, with a smile, as if proud of her clever scheming daddy. That kid will go far. ♦

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