

# How Baseball Saved Itself

By Mark Leibovich



A

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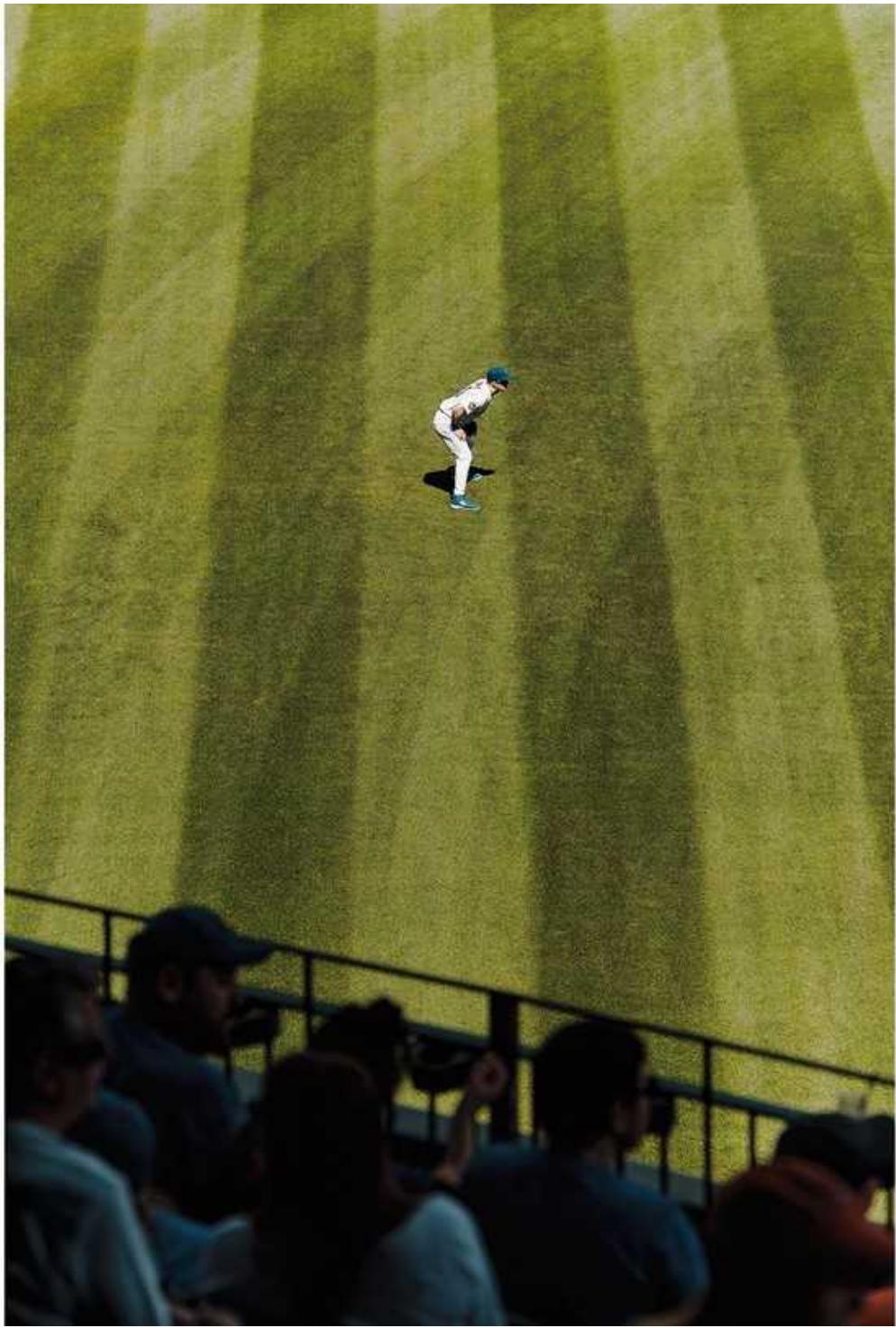
# Cover Story

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# Moneyball Broke Baseball

**But now the whiz kids who nearly ruined the national pastime have returned to save it.**

by Mark Leibovich



*This article was featured in One Story to Read Today, a newsletter in which our editors recommend a single must-read from The Atlantic, Monday through Friday. [Sign up for it here.](#)*

Where in the name of human rain delays is Juan Soto?

The stud outfielder is late. Everyone keeps checking their phones—the antsy Major League Baseball officials, the San Diego Padres PR guy, the handful of reporters, and the assorted hangers-on you encounter around baseball clubhouses. Everyone is wondering when the Padres superstar will show up. He was supposed to be here half an hour ago, just after this baseball players' sanctum opened and we were allowed to join them in their most elemental of baseball activities: waiting around.

Soto, who is 24, works at his own pace. He is a baseball player. Players do their thing and the game indulges their routines, at least to a point. But everything was supposed to be different today, the first day of baseball's new, accelerated life. I had flown into Phoenix the night before to witness the first spring-training game of the year, in Peoria, Arizona, between the Padres and the Seattle Mariners. Normally, I would pay zero attention to this contest. Even if it counted in the standings—or, for that matter, even if it was a World Series game—I wouldn't care. Baseball has been losing me for years, as steadily as its games have become more interminable every season: less scoring, less action, slower, more stagnant.

Yet here I am—here we all are—for a Padres-Mariners scrimmage on February 24, one of two games scheduled to begin just after 1 p.m. (The Rangers would be concurrently opening against the Royals not far away, in Surprise, Arizona.) These would be curious and newfangled specimens, the first major-league contests to feature rules enacted to revitalize a sport that had been heading toward cultural irrelevancy. "Time of game: three hours, 32 minutes"—or some such bloated number—had become a mocking coda to the nightly slogs.

In a few hours, [MLB would introduce](#) a novel ethic into its stationary culture: urgency. Limits would be placed on pickoff throws as well as time taken between pitches and between at-bats. The [most radical change](#) would be the addition of a pitch clock, a kind of pacemaker to reregulate the game's lagging heartbeat. Pitchers would now be allowed just 15 seconds to begin their motion to deliver the baseball to home plate (20 seconds with runners on base), and hitters would have to be set in the batter's box by the eight-second mark. Failure to do so would result in an automatic ball (for delinquent pitchers) or strike (for dawdling batters). The goal is to curtail dead time, the endless velcroing and re-velcroing of batting gloves and

strolling around the mound. Also, in an effort to stimulate offense, MLB had banned [infield shifts](#); to encourage aggressive baserunning, it had augmented the size of the bases.

How would this “best version of baseball,” as one of its architects calls it, play in Peoria? At the very least, hopefully it would play faster. The pitch clocks, which were deployed throughout the minor leagues in 2022, cut the average game time by 26 minutes. Pretty much everyone who experienced this sped-up rendering loved it. But that was the minors. And it’s one thing for a spectator to be anesthetized over several years and crave something new. But what would the royalty think?

And how would this affect King Juan, if he ever gets here? A Padres PR guy is apologetic, explaining to me that Soto is still [relatively new](#) to the team—he was acquired from the Washington Nationals last year—and that the staff is still trying to divine his propensities and quirks. After about 40 minutes, Soto appears through a side door and heads for his locker. He pauses and scrolls through his phone. I think about walking up to him, but my legs will not move. It’s funny that way with pro athletes, my earliest idols. They can be extremely scary to approach. I’ve interviewed presidents, Nobel laureates, and all flavors of tycoon and luminary over the years and never felt intimidated. But put me in front of a partially dressed man-child in pajama pants who can hit a baseball and I’m suddenly reduced to a puddle at his feet.

“Juan, hey,” I say, finally moving toward him.

“I gotta go over here,” Soto says, blowing past me and into a training room.

After another 10 minutes, Soto reemerges and starts bantering in Spanish with two of his teammates, designated hitter Nelson Cruz and star third baseman Manny Machado. They stand in a huddle, giggling a few feet away from where Xander Bogaerts, the former Boston Red Sox shortstop who signed an 11-year, \$280 million contract this past winter, is being interviewed.

Soto continues to give off strong “do not approach” vibes, so I hold my position in the center of the room. Next to me is another clubhouse loiterer,

Josh Rawitch, the president of the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum, in Cooperstown, New York, who is on hand to collect mementos from this landmark happening. “We’re going to want to grab one of the new larger bases at some point,” Rawitch says to me. It seems wholly on-brand for baseball that even in this season of renovation, the sport remains ever attentive to its treasured souvenirs. Rawitch hands me his business card and the two of us continue waiting around.

Finally Soto ambles back toward his locker and I walk over to introduce myself. The time is now 8:56 a.m., exactly four minutes until the clubhouse will be closed to interlopers. “I have a good feeling,” Soto reports to me after I lead off our discussion with a piercing *How do you feel?* question. Specifically, how does he feel about the new pitch clock?



Scenes from the game between the Rockies and Mets at Citi Field on May 7 (*left*) and from Fenway Park on April 26 (*right*), a day the Red Sox had an away game versus the Orioles. A new MLB pitch clock is observable

dangling from the Jumbotron behind center field at Fenway. (Tony Luong for *The Atlantic*)

“I feel like baseball, if you enjoy the game, you gotta give us time to think and to see and look around at everything,” Soto says. This might have been a mild complaint, but I would generally characterize Soto’s default posture as unfazed.

“Nine a.m., folks,” a team official announces. Nonplayers start heading for the exits. I wish Soto luck and he shakes my hand and that is the extent of the action.

Time of interview: three minutes and 10 seconds.

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I feared that my foray back into baseball might end up a requiem. I missed having a sport to care about after the NBA and NHL playoffs ended and before football began. I obsessed over baseball growing up and rarely missed a Red Sox game into my 30s. But by the time I reached middle age, baseball was an afterthought. The only time I would ever seriously tune in again was when the Sox happened to be playing in the postseason, which fortunately has occurred with some regularity this century. (On a related note: The Yankees will always fair and squarely suck.)

The so-called national pastime’s fade into bygone territory has happened simultaneously with my brain speeding up to receive the various dopamine pelts coming at me from my phone, laptop, NFL RedZone channel, or whatever else captures my attention instead of the latest chore creeping past midnight on the MLB Network.

Baseball had a great run, a nice century. Times change, tastes veer, attention spans shrink. Cultural gems become cultural relics. It’s no one’s fault; we move on to new things.

Apparently, there were many of us. We were reflected in audience surveys and TV ratings and testimonials from pretty much every longtime baseball fan I knew. Annual game attendance dropped from 79.5 million in 2007 to 64.5 million last year. And then there was the separate constituency of younger fans and thrill-seekers who never got the baseball thing to begin with and weren't exactly bingeing *Field of Dreams* and George Will columns to find out what they were missing. I remember a few years ago trying to get my then-13-year-old nephew, Carlos, excited about the longest-ever World Series game, which had been played the night before, a 3–2 victory by the Los Angeles Dodgers over the Red Sox in 18 innings (seven hours, 20 minutes). Carlos flashed me a classic “OK Boomer” smirk (even though I’m not a Boomer!) and went back to his *Minecraft* or fantasy football or whatever the hell he was doing.

Baseball had a great run, a nice century. Boxing used to be huge too. Times change, tastes veer, attention spans shrink. Cultural gems become cultural relics. It’s no one’s fault; we move on to new things. Roger Angell died last year. Vida Blue left us in May. (His [Topps card](#) was in the spokes of my bike.) Nothing is timeless, not even baseball.

Each morning in years past, MLB Commissioner Rob Manfred would review daily reports charting the advancing lengths of the previous night’s games. “It was not a good story,” he told me. “Last year was so depressing, I just stopped doing it.” Manfred, who started as commissioner in 2015, knew that the game had hit a bad seam. To avoid further decline, baseball would have to save itself from lethargy.

#### [From the July/August 2018 issue: Chasing the ‘Holy Grail’ of baseball performance](#)

I came in as a kind of embedded spectator to this operation beginning last fall, when I attended Game 4 of the World Series between the Philadelphia Phillies and the visiting Houston Astros. My three-hour trip up I-95 from Washington, D.C., told its own story of the cultural ghetto that baseball now inhabited. As I drove, I sampled the sports-radio offerings in various cities. Around D.C., everyone was fixated on the news that the hideous owner of the Washington Commanders, Daniel Snyder, might finally be unloading the once-venerable NFL franchise. Baltimore stations featured intense concern

over the contract dispute between the Ravens and their star quarterback, Lamar Jackson.

Not until I got within 30 miles or so of Philly did anyone on the radio so much as mention the World Series—a mark of baseball’s drift into the foul territory of “regional sport.” Upon entering the City of Brotherly Love, it was all Phillies, everywhere. Philadelphia is a great sports town, and the surprising Phillies—who barely slipped into the postseason—play in spiffy Citizens Bank Park to loud and engaged fans, albeit many of them drunk, disgusting animals.



Scenes from the game between the Rockies and Mets at Citi Field on May 7 (*left*) and from a Red Sox–Guardians game on April 30 (*right*). A new MLB pitch clock is behind the catcher at Citi Field. (Tony Luong for *The Atlantic*)

The game itself was historic. I suppose. Four Houston pitchers combined to no-hit the Phillies in a 5–0 victory that tied the Fall Classic at two games apiece. It was just the second no-hitter in the World Series’ 119-year history,

joining [Yankees pitcher Don Larsen's perfect game](#) in 1956. The Fox broadcasters and a few sportswriters and Astros partisans seemed dutifully aroused by the achievement; the Hall of Fame secured the rosin bag. But besides that milestone, I remember nothing about the game, mostly because nothing happened—and it took three hours and 25 minutes.

“It’s cool; we’ll be in the history books, I guess,” Phillies left fielder Kyle Schwarber said at his locker after the game, his voice as dead as his team’s bats. “Yeah, I really don’t give a shit.”

Neither, apparently, did large swaths of the viewing public. Philly–Houston in 2022 was the [second-lowest-rated World Series](#) since Nielsen began tracking these numbers five decades ago, ahead of only the COVID Classic of 2020.

Before Game 4, I’d met Morgan Sword, MLB’s executive vice president of baseball operations, who was preparing to monitor the action, such as it was, from a suite above home plate. Sword, a boyish, ruddy-faced dynamo, has been the chief orchestrator of the new rules. He began planning to implement them after baseball’s new collective-bargaining agreement was reached in early 2022. “Welcome to one of the last slow baseball games,” Sword said as I entered the suite. I assured Sword that I would savor this bland finale with great nostalgia—maybe between pickoff throws.

Sword and I would meet a few times through the offseason. His mission was straightforward: to make baseball less boring.

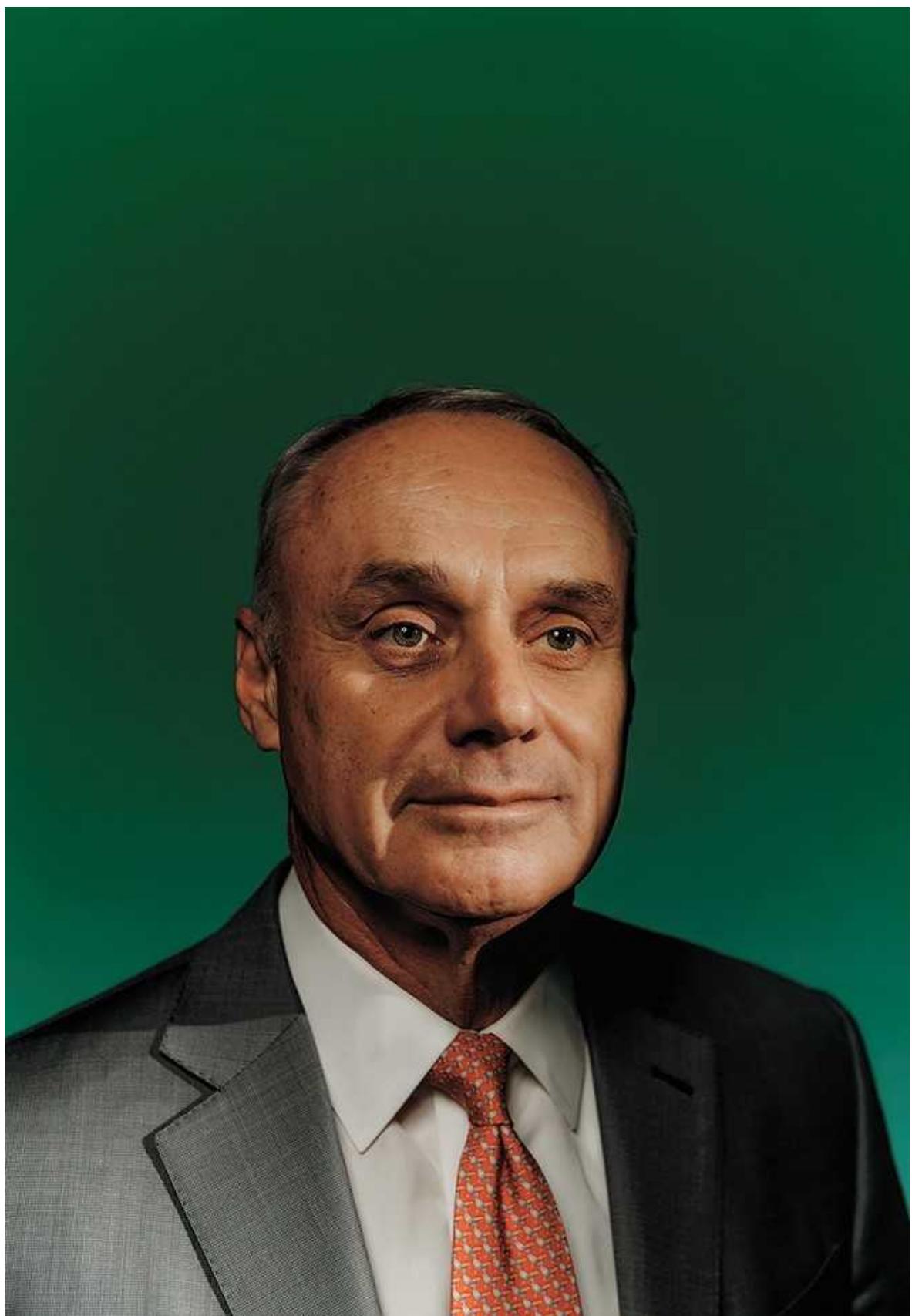
“I think it’s the most significant change made to the sport in my lifetime,” he told me, referring to the pitch clock. Sword is only 38, so his lifetime does not cover most of the game’s major transformations. Still, his point would be valid even if he’d been born a century ago. The introduction of the designated hitter, in 1973, was certainly meaningful, but it was more of a lineup and personnel amendment than a disruption of the game’s rhythms. Jackie Robinson’s breaking of the color barrier, in 1947, transformed the culture, character, and style of the sport forever, but not the actual rules. [Night baseball](#), which began in 1935, was a huge development, but ultimately a scheduling phenomenon. None of these changes recalibrated baseball’s essential pace.

For years the league had done its best to speed things along, but the enforcement mechanisms were toothless. If a player was particularly lackadaisical during an at-bat, an umpire might tell him to hurry up; if he was a habitual slowpoke, MLB might send out a warning or, at worst, issue a fine of a few hundred dollars—loose change to the multimillionaire offender.

“The league office would send letters fining the players,” Theo Epstein told me. Epstein, the former general manager of the Red Sox and president of baseball operations for the Chicago Cubs, masterminded those franchises’ [first championships in 86](#) and [108 years](#), respectively. “And we’d have to have someone in the office take the letters down to the clubhouse to the players so they could crumple them up into a ball and then say, ‘Just tell me how much the next fine is.’”

When Manfred took over as commissioner, he made it clear that speeding up the game was a priority. He instituted a set of relatively minor adjustments that nibbled a few minutes and seconds away here and there—limitations on warm-up throws, in-game conferences, and pitching changes; eliminating the need to throw four outside pitches to complete an intentional walk. But this did not address the biggest drag on time: pitchers and batters futzing around between deliveries.

So starting this season, excessive delay would be punishable by balls and strikes, a direct performance cost that could influence the outcome of the game and the players’ statistics. After two unsuccessful pickoff throws by a pitcher, an unsuccessful third one will advance the runner a base. “One thing you learn about discipline in baseball is, uh, that money is a very weak deterrent,” Manfred told me with a resigned laugh. “The things that work affect what players really care about: Do you win or lose? Does it affect how well you do your job?”



Major League Baseball Commissioner Rob Manfred found the growing length of professional baseball games “depressing.” He committed to speeding up and reinvigorating the game. (Tony Luong for *The Atlantic*)

Baseball has been eager to bring pitch clocks to the big leagues for years, especially after its top executives saw how effective they were in cutting game times in the minors. After a reorganization of the sport in 2020, MLB gained oversight of minor-league baseball, which became a laboratory for potential innovations. The league also conducted fan surveys showing that not only did fans want a brisker pace; they also did not care for all the walks and strikeouts and pickoff throws. They craved more action and offense; more balls hit into play; more doubles, triples, and stolen bases. But MLB could not quickly implement any of these big changes without the approval of the Major League Baseball Players Association, a colossus of a sports union that tends to be fiercely distrustful of management. This is particularly true of rule changes that owners might impose that could affect players’ livelihoods. Baseball in general is the most change-averse of games, bound like no other major sport to its quirky traditions and rules, written and unwritten. Players can be a notoriously delicate bunch, protective of their routines and hypersensitive to workplace disruptions.

Baseball’s last collective-bargaining agreement expired after the 2021 season, which resulted in an offseason lockout that delayed spring training and the start of the 2022 season. A game that was ailing to begin with now appeared headed for a catastrophic work stoppage. Some fans responded with their standard laments about the greed, arrogance, and ineptitude of the game’s leaders. But, perhaps more worrisome, many others didn’t seem to care all that much. Would anyone really miss baseball?

In March 2022, MLB owners and players reached a deal on a new five-year collective-bargaining agreement, ending the lockout after 99 days. Beyond the major points of contention over minimum salaries and bonus pools, the agreement made it easier for MLB to change the rules. A new joint competition committee was formed to deliberate over new rules; it was made up of six owners, four players, and one umpire, so management effectively controlled the panel. Six months after the new agreement was signed, the league announced a more enduring salvation: the pitch clock, coming in 2023.

Though the Players Association accused the Commissioner’s Office of refusing to “meaningfully incorporate the player feedback,” this was perhaps the most enlightened addition to baseball since batting helmets, or maybe soft-serve ice cream (served in mini batting helmets). In September 2021, I had attended a California League game in San Bernardino that deployed one of these beauties. It was a revelation and, I hoped, a preview. Unbeknownst to me, Sword and a few members of his team had attended a California League game a few weeks earlier, in Rancho Cucamonga, and had a similarly effusive reaction to what they saw.

The innings flew by in San Bernardino, even though the two teams I was watching—the Inland Empire 66ers and the Rancho Cucamonga Quakes—scored tons of runs. I was focused on the action and barely checked my phone. Rancho Cucamonga won 8–7, and the game was over in two hours, 40 minutes. A few days later, I attended a clockless MLB game in Los Angeles that was, comparatively, like watching grass grow, albeit the lush and manicured pastures of Dodger Stadium.

News of the coming rule changes, particularly the pitch clock, was met warily by some major leaguers. The knee-jerk critique of the clock was tied to the purist notion that baseball was unique in its “timelessness,” that its leisurely rhythms should be sacrosanct.



Thanks to the Boston Red Sox for featuring our print headline on the Fenway Park Jumbotron, May 12, 2023. (Photograph by Billie Weiss)

["I don't like it,"](#) Red Sox second baseman Trevor Story said after the new rules were announced. "Our game is special in that it doesn't have a clock." Story, who signed a six-year, \$140 million contract with Boston in March 2022—since then, he's mostly languished on the injured list—seemed put off by the idea that anyone would want to spend less time witnessing the divine occurrence of a baseball competition. "I don't know why everybody wants it over so quick," he said. (Ideally, for Red Sox fans, his contract would be too.)

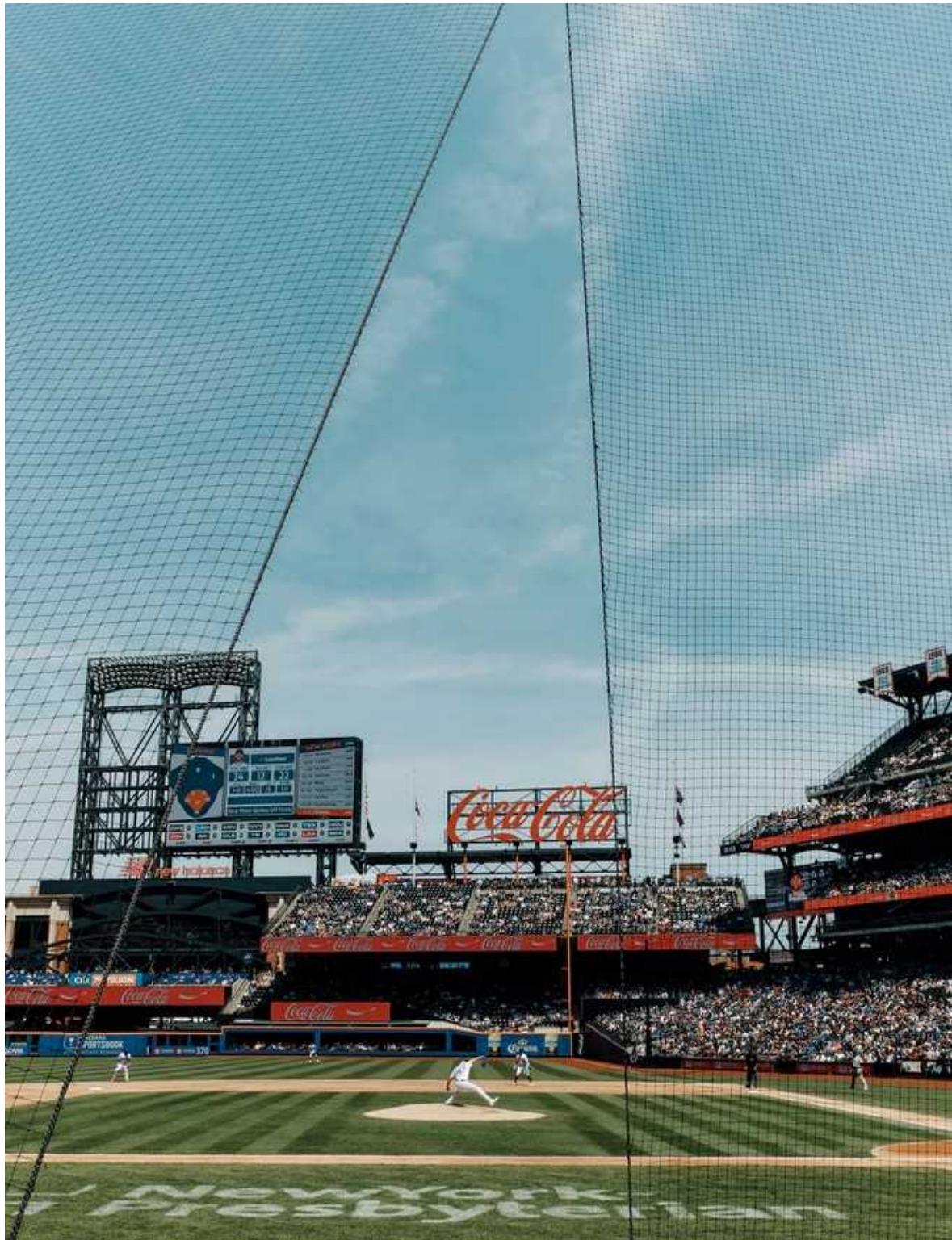
In general, the “baseball must be timeless” decree is lazy and dumb, and typically trotted out by those who have never endured a 37-minute inning with a melting-down 6-year-old on a school night. For starters, no one was proposing placing a timer on baseball’s substantive action. They are regulating only excess time between pitches—the practice swings, swatting of bugs, and staring at dirt. Unlike an NBA game, whose essential activity will always cease after 48 minutes (barring overtime), a baseball game is still measured in 27 outs per team (barring extra innings). No one activates a timing device after a ball is hit; the play is over when it’s over. If a pitcher can’t get a batter out, no buzzer will save him; if neither team has a run advantage after nine innings, they keep playing.

“I think the statement that ‘baseball is the game with no clock’ is more facile than deep,” Manfred, the MLB commissioner, told me. He mentioned an interview, conducted by the sports broadcaster Dan Patrick, with Tom Boswell, the exquisite former baseball columnist for *The Washington Post*. Boswell, Manfred told me, was thrilled by the new rules and said he was “back” to watching baseball, which the commissioner said had helped him appreciate how far things had deteriorated. “It’s one thing when you’re talking about Joe on the street,” Manfred said. “But when you have people who make their living in the business saying ‘I’m not watching as much,’ you have a problem.”

Epstein told me that when he was running the Cubs, after they were eliminated from contention he would watch every postseason game between the remaining clubs—or he would for as long as he could stand it. “Some of those World Series games were taking so long, I found myself channel surfing,” Epstein said. “And I talked to a lot of other people in baseball who were experiencing the same thing.”

In the middle of January 2023, Morgan Sword and his team invited me to a Scottsdale, Arizona, resort to attend a special “boot camp” that MLB had organized for the game’s 76 full-time umpires to get acclimated to the new rules. “Our goal is to suck the idle time out of our game,” Reed MacPhail, the league’s senior vice president of baseball operations, announced to the umpires during an evening presentation. (ESPN’s Jeff Passan described the pitch clock as “baseball liposuction.”) The all-hands session dragged on for more than three hours—metaphor alert!—in large part because the umpires

seemed unsettled by the coming revolution and asked a million questions. “Umpires thrive on guidance,” Sword told me outside the ballroom. “We expected a lot of the back-and-forth. It’s better to iron things out now.” Sword said the main purpose of the retreat was to encourage the umpires to enforce the new rules from day one. No exceptions, easing-in, or grace periods. “Once we flip the switch on this, we’re into the future,” he said.



The Rockies bat against the Mets, May 7. (Tony Luong for *The Atlantic*)

Sword fits the current mold of young baseball executive. He was a high-school catcher and outfielder in Lawrenceville, New Jersey, who was not good enough to keep playing at the University of Virginia, where he majored in economics. He interned one summer with the Phillies and was inspired to pursue a career in baseball after reading *[Moneyball](#)*, Michael Lewis's best-selling 2003 book on the data-and-analytics revolution in the sport pioneered by Oakland Athletics General Manager Billy Beane.

Like many concerned keepers of the game and its traditions, Sword will often explain the creeping dispassion for baseball in terms of that overcooked analogy about the boiling frog in the pot. “Part of what made this so tricky was that the games were getting two or three minutes slower every year rather than half an hour slower, so there was never a point where it felt like a real emergency,” he told me. I offered an alternative analogy, comparing baseball’s predicament to a slow-growing tumor that the new rules would surgically excise. “I’d prefer to go back to the frog,” Sword said.

How did America’s beloved old frog find itself in such mortal danger? Baseball’s slowdown took many forms and had no shortage of culprits: The *Moneyball* innovators placed premium value on hitters “working counts” and “taking walks.” [“Grinding out at-bats” became a thing](#); players with keen batting eyes became folk heroes (Lewis introduced readers to a newly coveted minor-league infielder, Kevin Youkilis, “the Greek god of walks”). Meanwhile, a boom in pitching talent and “optimization” tools led to an obsession with hurlers “missing bats.” Pitchers throw significantly harder than they used to—fastballs now average 94 miles an hour—which requires greater physical exertion and, in many cases, several seconds more recovery time between deliveries. The result: more strikeouts, more walks, less contact with the ball, less offense, less action. This new breed of analytics eggheads provided fodder for a classic business book (*Moneyball*), a fun movie based on that book (Brad Pitt as Beane), and God knows how many M.B.A. case studies and MIT grads [inundating baseball teams with their theorems and résumés](#). But as an actual consumer product, this brainiac, pitching-dominant version of baseball was not much fun to watch.

The trend lines were grim. In 2021, major-league games averaged a record three hours and 11 minutes; that’s a full 42 minutes longer than the two

hours and 29 minutes they averaged in 1976.

“Look, there’s nothing wrong with analytics,” Manfred told me. “The problem is, they have been used to solve for one thing: ‘How do I win baseball games?’ That’s a very narrow goal when you think about the business overall.” Manfred, who started working in baseball as an outside counsel in 1987, joined the league full-time in 1998 as the executive vice president for labor relations and human resources. Fidgety and intense, he can evince the aloof manner of a lawyer-bureaucrat who quite obviously never played the game. He also talks like this: “Analytics can quite frankly ignore what your business optimization should look like in terms of revenue.”

As a practical matter, he says, statistical probabilities take time to process and disseminate. A bench coach, for instance, might notice something from the dugout. Then he might consult a spreadsheet and call to the batter, who then might step out of the batter’s box for a few seconds while he receives the information. The catcher might then try to adjust the pitch sequence, or adjust an already complicated set of signs, which might necessitate a visit to the mound.

Another example: the shift. Refined data have helped teams become more precise at placing their defenders where opposing batters are most likely to hit the ball, and at adjusting for specific counts. Against certain left-handed pull hitters, shortstops would routinely move to the right of second base, joining the second and first basemen on a lopsided infield. This wasted several more seconds—moving the players around—and also a lot of offense: Singles and doubles that were once smashed through infield holes became momentum-killing outs.



The scoreboard on Fenway Park’s famous Green Monster, April 26 (Tony Luong for *The Atlantic*)

Beyond the cold tyranny of numbers, the culture of baseball had evolved in the direction of dead time. Every team, for instance, embraced mental-skills coaching, which encouraged players to “slow the game down” with assorted breathing, visualization, and relaxation techniques. Likewise, certain batter’s-box tics—such as the Red Sox Hall of Famer David Ortiz spitting on his hands and clapping them together—had become legendary. They were also widely imitated. John Stanton, the chair of the Mariners and a longtime proponent of the new rules as chair of the league’s joint competition committee, which oversees rules and on-field issues, witnessed this when he coached his sons’ Little League teams. Robinson Canó, a star infielder who played five years for the Mariners, had a very particular method of adjusting his batting gloves after each pitch. “And then all of a sudden I see my 6-year-old and my 12-year-old doing the same thing,” Stanton told me. Similar delays were breaking out all over the field. “The dynamic was, we were teaching a whole new generation to walk around the back of the mound every time they threw the ball,” he said.

“If we had let this game evolve on its own, we were on our way to an unwatchable sport,” Epstein told me. He left the Cubs after the 2020 season and went on to join Major League Baseball as a consultant, to help reverse the tailspin that had befallen the game itself. He shared a few key data points that illustrated the grim trend lines he’d been up against when he joined the rescue squad. In 2021, Epstein’s first season as a consultant, major-league games averaged a record three hours and 11 minutes; that’s a full 42 minutes longer than the two hours and 29 minutes they averaged in 1976. What’s more, not much was happening between the endless time-outs, rosin-bag ruminations, elbow-pad modifications, and testicle readjustments. This was especially true on offense. In 2022, nonpitchers had their [lowest batting average of all time](#): .243. The strikeout rate had risen to 22.4 percent, approaching the rate that two of the best strikeout pitchers in history, Sandy Koufax and Nolan Ryan, had achieved over their career. As noted by my *Atlantic* colleague Derek Thompson, “In the century and a half of MLB history covered by the database Baseball Reference, the 10 years with the most strikeouts per game are the past 10.”

“So what’s it going to look like 10 years from now, when the league is hitting .215?” Epstein said. “Who’s going to watch that?”

After my spring-training brush with Juan Soto, Glen Caplin, an MLB PR executive, walked me through brief visits with the managers of both the Padres and the Mariners. It was a cool Cactus League morning of luminous sun and green grass (cracking of bats, thudding of mitts, Shoeless Joe emerging from the cacti). Fans began pulling into the Peoria Sports Complex for the 1:10 p.m. game. Bob Melvin, the Padres manager, stationed himself in a small patio area outside the locker room and addressed reporters. Melvin, a former big-league catcher now leading his fourth team, has the weary, seen-it-all manner of an exemplary baseball man. He allowed that it was unfortunate that the slowing of the game had repelled generations of potential fans. But he also spoke of the phenomenon with remove: This was not his problem.

“I’ve noticed it, but I don’t really care,” he told me. In other words, Melvin would much rather win a game in four hours than lose in two. Everyone affiliated with the Padres, or any other team, would say the same.

“From a baseball-operations standpoint, you just don’t have the bandwidth to think about the fan experience,” Epstein told me. “It’s a zero-sum game. If you want to win five more games, you have to take those five wins away from another team. All of your thinking, all of your R&D, is geared to doing that.” When Epstein was leading the analytics revolution in baseball as a Moneyball guru for the Red Sox and then the Cubs, I asked him, did he ever consider the unintended harm he might be causing the game? “No,” he said. “It was all about how to prevent one more run and score one more run.”

Players and managers might talk about “growing the game” and “attracting new fans,” but it usually comes off as lip service. “We are in the entertainment business, and we have to understand that, keeping it as fan-friendly as we can,” Scott Servais, the Seattle manager, who was sitting in his office, told me. The Mariners’ clubhouse dog, Tucker, a yellow lab-retriever mix, kept scurrying in and out of the room (apparently hungry). What happens, I asked, if “fan friendliness” conflicts with “player or manager friendliness”?

“We’re in the entertainment business,” Servais said again. His voice assumed the dutiful monotone of a hostage video. But as we spoke, I began to believe that Servais, another former catcher, who was participating in his 35th spring training, was sincere. I asked him if he ever worried about the state of the game.

“Yes, I do,” Servais told me. He paused. “I’m trying to decide if I want to say this or not”—always a sentence that makes a reporter’s ears perk up. He glanced at his PR babysitters. “There are games when I’m sitting there in the dugout, and I will think, *This is boring*,” Servais said. “And I’ve been part of this game my whole life. This is boring. It’s three up, three down. No action.”

If there is one team that has bought into baseball’s acceleration campaign, it is the Mariners, led by Stanton, the chair of MLB’s joint competition committee. Stanton has steeped himself in the trend lines of tedium that have stricken the sport. He has also studied how other sports leagues have adjusted their rules to enliven games: The NBA’s 24-second shot clock eliminated laborious stall tactics; the NFL made it harder for defenders to manhandle receivers, leading to an explosion of passing offense.

Given Stanton's dual roles—as chief of the Mariners and champion of the pitch clock—I asked how he would feel if his team wound up winning the World Series on a clock violation. Stanton laughed, then stipulated that he would always prefer that a game not be decided by a rule infraction. But, he said, “as the managing partner of the one team in baseball that has never been to the World Series, if we get there as a result of an earthquake that hits the other 29 markets, we will still take it.”

Sword and Epstein, two of the founding fathers of the New Baseball, were in Arizona to witness the Mariners and Padres inaugurate the pitch-clock era. I found Sword tapping away on his phone outside the San Diego clubhouse before the game, his cheeks an even darker hue of cardinal red than usual. Normally a relaxed and comfortable presence, Sword was a conspicuous basket case today. He was leaning against the door of a closet marked Isolation Room, preparing to do a final consult with the umpires and officials from both clubs and then visit the press box to check in with the stadium’s pitch-clock operator.



Morgan Sword, tasked by Major League Baseball with orchestrating the changes designed to speed up the sport. (Tony Luong for *The Atlantic*)

A few minutes before the first pitch, I settled into a lower box seat behind home plate, with Epstein to my left, and Sword and Caplin to my right. Epstein wore a cap pulled low over his forehead and kept his hands buried in his pockets. He appeared more subdued than Sword—or maybe fatigued, given the spirited reunion he had enjoyed the night before with a bunch of his old pals from the Cubs at a raucous Mexican steak house in Scottsdale (fire dancers, infinite tequila). Epstein looked to be in desperate need of a nap, which, thanks to the new rules, should now be available to him sooner. “The pitch clock is great for hangovers,” he declared.

Epstein majored in American studies at Yale, and was hired by the Red Sox at 28, making him the youngest general manager in major-league history to that point. His curse-crushing résumé has earned him boy-genius-for-life status, even though he will turn 50 this year. Epstein and I first met in 2012, when I interviewed him in Chicago for an anthology of profiles that I contributed to about Semitic sports heroes, called *Jewish Jocks*. “Is this a pamphlet or a book?” Epstein had asked me when I’d first approached him, which immediately won me over, even though he’d already earned my eternal gratitude for his heroic Red Sox deeds. (Disclosure: I am totally in the tank for this man.)

Epstein had served on previous versions of the competition committee during his tenures with the Red Sox and the Cubs, and wished to remain involved in rule-and-reform debates after he left. He wrote Manfred a long letter in 2020, with recommendations on how to measure fan sentiment, develop new guidelines, and realize “the best version of baseball.” Manfred hired him as a part-time consultant, but not without ambivalence. Epstein is a brilliant and visionary figure in baseball, with a high profile and Hall of Fame cachet. This gave Manfred pause, something the commissioner was more open with me about than I would have expected.

“I’ll be honest with you; Theo’s a big presence,” Manfred told me. “When you bring somebody in like that, it’s like, how is he gonna fit with the people who are here?” He twice noted that Epstein was “really active with the press” and also wondered, “Is his messaging going to be our messaging?”

Manfred emphasized that Epstein was hired to complement MLB's existing staff. "I wasn't out there looking for Theo," he said, and reiterated that "the quarterback" of this project is Sword. "Not Theo, okay?"

Sword, for his part, sounded almost starstruck to be collaborating with Epstein. A product of the *Moneyball* generation himself, Sword views Epstein—a nonplayer who transformed the game—as a major inspiration. They had a jocular, easy rapport as they watched the Padres–Mariners game, rooting for one outcome above all: a brisk and glitchless contest with lots of base runners, preferably ending in less than two and a half hours.

Seattle's Kolten Wong stepped in to lead off against San Diego's Nick Martinez at 1:11 p.m. It was 62 degrees and sunny. Wong struck out, center fielder Julio Rodríguez grounded a single into left, and within a few minutes I barely noticed those big numbers counting down over the outfield fence. A minute later came history.

"So that was [the first violation](#)," Epstein said. I hadn't even noticed. Yes, Epstein said, it was on the hitter, San Diego's Manny Machado, who had not settled into the box in time to face the Seattle left-hander Robbie Ray. The home-plate umpire, Ryan Blakney, called time and pointed to his wrist to signal a violation on Machado.

Both Epstein and Sword watched replays several times on their phones. Could the violation have been intentional? I had wondered if certain star players with mutinous tendencies (for instance, Machado) might engage in pitch-clock civil disobedience. Regardless, Machado was penalized a strike —the count was now 0–1—and would go down as the first pitch-clock scofflaw in baseball history; he then singled to left. (Six weeks later, Machado became the [first player to be ejected](#) over a pitch-clock violation after he called the home-plate umpire, Ron Kulpa, a "[fucking douchebag](#)," [per lipreading sources](#).)

The Padres and Mariners skipped right along, reaching the fifth inning after just an hour and five minutes. I mentioned to Epstein how smoothly everything appeared to be going—not just this game, but all of spring training, how little friction and complaint there seemed to be. Who have been the loudest critics? I asked him. Epstein did not hesitate.

“Online commenters.”



Fan scenes from game day at Citi Field, May 7 (Tony Luong for *The Atlantic*)

Entering the bottom of the ninth, the Mariners were up 3–2, and—far more important—the game had a good shot at coming in under two hours, 30 minutes. With one out, we were at 2:23, and history was in the hands of a bunch of roster stragglers. A walk, then a strikeout. “We’re at 2:25,” Caplin reported. The Padres shortstop Jackson Merrill singled to left, then third baseman Matthew Batten was hit by a pitch, and uh-oh. The Mariners’ pitching coach stepped out of the dugout. “Okay, you might be about to see a pitching change, which would really fuck us,” Epstein said. Phew, it was only a mound visit. San Diego’s right fielder David Dahl stepped into the box at 2:28. He flied out to right field to end the game in a brisk two hours, 29 minutes.

“We did it, baby,” Epstein said, pumping his fist in celebration of a triumph that obviously surpasses everything else he’s ever achieved in baseball.

When I first set out on this story, I imagined an obituary. Baseball’s plodding demise was the hook. The game was mortally ill. Its tempo was poorly suited to the age. Its leaders were overmatched. Manfred made for a perfectly peevish face of the collapse. He had a special gift for making matters worse. In 2020, after the Astros were [caught in a sign-stealing caper](#), Manfred declined to revoke their ill-gotten World Series trophy from 2017, dismissing its significance as a “piece of metal.” He later apologized (just making “a rhetorical point,” he explained). During the labor impasse last March, a camera caught him practicing his golf swing on the day MLB announced it would be canceling games. Cubs pitcher Marcus Stroman [twice referred to the commissioner as “Manclown.”](#)

But as it turns out, game times are down, ratings are up, and the new rules—especially the pitch clocks—are drawing raves. “If we’d had a pitch clock my entire career,” the Dodgers’ manager, Dave Roberts, [told the columnist](#) Rick Reilly, “I might have learned how to play the violin by now.” As of mid-May, game times were averaging two hours and 37 minutes, almost half an hour less than the average game in 2022. Batting averages were up 12 points. (Sadly, this did not extend to my man Soto, who got off to a terrible start at the plate—through April, he was hitting 62 points lower than his career average.)

So far, 2023 has been a joy. I am becoming reacquainted with box scores. Morgan Sword told me he brought his 6-year-old to Mets Opening Day at Citi Field and made it through all nine innings—another historic first.

Manfred has no idea how to process all this good news. He always looks like he is bracing for a light tower to fall on his head. I kept hitting him with more sunny indicators—good fan surveys, few hiccups with the new rules—and he kept wincing as if he thought I was taunting him. But my sentiment was genuine. I told him that for the first time, I’d purchased the MLB.TV package this season (\$139.99), and have probably watched more games in April and May alone than in all of the past five years combined.

On a typical night, as the rest of my family settles in to watch some weird Netflix show about sociopathic British teenagers, I open my laptop to catch the Sox, who got off to a fast start, in both senses of the word—winning games at rapid speeds. They managed a remarkable 14 comeback victories through mid-May. Right fielder Alex Verdugo alone has accounted for three walk-off hits, followed by [delirious postgame interviews](#) in which he tries, with limited success, to get through them without swearing (repeatedly). And it's all usually over in time for that night's NBA or NHL playoff action to crush my good mood and poison my dreams before bed (RIP Bruins, Celtics).



An off day at Fenway, April 26. Later that day, the Orioles would beat the Red Sox in Baltimore, 6–2, in two hours and 37 minutes—the average length of a game this season. (Tony Luong for *The Atlantic*)

It's still early with the pitch clocks. The effects of sped-up games on injuries, especially to pitchers, bear monitoring over the full season. Inevitably, violations will be called—or not called—in high-stakes situations. Fiascoes are likely. So, for that matter, is the next scandal or existential crisis that baseball—being baseball—will find a way to inflict on itself, and somehow

make worse. And everyone will then go back to blaming Manfred for everything, including the earthquake that ends baseball once and for all, except in Seattle, city of champions.

So far, though, 2023 has been a joy. I am becoming reacquainted with box scores. Sword told me he brought his 6-year-old to Mets Opening Day at Citi Field and they made it through all nine innings—another historic first. From what I’ve observed (a very scientific sample), fans are looking less at their phones, for fear of missing something.

Later in the spring, I concluded my baseball reclamation journey with an outing to Nationals Park, where Washington’s woeful squad was hosting the Cleveland Guardians on a sunny Saturday. Before the game, I visited with Terry Francona, Cleveland’s manager, ostensibly to get his view on the pitch clock, but mostly because I wanted to profusely thank him—consummate professional that I am—for his glorious life’s work of managing the World Series-winning Red Sox of 2004 and 2007.

I arrived at the Cleveland clubhouse two hours before the 4:05 p.m. game and, of course, spent several minutes waiting around. The players all looked 14 years old. Most wore headphones and stared deep into their phones. A small group played cards, while one of them counted out \$100 bills on the arm of a couch. A Cleveland PR guy informed me that “Tito”—as Francona is known—was ready, and led me into the manager’s office. I had 10 minutes, three of which I spent on egregious New England fanboying.

Pitch clocks have required an adjustment, Francona told me. Especially for lifers like him. “I’ve been watching the game one way for 44 years, and now all of a sudden it’s different,” he said. What slowed baseball down to begin with? Francona mentions a few contributors: among others, walk-up music—the modern practice of ballparks blaring a batter’s self-selected song as he comes to the plate. Before, hitters might pause to hear their selection to its completion. But that’s harder now, especially if the pitcher is ready to go. “So many players have shticks, it started to take over the game,” Francona said. I asked what his shtick was.

“I have none,” he replied immediately. “My shtick is I hope we play good.”

As I was finishing this article, Josh Rawitch, from the Hall of Fame, let me know that the museum had secured—and for this we can be grateful—the “ClockCom” buzzer that had alerted Ron Kulpa, the third-base umpire on Opening Day at Wrigley Field, to the first pitch-clock violation to ever occur in a regular-season game.

Baseball’s obsession with preserving its keepsakes through the generations is part of its charm, as though the sport is constantly adding new sepia-toned episodes to its perpetual Ken Burns documentary. But from the discussions I’ve had with the various custodians of America’s pastime, they clearly do understand that for the game to capture new and younger cohorts of fans, it needs to be more than just the sum of its immutable traditions.

Before I left the MLB offices for the last time, I stopped to visit Sword, who had just finished watching his daily video mashup of every infraction that had occurred at every ballpark the night before—a kind of customized RedZone package for pitch-clock-violation junkies. (Sounds like fun viewing, I said.) I mentioned to Sword that baseball sometimes seems to treat itself like one big museum piece. This seemed to amuse him. “It’s actually a perfect metaphor,” he said, “because I couldn’t drag my kids to a museum.”

The idea is that baseball needs to attract new fans. But there’s a parallel notion here, with life lessons embedded. Change can invigorate at any age. It’s important to keep traditions, and base runners, moving. Obsolescence is a choice.

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## The Immortal Mel Brooks

**The 2,000-year-old man turns 97 this summer. I talked with him about fighting in World War II, his life in comedy, and the secret to happiness.**

by Judd Apatow



*This article was featured in One Story to Read Today, a newsletter in which our editors recommend a single must-read from The Atlantic, Monday through Friday. [Sign up for it here.](#)*

I'm always looking for a way to get near Mel Brooks. Can you blame me? He has acted in, directed, produced, and written some of the most

memorable films in human history—among them *The Producers*, *Blazing Saddles*, *History of the World, Part I*, and *Spaceballs*. He is the reason I went into comedy. As a young man, I obsessively watched his films and his appearances on late-night television. I would listen to his *2000 Year Old Man* albums—in which Mel played the character of an ancient man explaining the origins of humanity—and dream of having the same job as him.

Once, I interviewed Mel at an event where he was so funny that I locked up completely and didn't dare attempt a single joke. After I wrote the foreword to his book about the making of *Young Frankenstein*, I got to watch him record the audio version of it. Fifteen minutes into the reading, he stopped and shouted, "Why did I make this thing so damned long?! This is going to take forever!" Then there was the time that I took my friend and fellow comedian Bill Hader to Mel's office just to chat. He regaled us with stories for several hours. When we were getting ready to leave, Mel said, "Come and visit again, but not soon! Wait a few months." As we walked to our car, he screamed from the far distance, "Get the fuck out of here!"

Mel is turning 97 this summer. He is way sharper than I am, which isn't saying much, and he is still riotously funny. Recently I visited him at his house in Los Angeles, not just so I could bask once more in the comic genius of a true master (although also that), but because I hoped to glean some of his wisdom. I wanted to understand what made Mel Brooks who he is, and I attempted to steer him toward the philosophical and the spiritual, so that we might all benefit from what he has learned in almost a century on this Earth. Our conversation has been condensed and edited for clarity. And to make me seem less dumb.

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**Judd Apatow:** I'm always happy to have an excuse to talk to you.

**Mel Brooks:** I usually say no. No, no. It's not you; it's COVID. I'm afraid. I got sick. I got so sick, I had to go to the hospital.

**Apatow:** Really?

**Brooks:** Yeah. Remdesivir. You can only get it in the hospital. So I got it. I think it saved me. I felt like I was swallowing glass.

**Apatow:** Oh no.

**Brooks:** Oh, it was awful.

**Apatow:** Well, the pandemic has been the biggest calamity in the United States in a long time. But you've seen other big calamities. When you think about World War II and everybody saying, *We have to join together to get this done*, do you think, *We don't have that anymore*?

**Brooks:** Oh yeah. I went overseas as a private in the artillery. I was a radio operator. And when we got to Europe, I was going to be a fast-speed radio operator and forward observer in the artillery. Got off the boat, got onto a truck. They said, "You're in the combat engineers. We need a lot of combat engineers to build bridges and to defuse mines and booby traps. And you're going to love it."

**Apatow:** You're going to love it!

**Brooks:** I got over in February 1945, and the war was over a few months later—March, April, May, and I was home. So I was lucky. But I defused a lot of booby traps, a lot of mines. One good thing was I got my training at a farmhouse in Normandy. And there was a little kid with a bicycle, and he fell in love with me because I gave him chewing gum and chocolate, and he'd go "Private Mel, Private Mel!" He'd just follow me on his tricycle. Sweet little French kid.

**Apatow:** Were you drafted or did you enlist?

**Brooks:** I enlisted, but not as a hero. Somebody from the Army came to Eastern District High School in Brooklyn and said, "If you join the Reserve, we will send you to the Army Specialized Training Reserve Program for your last year of school, and it will actually be your first year of college." Sounded good. So I enlisted in the Army Reserve.

**Apatow:** They were nice enough to put you in the division that had to defuse mines.

**Brooks:** You'd go to the toilet, and there was a chain that hung down, and if you pulled the chain, you'd blow up the house. You'd go right to heaven. So the first place we'd look was in that water closet, right above the toilet. And then every door could have a hinge attached to a bomb. When the troops cleared out a farmhouse, we'd go right in and clean it up so that they could actually sleep in it, stay in it for a night or two, instead of on the ground. The scariest and funniest one was a jar of pickles. Our top sergeant explained to us: "Don't open a jar." Because in the middle of the pickles, there could be dynamite. He had defused it already. So he took out the jar, he took off the lid, and in the middle of the pickles there was a stick of dynamite.

**Apatow:** Oh my God.

[Read: HBO's 'If You're Not in the Obit, Eat Breakfast' offers a sunnier take on aging](#)

**Brooks:** Crafty. So anyway, we would test the soil around the farmhouse with our bayonets at a 45-degree angle. We'd hit the soil, and if we heard a *tink* or a *dink dink dink*, we were supposed to defuse.

**Apatow:** And do you remember your state of mind? Were you thinking, *Any day now, I'm going to get blown up?* Or did you just feel confident, like, *We know what we're doing?*

**Brooks:** It was more *Any day now, I'm going to get blown up.*



Mel Brooks in the Army during World War II (Courtesy of U.S. Department of Defense)

**Apatow:** How did people treat the Jewish soldiers?

**Brooks:** Once in a while you'd get a couple of guys from Alabama who would ask, "Take off your helmet. I want to see if your ears are long." Sometimes for real, just curious. And sometimes just mean. A lot of mean guys.

**Apatow:** When my mom was in college—this is in the early 1960s—her roommate at Michigan State asked to see her horns. For real. "Can I see your horns?"

**Brooks:** When I was a kid, I'd feel sorry for non-Jewish kids who would go by, and the Jews would harass them. I always felt that in my little clique of Jews, that that's what the world was. Mostly Jews and a few strange people.

It was quite a revelation when I was in the Army, that maybe me and two other guys were the only Jews in a battalion.

**Apatow:** Fighting to free the Jews.

**Brooks:** It was strange. I mean, it was an eye-opener. I woke up.

**Apatow:** Do you have an interpretation of how people have changed over the generations? Or do you think it's all basically the same?

**Brooks:** No, it's not basically the same. They've changed, mostly for the better, mostly for being more tolerant and more understanding about people. And you know, as a matter of fact, it's only recently that I'm aware of so much anti-Semitism. For many years, there was none that I was aware of.

**Apatow:** Yeah, well. You're the one Jew everyone likes.

**Brooks:** In the Army, I was entertaining and I was fun, and they overlooked that I was Jewish. They just liked me for my personality.

**Apatow:** Were you depressed?

**Brooks:** No! It was terrible and wonderful.

**Apatow:** And the wonderful part was the camaraderie?

**Brooks:** The wonderful part was camaraderie. The day the war ended, or was going to be ended, it was May 7. And they said, "Tomorrow, the war ends." A buddy came with me from Fort Sill, Oklahoma, where we both learned how to be radio operators for the Field Artillery—we both located into the combat engineers. He said to me, "Come with me." We were in a little schoolhouse. And in the basement, he had set up a table with white wine. And he said, "We're going to sleep here tonight and stay here all day tomorrow." And I said, "Why?" He said, "Because tomorrow is going to be V-E Day. And knowing soldiers, they're going to shoot their rifles up and yell and celebrate. Shoot a lot of stuff up in the air, forgetting that some of those bullets have to come down. So we're going to spend all of it here." Until when the celebration was over.

Years later when we made *The Elephant Man*, we had a 20-day break because we were going to a location in London, and the writers had roughly 20 days where we could rewrite. I said, “How would you guys like to see where I was stationed?” So we took the ferry and then hired a car in Paris, and we went to Normandy. I knocked on the door of the farmhouse. And the door opened: a bear of a man with a great big black beard. Scary guy. “*Que voulez-vous?*” “What do you want?” And he said, “*Un moment, un moment.*” “One minute.” [Gasps] “Ah, Private Mel!” he shouted. I said, “Oh my God. You were that little—” “Yes! *Je suis l'enfant.*” “I was the little boy.” He was a monster. He was a big, beautiful guy. And it was a great afternoon.

**Apatow:** That’s incredible.

**Brooks:** I’ll never forget that roar. “Private Mel!”

**Apatow:** When you look back now, do you think the level of fear you experienced during the war affected you when you got back and started working in comedy?

**Brooks:** Yeah. But in the end, fighting in World War II was better than facing a tough Jewish audience in the mountains. Because I mean, they could kill you. I remember I once said, “Man of 1,000 faces!” I did faces, you know. And I did one; I did Harpo Marx. I figured, *I'll get a laugh by two*, you know. And they waited. When I got to about 280, I said, *They're actually waiting for 1,000 faces.*

“You can’t live a real life if you’re just a bunch of firecrackers going off. You got to play ball with the universe.”

**Apatow:** Did you know before the war that you wanted to be a comedian in the Catskills?

**Brooks:** That was the dream. That was the road to being a star comic. If you wanted to become Henny Youngman, I don’t know why, but that was the road you took.

**Apatow:** Who was the person before World War II that you loved, that you thought, *Oh, I'd love to be like that person?*

**Brooks:** Actually, there was one comic who was really funny. Myron Cohen was his name. He's very Jewish, and I stole one of his really great, great jokes. The joke went like this: "Guy walks into an appetizing store." I mean, so Jewish—there are no appetizing stores! "Guy walks into an appetizing store, says to the grocery guy, 'I want some lox, I want some cream cheese, I want four bagels, I want—' He stops. He says, 'Salt, salt. Why have you got so many boxes of salt? All your shelves are covered with red boxes of salt. You must have 100 boxes of salt. You sell a lot of salt?' And the grocer says, 'Yeah, well, if I sell a box of salt a week, I'll throw a party. It's a miracle. I don't sell a lot of salt. But the guy that sells me salt? Boy, can he sell salt.'" And I love it. I love that joke.

**Apatow:** How do you think you would have been a different comedian if you hadn't gone to World War II?

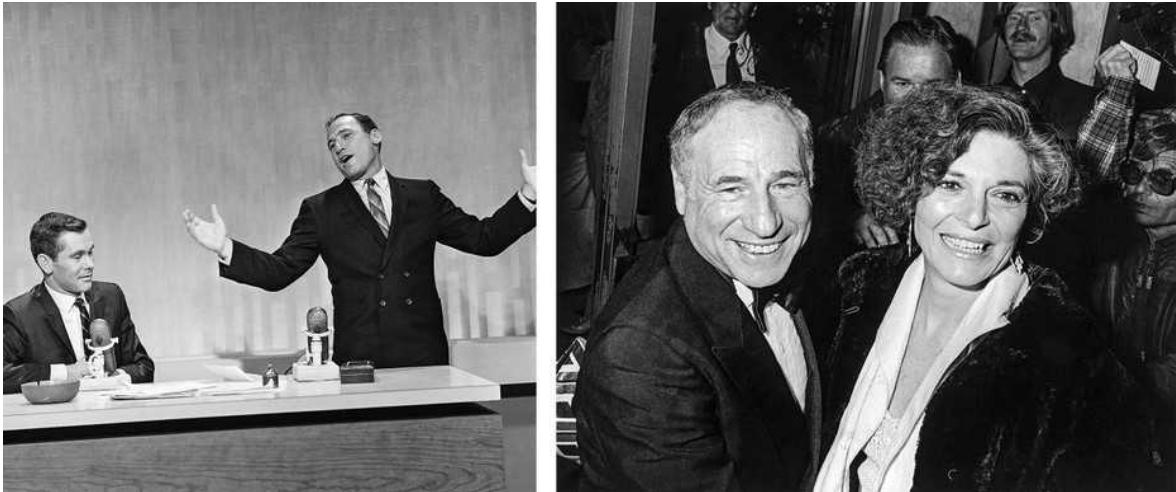
**Brooks:** When you're a kid, you don't really understand totalitarianism. You don't know what it's all about, and why they're shooting. You really don't understand: *Why war?* When I found out what Hitler was doing with Jews, that was enough to drive me crazy. I don't know whether I would fight in any other war, but I was gung ho.

**Apatow:** Were you funny as a result of being around other funny people or as a result of no one being funny?

**Brooks:** That's a good question. I don't know. I have no idea. I think other people.

**Apatow:** You were on the very first *Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson, with Groucho Marx.

**Brooks:** Johnny Carson was the best. On other shows, they'd fight for the spotlight or they'd fight for the laugh. Johnny Carson never, never fought for the laugh. And he could get plenty. He was good at it. However, if you hit him in the right spot, he'd leave his chair and be down under his desk. Holding his belly, you know? Quite often, I got him down on the ground.



*Left:* Brooks performs on the first-ever broadcast of *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson*, October 1962. *Right:* Brooks and Anne Bancroft, his wife of 41 years, in the 1990s. (NBCU Photo Bank / NBCUniversal / Getty; Vinnie Zuffante / Michael Ochs Archives / Getty)

**Apatow:** But the tape from that [very first episode is lost to time.](#)

**Brooks:** I think they needed the tape.

**Apatow:** They were like, *We got to erase this so we can tape another one!* How funny was Groucho? Was he genuinely hilarious? Or was it people writing for him?

**Brooks:** He was funny. His choice of what to say was sometimes so bizarre, so different. When we hung around with Groucho, he was Julius; he was not Groucho. For some reason, he was triggered to cap a story with a comment that was funnier than what you were doing.

**Apatow:** He would top everybody.

**Brooks:** He would top it. He was a topper.

**Apatow:** There were different cliques of comics. The Hillcrest group, like Jack Benny and all those guys. Then your group was Dom DeLuise and Gene Wilder. It almost seems like Dom was your Chris Farley—anything for a laugh. The second he walked in, you were so happy, and you'd laugh your ass off, and he would want you to laugh your ass off.

**Brooks:** Right. Exactly, exactly. He loved being funny. He loved making comedy. And yeah. We did that *yenem velt*.

**Apatow:** What's that?

**Brooks:** It's a Jewish word which means "otherworld," maybe "heavenly." *Yenem velt*. And it was Dom and his wife, Carol; and there was Norman Lear and Larry Gelbart. And once in a while Ron Clark. And of course, Carl Reiner and his wife, Estelle. You know, Carl wouldn't let us sleep. We'd go for a weekend at a house in Palm Springs. And we'd all say goodnight, you know, be in our pajamas and stuff. And then over the intercom you'd hear, "Oh, *yenem velt*! Oh, *yenem velt*!" That was Carl. "There is no *velt* like *yenem velt*!" *Otherworld*. It's like heaven.

**Apatow:** You've had amazing friends. Was that the blessing of your life?

**Brooks:** It was a blessing. I was so lucky to run into people who were so sweet. And Carl was my best friend, you know. He cared for you. You could feel his love. And he'd stop whatever he was doing. He was so generous with his time for you. Carl was a very different person.

**Apatow:** I lived with Adam Sandler right after college. So it's funny for us

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**Brooks:** He is so incredibly prolific. I can't get over the amount of good ideas and good jokes and good characters.

**Apatow:** When he wins awards, I think back to when I lived with Adam, like, *Why did we get into comedy?* And it really was you, and Rodney Dangerfield, but also the idea that you could write sometimes, be the director sometimes, or the producer. Your career was the model for so many of us.

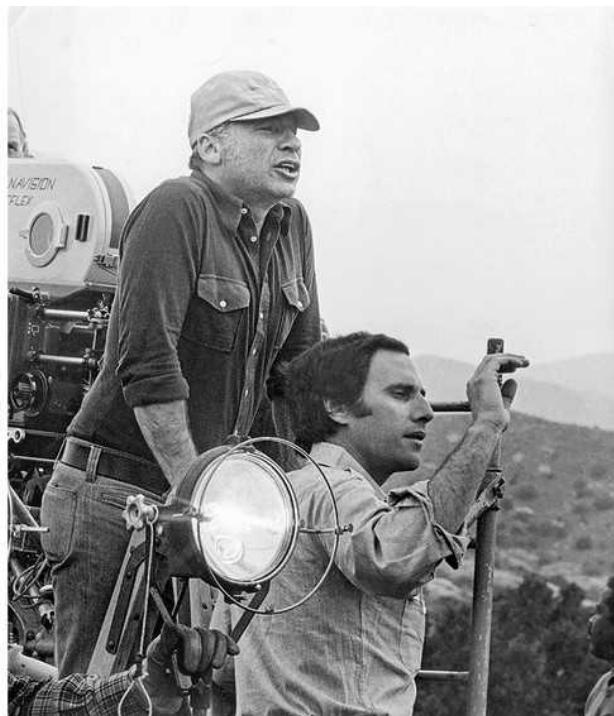
[Read: Mel Brooks: portrait of an artist as an old man](#)

**Brooks:** A multijob. I remember on the *Show of Shows*, we would write a sketch that was a little dangerous here and there, and they'd cut out the danger and they'd trim it. And I vowed that when I grew up, I'd be a director, so that I didn't have to give it to a director to spoil. It all became

about defending your initial thought, your initial concept. So I started being a writer. Then I defended the script by being a director. Then I defended the project by being the producer, so they wouldn't sell it or distribute it incorrectly.

**Apatow:** But that's stressful too, right? The fighting with the studios. Were you stressed as a businessman, just with the daily battles, or did you get a kick out of it?

**Brooks:** Mostly stressed.



*Left:* Brooks wrote, produced, directed, and starred in *History of the World, Part I* (1981). *Right:* Brooks and the producer Michael Hertzberg on the set of *Blazing Saddles* in 1974. (Everett Collection; Everett Collection)

**Apatow:** Is there a film experience that was your most fun one?

**Brooks:** I think I finally relaxed by making *Robin Hood*.

**Apatow:** And [Dave Chappelle](#) is in it.

**Brooks:** Yeah! From nowhere. I just liked this sweet kid. He came up during the filming; he said, “I’d like to do Malcolm X.” I said, “How?” And he went into this rant. I said, “Do it! Do it!” And he did it in the movie. It was great. Dave Chappelle. Wonderful, sweet guy. Great guy.

**Apatow:** Did you evolve as a person? What was the arc of your acquiring wisdom, the big lessons you had to learn along the way?

**Brooks:** You just can’t spout at the mouth. There is a thing called manners, which is very hard to understand why they invented this thing that held you back. It held me back. You can’t live a real life if you’re just a bunch of firecrackers going off. You got to play ball with the universe. So I settled down. I learned that from my oldest brother, Irving. Irving, Lenny, Bernie, and me. And Irving was the wisest. We lost our father when I was 2 and Irving was 10. So Irving took on that duty of raising me. He was the guy in my life. He explained math to me, which was just a jungle of insanity. To this day, I don’t know why we need it.

**Apatow:** For counting money.

**Brooks:** Yeah, yeah. Get somebody who loves it; let him do the math. It’s called an accountant. But Irving—we all ate dinner together. So Irving would say, “Shut up,” or “Pay attention,” or “Pass the potatoes.” He was our intelligence, our regulator. And I think Irving really was a great influence in my life, to tame me.

**Apatow:** Were you just obnoxious, or high-strung?

**Brooks:** Obnoxious and unthinking. And he made me an aware human being. I was not aware until Irving taught me.

**Apatow:** And what did Anne [Bancroft, his wife of 41 years, who died in 2005] have to teach you?

**Brooks:** Anne was one of the wisest people I ever met. And she gave me the best advice, always gave me the best advice. When *The New York Times* gave me a terrible review of my first movie, *The Producers* (Renata Adler—thank you, Renata! It was just a terrible review), I said, “Okay, they don’t

like me in movies. They liked me in television. I'm going back to television." Anne said, "No, you're not. It's a remarkable movie. It shows how talented you are. You're gonna stay in movies, and you're gonna make more movies." And she'd be there, you know? She was just lovely and wise.

**Apatow:** Didn't you win an Oscar for *The Producers*?

**Brooks:** Yeah, for writing.

**Apatow:** So Renata immediately was proved incorrect. Didn't you beat Stanley Kubrick for *2001*? [Ed. note: *He did.*]

**Brooks:** I sent a letter to Renata Adler a few times. I said, "Wrong! You were wrong!"

**Apatow:** Did she respond?

**Brooks:** No, I never got a response.

**Apatow:** Isn't it funny how mad those reviews can make you when you're young, and you don't realize that they don't matter as much as you thought they did?

**Brooks:** I always said the critics were very good to me after the movie they knocked. They'd kill something like *Blazing Saddles*. And then when they reviewed *High Anxiety*, they'd say, "What happened to the genius that gave us *Blazing Saddles*?" And then later they'd say, "This is no *High Anxiety*."

**Apatow:** People now are like, "Can you even show *Blazing Saddles*?" Fifty years later. It's like, "Oh, is that too far?" For something that is also so beloved. I mean, it's dangerous not to have that type of satire in society.

**Brooks:** The comedian has always been the court jester. He's always, *You got it wrong, your majesty; you got that one wrong*. He's got to whisper in the king's ear when the king gets off on the wrong track. We have a good job to do.

**Apatow:** When did you realize that part of what you'd like to do with some of your comedy was to be shocking? That you were going further than

everybody else?

**Brooks:** That's a good question, because I didn't know I was being shocking. I just thought I'd get a big laugh here. The purpose was not to be shocking. The purpose was in the surprise, which, of course I'd get a bigger laugh. It was always to get the biggest laugh. Never to make a political point —I was never making any points. I was always: Surprise them! You know, surprise them and get a big laugh.



Mel Brooks in the late 1960s (TCD / Prod.DB / Alamy)

**Apatow:** But unconsciously you have a morality that defines your comedy style. Because it's everywhere—about human nature and the way people are cruel to each other, and the mocking of hurtful people.

**Brooks:** Sometimes I get angry at something and say, *Don't you know that what you did was bad? Here, I'm going to show you. I'll just put you on skates.* So: Hitler on ice! When I did “The Inquisition” [the song in *History of the World, Part I*], I think underneath it the engine was to say, *Hey, look what they did to Jews*. But as long as you were laughing, it was okay.

**Apatow:** Because Carl Reiner said that one of the keys to understanding you is that you like to push the joke all the way to abstraction. What do you think he meant by that?

**Brooks:** That the joke should have more than one meaning than just the joke. Information. You went all the way from comedy to information.

**Apatow:** Are you very religious? I'm seen as a Jewish comedy person. But I'm not very religious.

**Brooks:** No.

**Apatow:** And was your family not religious? I mean, my family wasn't either.

**Brooks:** Well, my family wasn't religious, because we were pretty poor and my mother had to raise four boys with no husband.

**Apatow:** No time for religion.

**Brooks:** If she wanted to go to synagogue on a High Holy Day, they were charging a dollar to get in and sit down. And she had four children—that was five bucks. She simply couldn't afford it. So, not that she wasn't religious; she just couldn't.

**Apatow:** Did you ever feel pulled into it later in life?

**Brooks:** Never.

**Apatow:** Where did your philosophy or your spirituality land?

**Brooks:** To this day, I haven't worked it out. I'm not sure. I say, “Well, if there is a God, I'm pretty sure he's Jewish.” But I didn't think religion

would save me. If there is a God, he probably has sent me some warnings that I didn't heed.

**Apatow:** Harold Ramis used to say that he didn't believe in God at all, which made life very simple: "If I don't believe in God, then in every moment, I get to decide if I'm a good person or a bad person. And I've just decided to be a good person. I'd rather do that. And that's all it is. If it's up to me, I'd rather be a good guy."

**Brooks:** That's great. I like that. I like that a lot.

**Apatow:** Because some people spend their whole life searching for answers. But that wasn't your thing.

**Brooks:** No.

**Apatow:** Do you think it was replaced by creativity or comedy? Or did you not even feel it as something that needed to be filled?

**Brooks:** I say praying is good, but penicillin is better.

**Apatow:** You were always a big reader, right?

**Brooks:** Well, when I was just a kid writer—I'll never forget—Mel Tolkin, the head writer of the *Show of Shows*, when I worked with him, he said, "Even though you're an animal from Brooklyn, I think you have the beginnings of a mind." So he said, "I'm gonna help you; you know, you're a natural comedy writer, but you should read what comedy is and maybe you'll get an idea of what path to take." And he gave me *Dead Souls* to read. Nikolai Gogol. It's a brilliant idea and great writing. And then later I read Ilya Ilf and Yevgeny Petrov, who wrote *The Twelve Chairs*. I love *The Twelve Chairs*. I made it into a movie.

**Apatow:** How did reading those novels change how you were writing, and your creativity?

**Brooks:** Immensely. They were serious until there was some insane twist at the end, and you say, "Gee, this guy. He really takes his time!" He waits, he sucks you in, and you believe him, and you're almost in tears, and suddenly

you're laughing. I said, "This guy knows how to do it!" So I read a lot of Gogol and a lot of other comedy writers.

**Apatow:** Chekhov?

**Brooks:** Yeah, well, Chekhov wasn't that funny. But reading was another education.

**Apatow:** About the absurdity of life.

**Brooks:** Exactly. So Tolkin was responsible for my leaving the comedy of "I just flew in from Chicago. And boy, are my arms tired." I checked out of that kind of comedy for something more real and more human.



Brooks and Gene Wilder in *Young Frankenstein* in 1974 (20th Century Fox / Album / Alamy)

**Apatow:** So he was the mentor of that.

**Brooks:** Yeah. And Sid was that kind of comedian. He loved real-life comedy, not jokes.

**Apatow:** A lot of comedians are depressed or tortured. Sid Caesar had his struggles with alcohol. Did you see that?

**Brooks:** Absolutely. When he finished the show on Saturday night, we would go to a kind of nightclub slash restaurant, like Al & Dick's. Anyway, he took with him a bottle of vodka and finished that bottle. He needed the relief—the relief and release. And then on Sunday, sometimes I'd visit him just as a friend, not as a writer. And he'd been in the shower for an hour just letting the water run on his head. It was amazing.

I'll tell you a great story about me and Sid Caesar. I asked to have dinner with Sid, alone. Me and Sid. No other writers. I said, "Sid, you're genuinely funny. You make funny faces. You can make funny voices. You can imitate a pinball machine. Nobody else can. You're a pinball machine! You're perfect." I said, "*Your Show of Shows*. You do it on Saturday, and you really knock yourself out. It's brilliant. It's funny. It's hysterically fun. Sunday morning? It's forgotten. Monday, Tuesday come around. Forgotten. We're writing a new one. There's no memory of the show. There's no history." I said, "Movies! A bad Buster Keaton movie, 65 years later, is still around, because we can go see it. And we remembered it when we were kids. You make one movie a year, and you're immortal." And I said, "I've decided I'm gonna go into movies."

And so a week goes by and he says, "I'm thinking!" I'd pass him in the hall. "I'm thinking!" Finally, he calls me and says, "I want to have dinner with you." So he sits down and he says, "I think you're right. But I couldn't resist. Because when I told Max Liebman" (our producer), "he told Pat Weaver" (who conceived of the *Today* show). Brilliant guy, Pat Weaver. "And Pat Weaver took it to David Sarnoff" (who ran RCA and founded NBC), "and they got excited."

And so when it got to Sarnoff, they had a board meeting! Big shots. Sid was making something like \$5,000 a show, which was a lot of money in 1952 or 1953; \$5,000 a show, every Saturday night. So Max called him in, and Pat Weaver was there. And they had a meeting, and he was offered a three-year

contract for \$25,000 a show. He said, “I didn’t have to think about it twice. That’s a million dollars this season. I just couldn’t say no. I didn’t know how to say no to that.” So he said, “After our contract is over, we’ll go into movies.” I said, “It may be too late.” And that was it.

**Apatow:** It’s true that people should remember Sid Caesar more.

**Brooks:** My finest hour was writing for Sid Caesar as a young comedy writer. The kids today say, “Who?” How could you say “Who?”

**Apatow:** You were so forward-thinking about that, because in today’s media landscape, one of the big issues is there’s too much stuff, and it disappears really fast. So to have planted your flag with all these movies—you know, *Blazing Saddles* is like *The Wizard of Oz*.

**Brooks:** So it’s still true that movies are forever.

**Apatow:** I always remember seeing *Young Frankenstein* here in Santa Monica. The biggest laughs I’ve ever heard. *There’s Something About Mary*, *Airplane!*, and *Young Frankenstein*—and *Young Frankenstein* clearly had the most. The place was just losing their minds. But I was surprised at the jokes’ success rates. Because how we do it today is so different than how you did it. We improvise our brains out. If a joke doesn’t work, we have 10 other jokes in the footage. But you’re just believing in your scripts. You don’t have eight other “Oh, Gene riffed a whole nother version of this.” It’s pretty incredible. Do you notice a difference—like when you were working with Nick Kroll [on *History of the World, Part II*, released in March], did you go, *Damn, Nick’s as funny as some of those guys?*

**Brooks:** Well, you know—funny is funny. They were great. It’s just a pleasure. Sometimes I could still make them laugh, which is a thrill for me. I had an idea about General Robert E. Lee at the surrender at Appomattox. I said, “He’s the only guy really dressed up. He was always very snappy, and he wore his sword. He always wears his sword to the meeting, you know? And every time he turned around, he hit somebody in the balls with it.” They loved that. It’s in the show.

**Apatow:** We all know the writers' rooms where people will say anything to make the room laugh.

**Brooks:** Yeah.

**Apatow:** But now people go, "Will I get in trouble?"

**Brooks:** Nothing is off the table. Nothing. It's not for us to censor ourselves. There are plenty of censors around, you know?

**Apatow:** Could you sense your influence on them, in how they wrote jokes?

**Brooks:** I don't know. I'm not sure about that. Sometimes comedy's a mystery. The why and how.

**Apatow:** Isn't it weird? You just never know. Every joke is an experiment that could succeed or fail spectacularly.

**Brooks:** Exactly, exactly. You never know. But there is one rule: You don't go further if it didn't make you laugh. You personally have to break up and laugh, or the idea is off the board.



Brooks, Apatow, and Carl Reiner in 2013 (Courtesy of Judd Apatow)

**Apatow:** I remember I once saw you talking about how you don't like to type. That had a big influence on me. I tried to write longhand, but I didn't like that. So I started doing more dictation. I don't even like the idea of typing, because I feel like it slows down my mind that I'm doing this mechanical thing.

**Brooks:** It seemed to me that anytime it was typed, it was finished.

**Apatow:** No matter how bad it was.

**Brooks:** Because I couldn't type, and I would write in longhand. And then some secretary would type, and I'd say, "Whoa, looks good." The look of it was good. That's why typed is dangerous.

**Apatow:** Do you noodle around with creative things now?

**Brooks:** Once in a while. I never know when it's gonna strike me, you know? I think of something and it's a mystery where it comes from, and how it proceeds in your mind, to how it gets organized into a sketch or into a play.

**Apatow:** People always say that the key to aging is being engaged and social and having friends—that it's more important than even quitting smoking, that you have a passion.

**Brooks:** Some people are—there's a reason why they last. Because they've got a good mind that grabs something and uses it. I remember sitting at the table at NBC. A couple of us were sitting there, and George Burns was sitting opposite me. I had tuna fish. And Jack Benny was a guest star on, maybe it was on Carson or something. But anyway, he walked past our table. And he was dressed as an Indian chief with moccasins, feathers, and everything. And George Burns looked up and said, "Hi, Jack. Working?" Just, I mean, gifted. The turn of mind that seized on something and nailed it.

**Apatow:** Sometimes an idea comes and it's so out of the blue that it makes you go, *There must be something going on, because it's just weird that that arrived in some way*. That's the only time I ever think that there might be a God.

**Brooks:** Strange emanations from where and how.

**Apatow:** Bob Dylan used to say the whole song just came. You were around in that scene in the '60s, though. Would you go to see Lenny Bruce?

**Brooks:** Absolutely. Lenny Bruce had a tremendous—what a mind. For instance, I'll never forget, in one of his shows, he said out of the blue, "What if Jesus was electrocuted?" Just that one sentence. I really shrieked. What a mind.

**Apatow:** Would we all be wearing little electric chairs?

**Brooks:** You're right! He said, "At the top of every tall building, there'd be an electric chair. And we'd wear little electric chairs around our neck." I mean, it was amazing.

**Apatow:** It really felt like no one else was doing this.

**Brooks:** In five minutes, he really just busted up all my thinking.

**Apatow:** Was it shocking?

**Brooks:** Yeah. No one talked like that before. I said, “That’s the opposite of ‘I just flew in from Chicago. And boy, are my arms tired.’”

**Apatow:** Your body of work is so enormous. How do you look at it now?

**Brooks:** I don’t look back at it. I simply don’t. I just know that we did a lot of good things.

**Apatow:** Well, there’s a quote from you where you said, “We should enjoy life; we should not *future* ourselves so much. We should *now* ourselves more.”

**Brooks:** Yeah.

**Apatow:** Has that always been your philosophy?

**Brooks:** No, I just made that up at the moment.

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# A Star Reporter's Break With Reality

**<span>Lara Logan was once a respected </span><em>60 Minutes</em><span> correspondent. Now she trades in conspiracy theories that even far-right media disavow. What happened?</span>**

by Elaina Plott Calabro



*This article was featured in One Story to Read Today, a newsletter in which our editors recommend a single must-read from The Atlantic, Monday through Friday. [Sign up for it here.](#)*

The footage is shown before she takes the stage: Lara Logan in a headscarf, addressing the camera from the streets of Mogadishu. Logan ducking for

cover as bullets crack overhead in Afghanistan. Logan interrogating a trophy hunter in Texas. Logan walking with Christine Lagarde, Justin Trudeau, Mark Wahlberg, Jane Goodall.

It is a tour through Logan's past life as a journalist for CBS's *60 Minutes*, a glimpse at the various exchanges and explosions that earned her the awards and a "prominent spot," as her former network once put it, "among the world's best foreign correspondents." Then, three minutes and one second later, it is over. Cut to right now, February 27, 2023, in Fredericksburg, Texas: Logan looking out at 200 people gathered in a creaking church auditorium for the inaugural meeting of the Gillespie County chapter of Moms for Liberty.

"If you want to know why it's called social media," Logan says, "I'll tell you why: Because Karl Marx was hired by Henry Rothschild, by the Rothschild family, to develop a system of social control. So when you see *social*, it is a form of control—that's all it is. Social media is a form of controlling us all."

She goes on, picking up on the title of a recent book by a friend of hers, retired General Michael Flynn, the former national security adviser and a far-right conspiracy theorist: "So what does *fifth-generation warfare* really mean?" It means that "you're meant to believe the narrative, regardless of the truth."

For the next 45 minutes, Logan, wearing a floral wrap dress and a cream-colored cardigan, lays out what she sees as the true narrative: for instance, that by aiding Ukraine, America is arming Nazis; that the events of January 6 were not an insurrection at all. Turning to *The New York Times* to understand this moment, Logan warns, is "like being in the battle of Normandy, on the beaches of Normandy, Dunkirk, and going on your knees every day and crawling over to the Nazi lines and asking them to please write nice things about your side in German propaganda." Her dress is decorated with two identical navy-blue stickers reading STOP WOKE INDOCTRINATION.

In October, during an appearance on Newsmax, Logan declared that the global elite "want us eating insects" while they "dine on the blood of children."

As Logan talks, her words at times eliciting applause, the final frame of the introductory footage hovers ghostlike in the background. Logan's success at events like this—she now features at many—turns on her ability to shrink the distance between her past and present selves. She needs the people in this auditorium to believe that the woman on the projector screen is the same one who now anticipates their fears of woke indoctrination. She needs them to trust that when she talks about subjects like the “little puppet” Volodymyr Zelensky, or how COVID vaccines are a form of “genocide by government,” or how President Joe Biden’s administration has been “participating in the trafficking of kids,” it is with the precise rigor and dispassion she once displayed on the front lines of America’s wars.

Logan, who is 52, is still, after all, a war correspondent. That is how she sees it. The fighting may not be in Afghanistan or Iraq, and she may not be winning Emmys for her coverage anymore, but in her mind this is her most crucial assignment yet, uncovering this “war against humanity.” And she must be getting close to the real story, because the American media have tried to silence her from all sides.

First CBS, and then Fox News. Not even the far-right Newsmax wants journalists who risk piercing the narrative. In October, during an appearance on that network, Logan declared that “the open border is Satan’s way of taking control of the world” and that the global elite “want us eating insects” while they “dine on the blood of children.” [Newsmax condemned her remarks](#) and announced that it had no plans to invite Logan on its shows again.

Logan’s life has been rife with personal trauma, some of it well known. In 2011, she was gang-raped in Cairo’s Tahrir Square. In 2012, she was diagnosed with breast cancer. In 2013, a story she reported for *60 Minutes* was publicly disavowed. I went to Fredericksburg, where Logan now lives, on that February evening because I wanted to know what had happened in the decade since. I wanted to understand how, after years of association with the *tick-tick-tick* of *60 Minutes*, she had slipped into a world bracketed by MyPillow discount codes and LaraLoganGold.com. How a career built on pursuing the truth had become so unmoored from it.

When I had contacted Logan about an interview, her response, via text message, was: “Unfortunately I have no doubt this is another hit piece desperately seeking to discredit several decades of award-winning work at 60 Minutes, CBS, ABC, NBC and beyond and you are only seeking my voice to add legitimacy to the anonymous cowards you will use to attack me once again. Feel free to use this statement if you are sincere.” She then shared a screenshot of our exchange with her 530,000 Twitter followers.

And so I braced for an unpleasant encounter when I approached Logan at the end of the night, after the long line of grandmothers and mothers and teenage girls who wanted a photo with her had finally dwindled. I introduced myself and said that I had seen probably every story she had ever done for *60 Minutes*. “But here you’ve come,” she said. “Here you’ve come to destroy it all.”

She has been described in terms of hazardous weather. A tornado whipped through Midtown Manhattan and there suddenly was Lara Logan, June 2008, striding high-heeled from the wings of *The Daily Show*. “She is the chief foreign correspondent for CBS News,” Jon Stewart announced, the studio audience cheering as he shook Logan’s hand and guided her to center stage. “You remind me of a young Ted Koppel,” he said.

Logan tilted her head back and laughed. “Dan Rather used to say that about me!”

Logan had begun her career as a full-time journalist 16 years earlier, fresh out of college and with a résumé consisting of two part-time newspaper gigs in her hometown of Durban, South Africa, along with a bit of swimsuit modeling. In her first days covering the post-apartheid landscape as a producer at Reuters Television in Johannesburg, Logan, then in her early 20s, had not exactly reminded anyone of a young Ted Koppel. “The word *bimbo* came up a lot,” one of Logan’s former Reuters colleagues told me. But opinions began to shift once fellow journalists saw her in the field. “It was a very, very intense time … She’s a fucking hard worker, and she takes risks,” the former colleague said. “She had incredible guts.” (This person, like most of the nearly three dozen other onetime colleagues or friends of Logan’s I interviewed, requested anonymity in order to speak candidly.)

By 30, Logan was a correspondent for the British morning show *GMTV*. She was working out of London on 9/11, and within days she was pleading with an embassy clerk for a fast-track visa to Afghanistan. At first, *GMTV* management seemed unsure what to make of it, this young woman apparently desperate to embed herself in al-Qaeda territory. Where would she sleep? What about a driver, security? She'd figure it out. She was en route to Kabul shortly after the first American air strikes that October.

It didn't take long for Logan's superiors to recognize the opportunity before them, the potential for their coverage of the biggest story on Earth to become an event unto itself. This was not just because Logan was a woman but because she was attractive. It is prudent to address this now, because the fact of Logan's attractiveness would soon become unavoidable, the gathering resonance of her journalism inextricable from the public's gathering interest in her appearance.

Logan had been in Kabul less than a month when her Independent Television News competitor Julian Manyon suggested in a *Spectator* essay that the "delectable" correspondent's swift infiltration of Bagram Airfield and the upper ranks of the Northern Alliance was due to her "considerable physical charms." Logan, he wrote, "exploits her God-given advantages with a skill that Mata Hari might envy." Responding in a short dispatch for *The Guardian*, Logan parried adroitly. "If General Babajan smiles around me, perhaps it is because I offer him respect and attempt, at least, to talk to him in a non-demanding manner," she wrote. "It's not rocket science."

The British tabloids, delighted to have located the sex in jihad so quickly, scrambled to build on the story. In the course of interviewing Logan's mother at her home in Durban, a reporter got access to the swimsuit photos for which Logan had posed to earn extra cash while in high school and university. The photos soon appeared on the front pages of the *Daily Record* and *The Mirror*. At first Logan was furious, embarrassed. But then she decided to lean in, to fashion herself as the rare emblem of both harrowing journalism and unabashed femininity. The tip for the next *Mirror* splash ("Here's a sight that would stop the Taliban in its tracks. War reporter Lara Logan relaxes on a deck chair in a sizzling swimsuit") reportedly came from Logan herself. "She was the first field correspondent I ever met who sort of

understood her brand, which was a really new thing at the time,” a producer at a rival network told me.

As her profile grew, Logan charmed feature writers with her willingness to talk, to play ball when they asked her about things as personal as the last time she’d had a “good snog.” She argued that not using her looks would be malpractice. “There isn’t a journalist alive who won’t admit to you they use every advantage they have,” she told *The New York Times*.



More fundamental to Logan's success in Afghanistan, however, was the simple fact that she showed up when others didn't. In addition to her *GMTV* job, Logan worked as a stringer for CBS News Radio, and just a few weeks after arriving in Kabul, she found herself the only CBS-affiliated reporter on

hand to cover the Taliban's rapid unraveling. The network aired her prime-time debut from the capital.

This was when Dan Rather saw a young Ted Koppel. An [article in \*Vogue\*](#) described Rather as the first to urge CBS to hire Logan full-time. He marveled at her ability to "get through the glass," as he told the magazine. "The good ones," he said, "always want the worst assignments." By spring 2002, Logan had a \$1 million contract with the network.

Her new colleagues understood the appeal. "She knows how to position herself, she knows how to relate to the camera—she's incredibly good at that," Philip Ittner, a former CBS producer who worked with Logan, told me. "She was also very good under fire. Even in a very bad firefight or something, after an IED exploded, she would get in front of the camera, and she'd be able to deliver."

But then there was the tornado of it all. "She likes to stir stuff up, unconsciously," the former Reuters colleague told me. "Wherever she goes, there's a lot of kinetic energy that's not necessarily net positive."

Logan grew up one of three children in a well-off white family in apartheid South Africa. She enjoyed snacks prepared by housekeepers and a swimming pool in the backyard and the tacit belief that her parents had only ever existed, and indeed would only ever exist, in relation to each other. And then one morning when she was 8, her father pulled into the driveway and Logan raced out to greet him and there in the car was a 5-year-old girl she had never seen before. Say hello to your sister, her father said. He was leaving to be with this other daughter and her mother.

In 2005, *The New York Times* christened her the "War Zone 'It Girl"'; in 2006, CBS elevated her to chief foreign correspondent.

"It was such a shock, such a traumatic experience," Logan later recalled. After the divorce, she watched her mother struggle to reassemble the pieces of her life. Yolanda Logan moved her young children into a small apartment and found work as a sales representative at a glass company, never remarrying. "I learned about betrayal and dishonesty," Logan told the *Sunday Mirror* soon after returning to London from Kabul. "When I looked

at Mum, I saw a woman who thought she was secure and safe in her marriage suddenly alone.”

That was how Logan explained it when the *Mirror* reporter asked why she was so willing to pitch herself into danger as a journalist. “I’m afraid of being seen as vulnerable,” she said. “All my life, I’ve been fighting to prove that I’m not weak.”

She refused orders from CBS to keep out of Iraq during the American invasion in 2003, hiring local fixers to sneak her across the Jordanian border. On the drive into Baghdad, she played Van Morrison. With virtually every other American television broadcaster evacuated from the city, “shock and awe” was hers. One of Logan’s early segments for the relatively short-lived Wednesday edition of *60 Minutes* showed a Humvee she was in flip over when it hit a land mine; in a Sunday segment, viewers saw Logan defy a vehicle commander’s orders to stay put as he went to inspect an unexploded bomb. In 2005, the [\*Times\* christened her the “War Zone ‘It Girl’”](#); in 2006, CBS elevated her to chief foreign correspondent.

Whether Logan was daring or heedless depended on whom you asked—and, as is typical in the environs of television news, a great many of her colleagues enjoyed being asked. Some felt that Logan showed undue deference to the military line; others groused about what they saw as stubbornness and self-absorption. Still others watched Logan peer down at an unexploded bomb and saw not bravery as much as recklessness. At a certain point, “a lot of people refused to produce her,” one of her former producers told me.

If, for Logan, this was not cause for introspection, it was perhaps because her approach was winning a lot of awards. (In her first six years at CBS, she picked up Gracie Awards and Murrow Awards and an Emmy.) And if, for Logan, the *New York Post* article headlined “Sexty Minutes” had not been cause for alarm, it was perhaps because Jeff Fager, then the executive producer of *60 Minutes*, had hung a framed copy of the article in his office. “It’s hard to judge what Lara Logan is going to be in 10 years,” Fager told *Broadcasting & Cable* magazine in the fall of 2008. “But boy, she’s made a mark in a short period of time.”

And yet, for as long as Logan had craved precisely this level of success, she also seemed uncomfortable with having actually attained it—as if to accept life as it presented itself to her, the way her mother once had, risked revealing it to be a trick of the light. She spoke sometimes of unspecified plans to derail her career. “I’m sure people are interested in seeing me fail,” she said shortly after joining CBS. She detected threats where no threats were intended. In 2006, when reviewing Katie Couric’s premiere as the first solo female anchor on a major-network evening news show, the *Times* pronounced that “the woman who stood out the most” was not Couric herself, but rather the “experienced and unusually pretty” CBS war correspondent. The unwanted comparison with her senior colleague seemed only to reinforce Logan’s inchoate sense of being conspired against. “I always think it is some kind of secret plot to destroy me,” she told *Vogue* in 2007. “I mean, to disparage the anchor at my expense?”

This dim, diffuse paranoia would sharpen, according to some colleagues, after the start of Logan’s relationship with the man who is now her husband, Joe Burkett.

Logan was married for the first time in 1998—to Jason Siemon, an American who played professional basketball in the United Kingdom. She met Joseph Washington Burkett IV, a Texas native and an Army sergeant who was also married, a few years later, while reporting in Kabul. Early 2008 found them working again in the same city, this time Baghdad. Logan was now in the final stages of a divorce and Burkett was newly estranged from his wife. He quickly became a regular presence in the press compound outside the Green Zone.

It was not clear to Logan’s colleagues what Burkett did for a living, and Burkett seemed to prefer it that way. He cultivated an air of secrecy, dropping hints that he was involved in clandestine operations. Logan seemed drawn in by the mystery of Burkett and his “very secretive job,” as she once called it. It was a while before Logan’s colleagues learned that Burkett had been in Baghdad on behalf of the Lincoln Group, a now-defunct firm quietly contracted by the Pentagon to disseminate pro-America propaganda in Iraqi newspapers. But they needed only a few conversations to register his penchant for conspiracy theories.

As Logan's relationship with Burkett progressed, some of her colleagues noticed slight shifts in her story ideas. "As much as she would occasionally come up with loony tunes stuff on her own, it would always be more of, like, 'Hey, let's go right into the most dangerous part of' whatever environment they were currently covering," Philip Ittner told me. "But when Burkett came on the scene, it was like—and this is a hypothetical—'Clearly the CIA is bringing in hallucinogens to put into the water supply of Baghdad; we really need to dig into this.'" (Logan declined to answer questions about herself, her husband, or other topics related to this article. In response to a list of factual queries and requests for comment that *The Atlantic* sent her, Logan wrote, "You are a hundred percent wrong on everything.")

Logan and Burkett were wed in November 2008; Logan was seven months pregnant with their first child. They began married life in a house they bought in the Cleveland Park neighborhood of Washington, D.C.

On the evening of February 11, 2011, at the height of the Arab Spring, Logan threaded through the congested streets of Cairo. She, her cameraman, her security guard, and her producer had come straight from the airport, as she later recounted on *60 Minutes*, having landed just moments after President Hosni Mubarak announced his resignation. "It was like unleashing a champagne cork on Egypt," she recalled.

Logan's agent, Carole Cooper, had advised against the trip; only a week earlier, Logan and her crew had been detained overnight by Egyptian officials targeting journalists. But now, in Tahrir Square, thousands of people were singing, chanting, unfurling flags. For more than an hour she reported from the crowd, people smiling and waving at the camera. Then the camera's battery went dead. The light illuminating Logan and the people around her was suddenly gone. A few moments later, Logan felt hands on her body. She thought that if she screamed loud enough, the assault would stop, but it didn't.

[Read: Brutal assault on CBS's Lara Logan in Egypt shows risks to female reporters](#)

The mob tore off her clothes. For a few minutes she managed to hold on to her security guard's arm, but then, like everyone else in her crew, he was

beaten back. This was when Logan thought she was going to die. Later she would recall for *Newsweek* how the men raped her with their hands, with sticks, with flagpoles. Onlookers took photos with their cellphones. The assault lasted at least 25 minutes before a group of Egyptian women intervened. They were able to cover Logan until soldiers managed to reach her and get her to her hotel, where she was seen by a doctor.

The next morning, Logan was on a flight home to her husband and two young children in Washington. She would spend four days in the hospital. People from all over the world sent flowers and letters. President Barack Obama called her to share his support. Logan's [eventual decision to talk openly about what happened](#) inspired other women in journalism to share their own stories of being sexually assaulted while on the job. After she spoke out, the Committee to Protect Journalists [launched a major effort](#) to survey the problem and stigma of sexual violence in the field.

Over time, the most obvious reminders of Logan's assault—the hand-shaped bruises all over her body—faded. For years afterward, however, [as she told the \*Toronto Star\*](#), Logan would continue to cope with internal injuries—severe pelvic pain, a hysterectomy that failed to heal. And there was the emotional damage. Logan talked about problems of intimacy with her husband, the dark memories that could sweep over her with a single touch.

A little over a year after the assault, Logan, at 41, was diagnosed with Stage 2 breast cancer; she underwent a lumpectomy and six weeks of radiation, then went into remission. It was during this period of her life, Logan would say, that she “wanted to come apart.” She felt herself in a situation where “nobody could see it and nobody could see me and nobody understood.” She began suffering panic attacks. She tried therapy.

### [Read: It's more dangerous than ever to be a female war reporter](#)

Through it all, Logan found refuge in her career. In April 2013, a little more than two years after the assault, *The Hollywood Reporter* [published a glowing feature](#) on executive producer Jeff Fager's *60 Minutes*. The article depicted Logan as a confident correspondent striding into a screening for her next story, settling in beside Fager as he prepared to mark up the script. His verdict: “Terrific.” She could always make it back to terrific.

Until, that is, she couldn't.

Not long after the *Hollywood Reporter* article, Simon & Schuster reached out to CBS with a pitch. A conservative imprint within the publishing company had a book coming out in the fall—*The Embassy House*—about Benghazi: the “real story,” as the prologue promised, of the deadly attack on the American compound and CIA annex in September 2012, as recounted by “the only man in a position to tell the full story.”

The man’s name was Dylan Davies, but he was writing under a pseudonym—for his safety, the book explained, and also because he had “no interest in seeking official recognition.”

Davies, a British-military veteran from Wales, was a security officer whose employer, Blue Mountain, had been hired by the State Department to help protect the Special Mission in Benghazi. In his book, he described how, on the night of the attack, he had scaled the compound’s 12-foot wall to try to save the Americans trapped inside, rifle-butting a terrorist in the process. He also said that he had seen Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens’s body at the hospital.

Logan and her producer, Max McClellan, agreed to consider *The Embassy House* for a feature on *60 Minutes*. The basics of Davies’s biography appeared to check out; email correspondence that Davies shared with Logan seemed to confirm, as he claimed, that he had been interviewed by officials from across the U.S. government, including the FBI, about everything he had seen and heard and done that night. Over the next few months, Logan and McClellan put together a Benghazi segment featuring Davies’s story as well as original reporting on the attack. After the screening of the finished product, CBS and *60 Minutes* leadership, including Fager, green-lighted the broadcast for air.

Some of Logan’s reporting broke significant ground. No journalist had yet substantiated, for example, the role of Abu Sufian bin Qumu, an Ansar al-Sharia leader and former Guantánamo Bay detainee, in the Benghazi attack; the [Obama administration did not publicly announce his involvement](#) until the next year. But the segment’s revelations were framed almost as

sideshows to the Rambo-esque account of Davies, whose view of the attack comprised the majority of the report's 15 and a half minutes.

Within days of the broadcast, his story began to unravel. [The Washington Post reported](#) that Davies had told his employer he wasn't at the compound that night—something *60 Minutes* had known but did not mention, accepting Davies's explanation that he had lied to his employer. A week later, [The New York Times revealed](#) that Davies had also told the FBI that he wasn't at the compound. Logan and McClellan knew that Davies had been interviewed by the FBI; they had not checked what he actually said. And when, after the *Times* report, they tried to reach Davies to demand answers, they couldn't find him—[The Daily Beast later reported](#) that he had emailed his publisher saying that because of a threat against his family, he was going dark.

I was recently able to reach Davies via email. He claimed without evidence that his son's life had been threatened by “the US state department (Clinton)” after the *60 Minutes* report. (A spokesperson for Hillary Clinton denied the allegation and noted that Clinton had stepped down as secretary of state several months before the Benghazi report aired.) When I pressed him on whether he had told the FBI and *60 Minutes* different versions of his story, he replied that he didn't “want anything to do with Benghazi” and asked what was wrong with me.

Media Matters, the liberal watchdog group founded by the Clinton ally David Brock, seized on the controversy immediately, publishing no fewer than 36 stories highlighting problems in Logan's reporting. Other outlets would point to a speech Logan had given a year earlier, in which she accused the Obama administration of perpetuating a “major lie” about the ongoing threat of al-Qaeda, as evidence of political bias.

On November 8, 2013, for the first time in her career, Logan went on air to announce the retraction of a story. “We were wrong,” she said. [Simon & Schuster withdrew \*The Embassy House\* from sale](#) later that day. For CBS, and Fager in particular, it was a colossal embarrassment—the program's “worst mistake on my 10-year watch,” he wrote in a 2017 book. Logan would later say that a nondisclosure agreement she and McClellan had signed with the publisher had prevented them from checking Davies's story with the FBI. It was an odd line of defense—Logan arguing that she had

given up the right to verify key points. [An internal CBS review concluded](#) that problems with Davies's account were "knowable before the piece aired." Logan and McClellan agreed to take indefinite leaves of absence. (CBS News declined to comment on the Benghazi report and its aftermath.)

Sitting in her home in Cleveland Park during the leave of absence, Logan took calls from colleagues and tried to make sense of things. For the first time in her career, she was losing control of the narrative.

Logan soon learned that Joe Hagan, a writer at *New York* magazine, was working on a profile of her. Hagan's article, titled "[Benghazi and the Bombshell](#)," was published in May 2014. Hagan attributed the Benghazi mistake to a "proverbial perfect storm" of factors, including Logan's reputed personal sympathies with the Republican line on the attack, and the "outsize power" she enjoyed at *60 Minutes* thanks to Fager.

Logan would later file a lawsuit against Hagan and *New York*—a suit quickly dismissed by a federal judge. The complaint alleged that prior to publication of the "Hagan Hit Piece," as Logan called it, Fager and CBS Chair Les Moonves had come up with a "specific and detailed plan" for her to return to *60 Minutes*. According to the lawsuit, after the article appeared Moonves felt that he and Fager had been painted as Logan's "lapdogs" and decided to shift course; Fager then informed her that she would return to the program in a "drastically altered role." When she went back to work in June, her relationship with him was, she claimed in the suit, "irreparably damaged." "She really felt hung out to dry," a person formerly close to Logan told me. (Neither Fager nor Moonves responded to requests for comment.)

For Logan, reckoning frankly with the circumstances in which she now found herself would have meant accepting her own responsibility for creating them—accepting, in other words, the unextraordinary truth of the human capacity for poor judgment. But in the fall of 2014, a movie came out that helped Logan rewrite her narrative.

Based on [a book by the journalist Nick Schou](#), *Kill the Messenger* tells the story of Gary Webb, a *San Jose Mercury News* journalist who, in 1996, published a blockbuster investigation that linked the CIA to America's crack-cocaine epidemic by way of its relationship with the Nicaraguan

contras. Although much of the reporting was solid, Webb's "Dark Alliance" series also had serious flaws; the *Mercury News* eventually determined that the series "did not meet our standards" in several ways. Webb resigned from the paper not long afterward. He died by suicide in 2004. In the movie's telling, the various news outlets that called Webb's work into question were motivated less by a desire to correct the record than by petty jealousies and a longtime deference to the CIA.

It's unclear whether Logan had ever heard of Webb before she saw the film. In many respects, their experiences were utterly unalike. Nevertheless, Logan seemed to cling to Webb as a kind of life raft, and would later invoke his name and story in interviews about her Benghazi report. (She also questioned whether Webb's death had truly been a suicide.) Logan ultimately decided that Media Matters, in an effort to discredit the "substance" of the Benghazi report—about security flaws at the compound—had worked in concert with various media outlets to silence her. The problem, as she now saw it, was not that she had put an unverified account on air. It was that her report had dared to criticize the Obama administration. To use Webb's own formulation—[one that Logan repeats to this day](#)—she had told a story "important enough to suppress."



In mid-2015, when Logan's contract was coming up for renewal, CBS offered, and Logan accepted, a part-time correspondent role on *60 Minutes*. Shortly after the contract was signed, she, her husband, and their children packed up their house in Washington and moved to Burkett's hometown of Fredericksburg, Texas.

For most of her professional life, Logan had not struck her peers as especially political—"very moderate," one former colleague called her. She now began to shape a new worldview, one steeped in antagonism toward the media establishment she felt betrayed by, and toward the figures and institutions she believed it served. It was a worldview that offered both absolution and purpose. And it was soon to find a partisan expression in Donald Trump.

On-screen, over the next two years, Logan seemed much the same journalist and person she'd always been. She continued to file stories from various countries for *60 Minutes*. Off-screen, however, she was becoming closer to people like Ed Butowsky, a Fox News regular and Texas-based financial

adviser of whom Logan was now a client. Butowsky would play a central role in the story of Seth Rich.

In July 2016, the murder of the Democratic National Committee staffer—in a botched robbery, police said—produced a torrent of right-wing conspiracy theories. Butowsky helped instigate an investigation that resulted in a Fox News story suggesting that Rich had been killed by Hillary Clinton associates in retaliation for supposedly leaking emails from the DNC to WikiLeaks. (Fox soon retracted the story and later settled a lawsuit brought by the Rich family. Butowsky settled a separate lawsuit brought against him by Rich’s brother.)

According to Facebook messages shared with *The Atlantic*, Logan, too, had been suspicious of the botched-robbery line, and saw in the episode another instance of the elite media providing cover for the left. In an April 2017 exchange with Trevor FitzGibbon, a left-wing public-relations strategist whose firm had represented WikiLeaks, Logan wrote that she did not know “for a fact” that Clinton’s associates were responsible for Rich’s murder. “But I would be stunned if it were not true.” No journalist had reported this, because “they”—presumably the Democrats—“own the media,” she wrote, and pointed to the fallout from her Benghazi report. “They saw me as a threat and went after me and the show.” A few months later, Joe Burkett attended a small gathering at Butowsky’s home at which, according to one attendee’s sworn deposition, the possibility of wiretapping Rich’s parents’ house was raised. (Butowsky has denied that this was ever discussed.)

Toward the end of 2018, CBS declined to renew Logan’s contract. She was likely not surprised. Logan later characterized her final four years at the network as isolating; executives who’d once supported her now treated her with “utter contempt.” (Fager and Moonves, as it happened, were both ousted at approximately the same time—Fager for [sending a threatening text message to a CBS News reporter](#) looking into #MeToo allegations against him and Moonves when [a dozen women said he had sexually harassed or assaulted them](#). Both denied the sexual-misconduct allegations.)

[Read: Les Moonves and the familiarity fallacy](#)

In interviews, a number of Logan's former colleagues expressed the belief that, in time, she would have been picked up by another network. Her *60 Minutes* segment in 2015 on Christians in Iraq had won a Murrow Award; in 2017, she and her team won an Emmy for their report on the battle for Mosul. But what Logan's messages with FitzGibbon seem to underscore is that, even if a continued career in mainstream media had been possible, she wasn't necessarily interested in pursuing one.

Logan was creating, in effect, a new brand for herself. She unveiled it in early 2019, sitting down for a three-and-a-half-hour [podcast interview](#) with the former Navy SEAL Mike Ritland, whom she had once interviewed for *60 Minutes*. Logan related the story of her life and offered a blistering critique of the mainstream media she had chosen to leave behind. In speaking out against what she saw as the media's liberal bias, Logan told Ritland, she was committing "professional suicide." She likened right-wing outlets such as *Breitbart News* and Fox to the "tiny little spot" where women are permitted to pray at Jerusalem's Western Wall, while "CBS, ABC, NBC, *Huffington Post*, *Politico*, whatever"—the "liberal" media—took up the rest of the space, reserved for men. The interview went viral, and Sean Hannity invited her on his show for a follow-up. "I hope my bosses at Fox find a place for you," the host told her.

By the start of 2020, Logan had a deal with Fox News's streaming service Fox Nation, for a series called *Lara Logan Has No Agenda*. Along with reported segments on subjects including illegal immigration and the dangerous advance of socialism in America, Logan would use her new role to build on her criticism of the media. One of Logan's former producers remembers calling her around this time. "I was like, 'You know, you're talking about me ... You're talking about all these people who've worked with you—we're part of some vast left-wing conspiracy? Like, seriously, you believe that?' And she was like, 'No, you don't understand ... You may not know you're complicit—but you're complicit.'"

As the months passed, Logan's comments became more extreme. Eventually some of her closest friends from her former life could no longer stomach a phone call with her, knowing it might turn into a stem-winder on the virtues of Michael Flynn, who had admitted to lying to the FBI about his contact with the Russian ambassador. When Trump supporters mobilized to deny the

results of the 2020 election, Logan was right there with them; she would work on a movie (financed by MyPillow's Mike Lindell) about alleged voter fraud. After the January 6 insurrection, she rallied behind the people who were charged with taking part in it.

All of which seemed to culminate in an appearance on Fox News—in November 2021, as the country battled COVID—during which Logan compared Anthony Fauci, then the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, to the Nazi doctor Josef Mengele. Fox stayed silent about the remarks but ultimately did not pursue a new season of Logan's streaming show.

It was the sort of moment that those few friends left over from her old life thought might finally force a reckoning. Even her newer allies struggled to defend the remarks. (“Anytime you bring up a Nazi in anything, you’re kind of going off the reservation,” Ed Butowsky told me.) But by that point, Logan had come to seem firmly of the mind that setbacks, criticism, or a reproach of any sort were only evidence that she was doing something right. Carole Cooper, her agent—who, according to people familiar with their long relationship, had been like a second mother to Logan—dropped her. Less than a year later, Newsmax, where Logan often appeared on the commentator Eric Bolling’s weeknight show, washed its hands of Logan, following her riff on the global blood-drinking elite.

Logan was undeterred. The stakes, as she had come to see them, were simply too high. This is what she tries to communicate to people at the various local speaking gigs that now constitute much of her career, events such as the Park Cities Republican Women Christmas fundraising lunch in Texas, which she keynoted last year. “We had to cut her off because she was going too long,” one member who helped arrange the lunch recalled. The message was: “The world is on fire” and “your kids are being exposed to cats being raped” and “elections are stolen” and “we’ve lost our country.” The woman added, “It’s a Christmas lunch, mind you.”

The truth is that I had been nervous about approaching Logan on that February evening in Texas. Two weeks earlier, she had suggested on Twitter that I was engaged in a broader “strategic hit job” involving an effort to frame her as a Mossad asset. I did not know how she would respond to my

presence at the Moms for Liberty event, which I paid \$10 to attend. After my initial exchange with Logan, her manner softened, though she would not speak with me on the record.

In the past several years, I have written about a number of public figures on the right who believe very few of the things they profess to believe, who talk in public about stolen elections and wink at the specter of global cabals, and then privately crack jokes about the people who applaud.

I don't think Logan is one of these figures. People who know her say the private person is also the public one. It was with sincere urgency that she recommended Flynn's *The Citizen's Guide to Fifth Generation Warfare* to her audience that evening. I Googled Flynn's book as I waited to approach Logan. It is advertised almost as a self-help guide, the promotional copy encouraging Americans and "freedom loving people everywhere" to buy the volume to "understand the manipulation happening around you" and "why you feel the way you do." "When I just saw General Michael Flynn," Logan had told the audience, "he said to me—opening words—'We've got maybe 18 months before we lose this country.'" She had nodded as many in the crowd vocalized their dismay. "This is not something you can pick and choose about whether you want to do." She declared, "I'm not going to surrender. Even if they throw me in a prison and execute me—'til my last breath, I'm going to be fighting."

In recent years, many Americans have embraced conspiracy theories as a way to give order and meaning to the world's chance cruelties. Lara Logan seems to have done the same, rewriting her story as a martyrdom epic in the war of narratives. Five years after Logan departed CBS, few tethers remain to the woman on the projector screen. Executives and journalists who were once her greatest advocates have long since stopped talking to her and would prefer not to talk about her, either. "Respectfully, I would like to pass speaking on this subject. Best wishes," Dan Rather wrote in a Twitter message when I reached out to him. Former friends who remember Logan as empathetic and generous now fear incurring the vitriol of a woman who frequently trashes critics and perceived enemies as "evil," "disgusting," "worthless." The only former colleague of hers who was willing to be quoted by name in this article agreed to do so out of a sense of duty. "She is spreading Kremlin propaganda," Philip Ittner told me. "And as somebody

who is here in Ukraine, trying to fight back against the Russian information warfare, I can't in good conscience just sit idly by." It may be that saying nobody owns you, as Logan so often does, helps dull the reality that very few people claim you.

But the people at the event in Fredericksburg did claim her. After the speech was over, Logan talked one-on-one with dozens of audience members who seemed anxious to learn more about why they felt the way they did. She lingered until the very last person left the auditorium.

I think she stayed for as long as she did that night because she believes she has seen the light and wanted the people in the auditorium to see it too. I think she also stayed because the people there represent some of the only community she has left.

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# The Fake Poor Bride

## Confessions of a wedding planner

by Xochitl Gonzalez



*This article was featured in One Story to Read Today, a newsletter in which our editors recommend a single must-read from The Atlantic, Monday through Friday. [Sign up for it here.](#)*

Sunday mornings, for wedding planners, are reserved for prayer. Not because it's a particularly pious profession but because that's the day when

clients who were married on Saturday figure out if they’re happy or not. Should they choose unhappiness, Sunday is when they decide whom to blame. And Monday is when the emails come.

I say “decide” because weddings are funny affairs—tense, expensive, fraught with emotion. They are revisited—by the couple, by the family, by the person paying the bills—time and again. They mark the beginning of a couple’s new life but sometimes of other things too: family feuds, broken friendships, a long hangover of fiscal regret. So even if the party went great, on Sunday the wedding planner prays.

Will the email be full of joy and praise? Or will it be one of complaint? Back when I was a luxury-wedding planner in New York City, my business partner and I once got an email from a bride, written as she helicoptered off to her honeymoon, saying that her wedding had been a “transcendent experience.” A call from the bride’s mother directly followed. “Repeat after me,” she said. *“I am bad at my job. I should never do this job again.”* Sometimes the clients just need to vent. Sometimes they threaten to sue.



The work of a luxury-wedding planner is only partly about the planning. Yes, you help the couple plan what you hope will be a stunning event—but your main job is to be a professional wedding friend. You’re the person who cares if the bow on the favor has swallow or inverse tails, or if the maid of honor is being a passive-aggressive bitch when none of the bride’s other friends wants to talk about it anymore. The family is paying you to care as much as they do.

When I became a wedding planner, no one in my own family could comprehend my utility. My grandparents, who raised me, had what was called a “[football wedding](#).” They rented the Veterans of Foreign Wars hall in Red Hook, Brooklyn, and piled tinfoil-wrapped heroes on a table. People would shout out what sandwich they wanted, and another guest would toss it across the room. “[How complicated could a wedding be?](#)” they wondered.

Had I chosen to be a professional mud wrestler, I do not think it could have confounded them more.

[Read: The uncontrollable rise of wedding sprawl](#)

So whenever one of our events was featured in a bridal magazine, I would bring it to family occasions and show it off the way other people might show off pictures of their babies. “See,” I would say, pointing to a dreamy sailcloth tent glowing with custom-made chandeliers. “There was nothing but a field here. We built all of this.”



Unfortunately, this only added to the confusion. “Don’t they realize they could have bought a house with all of this money?”

I would have to explain that my clients didn’t need a house. They already had one. They probably had several.

A few years after the recession, I did a lavish wedding on Long Island. The bride was stressing about putting a custom lining on her invitations that would add another couple thousand to the already large stationery bill. She and the groom had been given a seven-figure sum to spend both on their wedding and on buying and decorating their new home, and the bride had a thing for mid-century-modern furniture. Was the liner worth more than a Wassily chair? She went back and forth, back and forth. I couldn't say a thing, but finally her mother reached her limit: "We're rich!" she cried out in exasperation. "Get the liners!"

Months later, the same mother, while admiring the tent we had spent days erecting for the reception, said, in total seriousness, "I hate that it's only being used for one night. I wish we could find some homeless people to stay here when we're done."



I once got a call from a woman in a panic: Her daughter was getting married in a few weeks and she needed my partner and me to save this wedding. She offered no further details over the phone, insisting that we come uptown to her apartment so she could properly convey the scale of the conundrum. Right before she hung up the phone she whispered, "By the way, I'm very, very rich."

And she was! She lived in one of those opulent places with an elevator that opened up into the apartment itself, because that's how sprawling it was. A maid in a uniform greeted us and escorted us down a long, art-lined hallway and into the library, where the mother of the bride was waiting.

She explained the dilemma. Her daughter was embarrassed by her family's wealth, and had been living as a closeted rich person for years—her friends had no idea. The bride had refused to let her mother have anything to do with the wedding, because if her mom got involved, the jig would be up. Everyone would see she'd just been cosplaying poverty. And so, armed with information from the internet and her mother's checkbook, the young

woman had gone off and planned what she imagined was an “average wedding.”

With the event just weeks away, the mother had started poking around and realized, *This is terrible!* Her daughter didn’t just have conflicted ideas about her own privilege. She also had bad taste—or at least unfortunate notions of what the “average” bride wants at her wedding: things like jam jars for wineglasses, picnic tables for seating, a limited bar.

Her daughter could pretend all she wanted, the mother said, but their friends and family knew that they were rich and were expecting a nice affair. After much argument, they compromised: They would hire a wedding planner. And the only wedding planner in all of New York they could agree on was me, probably because while many of my competitors were specializing in opulence, I had cornered the market in “understated luxury.”

### Read: How “I do” became performance art

The mother insisted that we meet right away because the bride was planning to reach out and hire us the next day, and the mother wanted me to be clear on how it was going to work. My job, in addition to making sure the wedding was not an embarrassment, was to say yes to everything the daughter asked for. If the bride questioned what something cost, I was to say it was “already included in the contract.” The mother didn’t care how expensive anything was; she would cover it secretly. Did this sound crazy? Absolutely. Did I need the money? Yes.



I was amazed by how well the strategy worked. “You could serve these baby lamb chops,” I would say, to which the bride would reply, “But is that going to be more expensive than pigs in a blanket?,” and I would assure her, as I had been hired to do, that everything was in the contract.

But then one day the bride proclaimed her desire to reduce the carbon footprint of the wedding by having edible escort cards. The escort card is the

folded-over piece of card stock that tells a guest where to sit. The bride had the idea to stick toothpicks with little tags showing the names and table numbers into bacon-wrapped dates, combining appetizer and escort card and thus saving the environment.

I nodded yes, and then emailed the mother in a panic, something to the effect of: “It’s going to look like a table full of floating turds! What are we going to do?”

“For Christ’s sake, why can’t you be my daughter?” she wrote back.

The mother said she’d grown up poor like me but, unlike me, had married well. “Marry rich!” she would tell me. “It’s so fun!” I still haven’t had a chance to give this a try, but I suspect that she’s right. We agreed: When you have more money than God, what better way to spend some of it than to throw other people a luxuriously good time?

Anyway, they say that there are no accidents, but the daughter, in town for wedding things, logged on to her mother’s computer and saw our entire exchange. She insisted, quite understandably, that I be fired immediately.



When my business partner and I began planning weddings, in 2003, America was in a wedding craze, nurtured by an abundance of magazines: *Bride's*, *Modern Bride*, *Elegant Bride*, *Town & Country Weddings*, *Inside Weddings*, *InStyle Weddings*. *The Wedding Planner* had hit theaters in 2001. Then we had *Bridezillas* and *Whose Wedding Is It Anyway?* Soon you could scour wedding blogs all night: Style Me Pretty and Weddingbee and The Bridal Bar (and my very own blog at the time, Always a Blogsmaid). On the Fridays before weddings, I used to binge-watch *Say Yes to the Dress* to calm my nerves—at least these weren’t my clients.

Weddings have always been luxury goods. And like all luxury goods, they’ve been coveted, emulated, and knocked off by the masses. Even white dresses became a thing only after Queen Victoria was married in one in

1840. Wedding envy is as old as weddings themselves, but it was supercharged by [the mid-'90s dawn of TheKnot.com](#). Weddings as we know them today—with their Instagram-ready ombré floral arrangements and embroidered custom veils and pom-pom farewells—began with an online group of brides-to-be called the Knotties.



Someone with a name like JuneJerseyBride334 would post photos of, say, her bedazzled escort and menu cards.

“Are we supposed to have menu cards?” SomethingBlue305 might ask. “I don’t have menu cards.”

“If I can get DH to splurge, I’m gonna get some!” FallForTedForever might add. “Printing these pics and stealing all your cute ideas!”

The Knot offered brides-to-be advice about budgets and listings of potential vendors, but it was the chat rooms—and the camaraderie and friendly one-upmanship found there—that kept users coming back. The Knot created a community; it made being a bride an identity. And it transformed weddings into a competitive sport.

Last year, approximately 13,000 weddings in America cost \$1 million or more.

An especially beautiful wedding might be featured on the site, or picked up by The Knot's magazine. Soon more and more people began planning weddings not just around their guests' experience of one special day, but around how the images of that day would look to strangers online. By 2010, I had clients walking in asking about our publicity strategy: *Where do you plan on sending the photos once the wedding is done?*

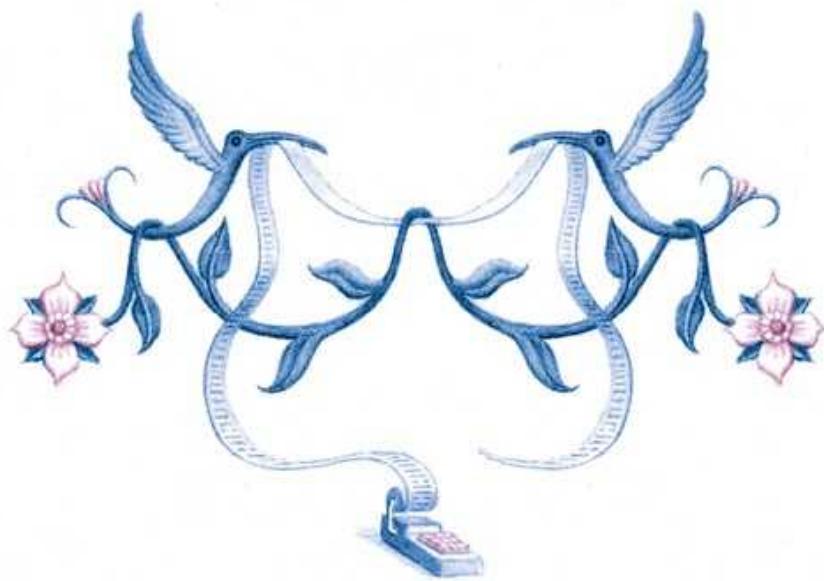
That was the year Instagram was founded, making it far easier for couples to share their content themselves. Thirteen years later, couples can hire a professional wedding social-media adviser, a service that can cost up to \$3,000. A company such as Maid of Social will develop a "strategy" for your wedding, attend and photograph it, and post the shots to your Snapchat and Instagram accounts, hashtags included—"because the day you just spent 14 months planning should be seen by the world."

Being a bride used to mean being royalty for a day. Now it means being a celebrity. Either way, the only sure path to really distinguish yourself—to capture the oohs and the aahs and the attention—is to spend a lot of money.



The average wedding in America costs about \$30,000. Historically, money for weddings was cobbled together through savings and gifts from parents, but today many of the celebrations are debt-financed affairs. Surveys have found that roughly 30 to 45 percent of couples report taking on credit-card or other debt to pay for them. Wedding loans—personal loans marketed to engaged couples—can carry interest rates as high as 30 percent.

At the same time, ultra-luxurious weddings—the kind no one needs credit cards to pay for—have become a bigger slice of the market. Last year, approximately 13,000 weddings in America cost \$1 million or more, according to the consulting firm Think Splendid. Which means that each week across America, some 250 millionaire and billionaire families are setting trends the rest of us should never dream of emulating.



At one of Marcy Blum's recent weddings, on a private estate in Palm Beach, Florida, she built her clients a miniature golf course. A video of guests putting around in their black-tie finery is available on Instagram, where Blum has more than 100,000 followers. Blum has been planning weddings for more than 30 years and has worked for moguls including George Soros and LeBron James. Like a lot of people in this industry, she wasn't born rich; she was raised in the Bronx by a salesman and a schoolteacher. But she's rarely intimidated. Say you're talking to Bill Gates, she told me: "He may be the smartest person in the world, but what does he know about lighting or a table setting?" Blum was my mentor—I've spent more nights than I can count crying on her sofa—and is still a close friend.

The golf course wasn't just some holes and a putting green: She and her design partners also created a concession stand, provided custom pencils and scorecards (inscribed with *Talk Birdie to Me*), and had staff dressed up as caddies offering putting tips.

Blum declined to tell me how much the mini golf added to the budget. But some of her clients spend \$2 million or \$3 million on their wedding—about \$8,000 a head. Some spend more, but she didn't want to elaborate—"I don't want people to think I'm that expensive before they call me," she said with a laugh.

What does all this money go to? Primarily: infrastructure. The least sexy things are the most expensive—landscaping to clear a field; electrical lines to get power to said field; tent companies to erect a clearspan or sailcloth structure for 300 people and then to heat or cool it; lighting to illuminate it; driftwood flooring; restroom trailers; decorations to make the trailers look like elegant powder rooms; another tent for the caterer; refrigerated trucks to keep the food cold; propane stoves to get it hot; even more landscaping to level another field far away where the vendors' vehicles can be parked.

For all of this you need many, many, many workers. Blum's weddings might employ up to 40 vendors, each with its own staff—hundreds and hundreds of bodies, mostly blue-collar laborers, many of them immigrants. All of these people can be there for upwards of a week working around the clock. It's sort of like being in the circus.

The day of the wedding, her clients will fly in professional dressers like the ones who work for the stylist Julie Sabatino's company, The Stylish Bride. Sabatino's website refers to her dressers as "ladies in waiting" and shows them wearing white gloves and little aprons. The starting rate for just one is \$2,450; a luxury wedding sometimes has 10. They sew and they press and they "do the bow ties," Blum told me; they'll pin garments into place and follow the bride around with a water bottle with a straw in it so she can drink without ruining her lipstick.

### [Read: The wedding trend couples love and guests hate](#)

Throughout this time, Blum usually employs security guards and a cybersecurity firm to keep hackers out of the guest list. There's a caterer to provide staff meals, and an on-site calligrapher to accommodate any last-minute changes to the seating chart. She even employs a "concierge event meteorologist"—Andrew Leavitt of Ironic Reports—to help prepare for the possibility of a "rain call": the dreaded moment when the planner needs to inform the bride that the outdoor celebration she dreamed of needs to move inside. Leavitt will call "every, like, 15 minutes" to update her on a possible storm front: "It's moving this way; it's moving that way."

Weather, after all, is the one thing Marcy Blum can't control.



Early in my wedding-planning days, I signed on to do the reality-TV show *Whose Wedding Is It Anyway?* I didn't care about the fame, but I wanted more clients. If there were an Emmy for reality-TV performance, I could've won it. Enthusiastic, romantic, anxious that everything go exactly as planned, I had clipboards and checklists and said things like "This is what I live for" when my clients gushed over their reception room. I could do 20 takes of me entering a bakery to see a cake, looking both ecstatic and urgently concerned, and each was like the first time.

Our clients who agreed to do the show weren't billionaires—they were normal people. They liked getting a little taste of stardom, sure, but mostly they wanted upgrades on things like flowers and lighting—a nice wedding on camera. The producers, of course, wanted something different. Nice weddings are nice. Messy weddings are great TV.



For my first reality-TV wedding, there I was—at a catering hall deep in New Jersey wearing a very unfortunate blue-velvet blazer—trying hard to seem calm while frantically calling the florist, who had gone missing. After many

hours and excuses, he did eventually show up—but with at least one fewer centerpiece than promised. Naturally, the producers wanted us back.

We did *Whose Wedding Is It Anyway?* a couple more times, but as I got better at my job, I had a harder time pretending to be overwhelmed or anxious about things I could do in my sleep. Our last foray into television came in 2014. It was a chance to star in a new show whose concept was extreme weddings. We were assigned a ceremony for 70 guests at the base of a dormant volcano in Hawaii. The shoot involved the bride entering by helicopter and six hours of setup and taping under the hot sun on black lava with no restroom. The entire thing went off smoothly. But reality TV doesn't appreciate expertise—we knew they'd never pick up the show.

In any case, my off-screen weddings were providing plenty of drama.

I once worked with a bride who had all of her wedding gifts sent to our office. I was confused until I realized that it gave her an excuse to keep stopping by. She knew that her fiancé was cheating on her, and she needed someone to talk with about it. They still got married, though, and had a resplendent wedding brunch. (I love a wedding brunch.)

Another bride could not settle on a design scheme, and was growing intensely frustrated. She said something like “I just don’t like pink. Never show me anything pink!” She had sent me a dozen images of things she loved, all of which involved the color pink. She was wearing head-to-toe pink. Even her phone was pink. “I think you love pink,” I said, as I looked her dead in the eye. “You actually love pink.” She ended up having a pink wedding.

At my final meeting with one couple, they kept talking about how they wanted to put “edibles” on the bar. I had designed a gorgeous wedding for them, with a custom chuppah and matching chandelier hand-built by an artist in Brooklyn, and a bunch of Edible Arrangements on the bar would completely destroy the vibe. I tried very hard to be polite about it. “People have strong opinions about edibles,” I said. This was true about chocolate-covered pineapple slices, and it was also true about weed gummies.

Another couple was getting married on an enormous estate, and the father of the bride decided, against his better judgment, to go all in on making it the wedding of his daughter's dreams. He would use this occasion to give her every outrageous thing she'd ever asked for in her life. We hid that pony for days.

When the weddings were over, many of our couples would take us out for a reunion meal, where they would spend hours reminiscing and reliving their favorite moments. Sometimes these nights were fun; sometimes, less so. I got divorced right before one of these dinners, and over appetizers the bride asked me what had gone wrong. "I guess I just felt dead inside," I said. Later, she followed me to the ladies' room. When I came out of the stall, she was waiting for me. "I feel dead inside too," she said.



The term *the wedding-industrial complex* entered the vernacular in 2007, around when Rebecca Mead published her takedown of the wedding industry, [One Perfect Day](#).

Mead was a cynic about the entire endeavor. She seemed to think that levelheaded couples should just take themselves to a courthouse and get on with their life while other, flightier fiancés were seduced by wedding professionals eager to swindle them out of their hard-earned cash. "These people think of themselves as providing a service that is needed," Mead [told Salon](#). "But they're also creating that need and generating the desire, and they're certainly aware of it; the best ones are very clever marketers."

But this was the era of the McMansion, the big-screen TV, the luxury handbag—insatiable consumer desire was hardly limited to weddings, or created by wedding planners. As Jodi Kantor [pointed out in her review](#), "We're all nouveau riche now." When the recession hit shortly thereafter—disproving that assumption—Mead's take solidified in the popular imagination. Years later, articles still warn couples about wedding "taxes"

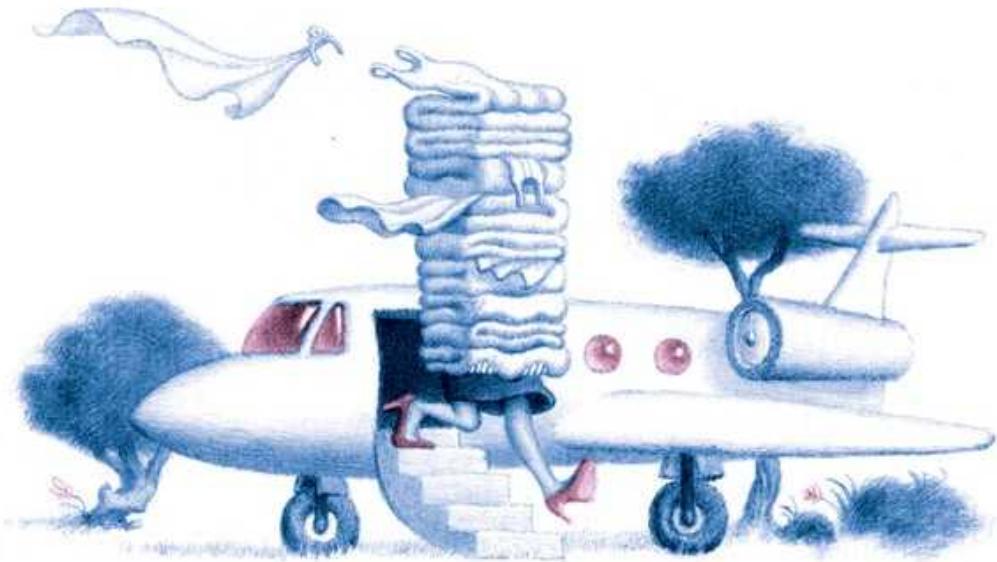
and “premiums” and ways to avoid being “scammed by the wedding industry.”

It’s not the wedding professionals’ fault that weddings are expensive. The fact is that weddings are luxuries, not necessities. It costs a lot to make something look nice; it costs even more to make it *feel* nice—to make sure all your guests are comfortable, and well fed, and entertained. A wedding is not a photograph of a wedding. A wedding—a good wedding—is immersive theater, a living, breathing work of art.

One bride knew that her fiancé was cheating on her. They still got married, though, and had a resplendent wedding brunch.

But Mead wasn’t wrong that wedding professionals are clever marketers. A handful of people dominate the luxury end of the market, and the trends they pioneered have taken widespread hold. Julie Sabatino basically invented wedding styling in the early aughts. Back then, when she told people what she did, they assumed she was a hairstylist, she told me. Today wedding stylists have cropped up all across the country, most charging a fraction of what she does.

Michael Waisner is among the most expensive caterers—“stupid expensive,” I’ve heard people call him. His food—foraged mushrooms under a quail egg and shaved black truffles, *leche de tigre* with plantain threads, that sort of thing—is all kosher, and starts at about \$550 a head. He started out working the New York kosher-catering circuit in the days when kosher was not exactly a coveted culinary experience. But Waisner realized that affluent Jewish foodies—just like their wealthy gentile peers—wanted something special.



Allan Zepeda immigrated to Brooklyn when he was 3 and started taking photos for the youth group at his Pentecostal church—he’s entirely self-taught. “Thanks for calling the Latin kid,” he said when I reached out. He photographed the weddings of Sheryl Sandberg and Serena Williams. His destination-wedding rates now begin at \$50,000. Beautiful images are only part of his success; couples love him because he treats them all like *Vogue* models.

The thing all of these people understand is that “billionaires buy experiences; they don’t buy things,” as Rishi Patel, a luxury-wedding designer based in Chicago, told me. And one of those experiences is having a very good time planning their wedding.



The mother of the fake poor bride, it turned out, couldn’t bring herself to fire me. We’d had a blast together upgrading the bride’s budget-conscious, twee affair into a jewel box of an event, and we weren’t ready to quit. Instead, we came up with a ruse—even more elaborate than the first—to get us through the wedding day.

I had one of my employees pretend to work for the caterer, and—I’m not particularly proud of this—we introduced the bride and this woman, assuring her that I was no longer involved. Except that I absolutely was. And nothing the bride and this woman talked about held any water, because the only thing that mattered was what happened between me and her mother. And what was happening was a lot. We ordered custom furniture to maximize the space in the room. We brought in an enhanced cooling system. We had the floor refinished so no one would trip.

On the day of the event, after straightening every fork and folding every hemstitched linen napkin, I made myself invisible. I left everything in the trusted hands of a few of my staff members, who were disguised as waiters. I posted myself in a restaurant a few blocks away and fielded the mother’s hysterical texts: “She’s going to find out! She’s going to find out what we’ve been doing!”

I assured her that this charade would soon be behind us. But I didn’t realize the reason she was certain her daughter would find out was that she was going to get drunk and tell her. Halfway through the reception, she pulled the bride aside and confessed the entire scheme. The bride saw red. She was surrounded by traitors on her wedding day! Her own mother was sneaking behind her back, carrying on an adulterous mother-daughter affair with the wedding planner!

At the end of the night, my phone buzzed one last time: “She knows everything. This is goodbye!”



“We are always gonna be the help,” Michael Waiser told me. “I’m probably the most expensive help there is. But I’m the help, right? And I think that you have to remember that.”

By 2015, I was burned out. Not so much by the weddings themselves as by the role I had to play. Shortly after Donald Trump declared his presidential

candidacy in a statement full of anti-Mexican sentiment, this half-Chicana wedding planner found herself at a Friday-night tasting listening to how excited the bride's and groom's families were about the venue and the band and the food and ... future President Donald Trump. Real friends could have said what they thought. But wedding friends—hired friends—had to go on with the show.

It is easier to get a divorce than to quit a wedding. I know because I successfully did the former but never the latter, and I liked my ex-husband a lot more than any of the brides I tried to walk away from. Almost always, the conflict came down to the budget: The bride wanted something she couldn't afford, and instead of accepting that, she decided I was incompetent.



Some of my most abusive clients were the ones who were stretching themselves, going into debt to have the wedding that they wanted the world to see them have. But unlike bags or jewelry, you can't really knock off a nice wedding. Things would get more and more tense, and finally we would call a meeting. This should be a joyous experience, and it was clear they weren't happy. We should just part ways and refer them to—and the bride's lip would start quivering. *We're sorry. Please don't leave us.*

## Read: The marriage lesson that I learned too late

I was used to my wealthy clients thinking they could bend reality to their will, but I got truly taken advantage of only once. The bride called us to say that she and her younger sister were both getting married in the same year at the same venue. For what seemed like obvious reasons, she did not want to work with the same planner as her baby sibling. I quoted her our rates and there was silence.

Her sister's planner, she said then, was cheaper—something like \$12,000 less.

To which I replied: Good for your sister!

We nevertheless agreed to meet, and by the end of our coffee date, I could see by the needy look in her eyes that she wanted me to be her wedding best friend—the one person who didn't care about what her sister was doing with her wedding; the one person who didn't care that her sister was getting married, period.

Her mother called: They loved me, but the issue was that the other planner cost less. Again I said: Good for you; they were welcome to use that planner for both events. But they wanted me. Eventually, they signed the contract and sent in the first of several deposits.

Two weeks before the wedding, we called to remind them that the final payment of \$10,000 hadn't come in yet. They said the check was in the mail. Two days before we left to begin setting up, we tried to charge their card on file, but it was no longer valid. When we rang, they told us they would give us a check when we arrived. Three days into the tent installation, when we would ask for payment, the mother or father would say they would go to the house right away and get it. Each time, they would get distracted. On the day of the wedding, we still hadn't been paid, and debated what to do. It wasn't like they didn't have the money. Obviously we would show up. When we asked the father for the check, he barked at us: *How dare we harass him on his daughter's wedding day?*

But the day after, when we arrived to break down the party, the family was nowhere to be found. No check, no credit-card number. We made the trip back to New York bathed in shame. Thirteen years in the business, and we'd been played by multimillionaires.

That Sunday we prayed extra hard, but on Monday the bride's father reached out. He had made an itemized list of minor infractions that he believed entitled him to withhold our last payment. I've blocked out exactly what they were, but they were absurd—napkins not up to snuff, lights flickering in the restroom trailer. I called him and said this was simply not right. We had done what we were hired to do. But he had decided, it seemed clear to me, that if the little sister's wedding planner was taking less, I would have to take less as well, contract be damned.

Go ahead and fight me, he said. "I'll have so much fun spending my money suing you."



The biggest wedding in the news lately, between Brooklyn Beckham, the son of a Spice Girl and a soccer star, and Nicola Peltz, the daughter of a billionaire, cost \$3 million to \$5 million, the tabloids say, and ended in lawsuits and scandal—the bride's father is suing two wedding planners who briefly worked for him; the planners have countersued. But every time I read about it, I find myself thinking of the hundreds of people whose labor made it all happen.

Critics who roll their eyes at wedding excess seem to forget that this excess creates a lot of jobs. So much of the work behind a wedding is invisible, but it's done by real people, people who suffer when the wedding industry goes downhill. Wedding planners and designers and florists and caterers ate a lot of soup during the recession. They did the same during the pandemic. Both times, it was the rich who came back first, like a spring thaw.

Rishi Patel was the designer on the Peltz wedding. He told me that after large projects, he often gives his clients a book with sketches of everything he made for their wedding—the chuppah, the table settings, the stage where they took their vows—and a note at the front that says something like *I hope you are as proud as I am that you were able to employ 200 people for these two weeks*. He and Marcy Blum are among the many luxury-wedding professionals who have started posting behind-the-scenes videos of their events on Instagram, to humanize the amount of work that goes into them.

Blum does this, she told me, in part because critics are always saying things like “There are all these hungry people in the world, all the homeless people. You could have fed 8 million people with that wedding.” Her clients already give millions to charity, she said. For someone like that, she asked, “what are they supposed to do—have a picnic? What is a quote-unquote appropriate amount to spend on your child’s wedding?”

You might not be surprised to hear that after the mother of my fake poor bride told me it was farewell forever, it wasn’t quite. I got some emails, the occasional text. The strange part about it is, although I believed the bride had every right to be upset, I never felt guilty for what we did. And I suspect that her mother didn’t either. Our bond had nothing to do with how she felt about her daughter, and everything to do with how she felt about her money: just fine. She not only didn’t mind having it; she didn’t mind spending it.

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*This article appears in the [July/August 2023](#) print edition with the headline “Confessions of a Luxury-Wedding Planner.” When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.*

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# My God, This Is a Magical Country

## A road trip across my adopted America

by James Parker



Los Angeles, California

Do you like being by yourself? How do you experience your own company? It's a fundamental human question. I'd invited my friend John—razor intellect, gamma-ray eyeballs—to drive across America with me, to take a trip into America, but John was immobilized by difficulties with his teeth. So I was alone. Alone for 10 days at the wheel of a sky-blue 2009 Toyota Camry—my son's car, which I was driving back from Los Angeles to our home in Boston because he was taking a leave of absence from college.

Alone, which has its advantages. I made the rules, I set the pace, autocrat of the pee break, and if I wanted another Filet-O-Fish, motherfucker, I was having one.

Alone, which is, let's face it, getting worse. Being alone in the 2020s is a condition of oppressive subjectivity, of dank skull-centricity, in which the world—this tree, that building—seems to ding you endlessly with your own separateness. It hasn't always been like this. It's been a journey, this long withdrawal into the head. But we're here now, and there's no point pretending we're not.

500 B.C.: A Greek artist paints a human foot from the front for the first time, thereby placing himself at a revolutionary new angle to nature.

1637: Descartes writes, “I think, therefore I am.”

1966: Owsley Stanley introduces LSD to the San Francisco underground at the Trips Festival, and the brain becomes the universe.

1991: I see a bumper sticker that says I claim my own power and lovingly create my own reality.

2016: Donald Trump is elected president.

That's the evolution of consciousness, pretty much.

“Do you believe Jesus Christ died for your sins?” asks the woman sitting next to me on the flight to L.A. Not fervently, not dogmatically—we’re having a lovely conversation—she just wants to know. “Well, if he didn’t,” I say, “I’m in trouble.”

In L.A., prepping for the big drive, I instruct the fine mechanics at RM Automotive in Northridge to make the little Camry roadworthy. It needs some work—the shocks, the steering rack, the fluids, the whole (if I may) gestalt—so there’s a bit of downtime at a Holiday Inn in Chatsworth, in the San Fernando Valley

Inside the IHOP, an elderly woman orders her meal. “This is gonna crack you up,” she promises her waitress. “I want a mushroom omelet without the

mushrooms.”

Downtime? Dreamtime. Out there on Devonshire Street I’m deep in L.A. space, which is tingling and car-swept and horizontal and prolific on a scale quite amazing to a Brit like me, raised in a blighted hedgerow on a diet of HobNobs and mushy peas. The Krav Maga studio and the hypnotism center, the barnlike sushi place and the U-Haul and the jolly old IHOP, the biker couple exiting the Star Bar with the tremendous, ponderous dignity of the totally smashed. Palm trees in the breeze, softly explosive California light, stony green-brown hillsides at the end of the street, dispossessed people on every corner. As I amble to the IHOP for lunch, a heavily layered man with an exposed psyche stalks jaggedly past me. My neck prickles. “I’m recording you on my phone, sir,” he says to me. Or at me. “I’m allowed to.”

Where am I? Where have I ended up? Only some mighty, hidden, continuously creative act seems to be holding all of these elements together, maintaining them in relationship. Inside the IHOP, an elderly woman with a Billy Idol haircut orders her meal. “This is gonna crack you up,” she promises her waitress. “I want a mushroom omelet without the mushrooms.”

And [then I’m driving](#), escaping L.A., heading east, floundering along behind the trucks on Interstate 40. Okay, America: me and you. Let’s go.

[The Atlantic Daily: James Parker has an hour of music for your next road trip](#)

The first couple of days, despite everything done by the fine mechanics of RM Automotive, are spent in a paroxysm of anxiety that the little Camry is going to crap out, break apart beneath me at 80 miles an hour, shed glowing lumps like a space shuttle on reentry. The passage into the desert, into another world, impinges upon me only vaguely: I drive past signs for Barstow. Barstow? Barstow ... And then I’m mumbling the first line of [Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas](#): “We were somewhere around Barstow on the edge of the desert when the drugs began to take hold.” On the edge of Kingman, Arizona, I breakfast at an uncharacteristically sluggish Denny’s that is somehow inside a gas station: It’s a Flying J Travel Center, with *Torque* and *Recoil* on the magazine rack and *Prayers for Difficult Times for Men* on the book stand. (“Jesus, my old abusive habits are tempting me

today.”) My notebook records that despite the invigorating desert air, I feel bleak.



Tucson, Arizona (Sinna Nasseri)

The Grand Canyon? For me, a nonevent. I dawdle around one of the parking lots in confusion, about to ask somebody, “Excuse me, where is the Grand Canyon?” when I sense the great vacuum pulling at me and go toward it. Mild vertigo kicks in as I approach the South Rim: I experience a weightlessness, a hollowness in the legs, that is curiously like anger. Plenty of people, plenty of phones: The air around me is full of that acoustically flattened chirping sound that humans make when confronted by the sublime. I stare. I gaze. I peer. I’m numb. My intention, my plan, was to affirm my existence in the face of the chasm, to assent—finally, ultimately—to my life as it is, to hurl an *amen* into the multicolored abyss, to shout like Allen Ginsberg in “The Lion for Real”: *Terrible Presence! ... Eat me or die!* But it’s not happening. Ramparts of geology frown at me and I turn around, feeling better with every step away.

The Meteor Crater, in Winslow, Arizona, cures me of my Grand Canyon anomie. To the work of millennia, apparently, to the infinite patience of wind and stone and water, I can find no connection. But a single wildly destructive moment, a one-off, bomblike incident of cosmic mega-violence in the desert—that, I can relate to. That makes complete frigging sense to me. More than 50,000 years ago, an iron-nickel meteorite weighing several hundred thousand tons plowed into the ground east of what is now Flagstaff, producing a nuclear-level explosion upon impact and leaving a mile-wide hole. To quote from the excellently written pamphlet handed to me at the Meteor Crater & Barringer Space Museum: “In the air, shock waves swept across the level plain devastating all in their path for a radius of several miles. In the ground, as the meteorite penetrated the rocky plain, pressures rose to over 20 million pounds per square inch, and both iron and rock experienced limited vaporization and extensive melting.” The hole is huge and clean and narrows toward an inverted peak: an upside-down mountain of nothingness. I look into it and feel utterly peaceful.

My relationship with the little Camry is changing. No longer on the lip of terror, primed for her disintegration, I’ve begun to appreciate her durability, her reliability, her modest potency. I’m growing to love her. She holds her own in the woofing back drafts of the trucks on 40E; she slips gracefully between those shifting, barging volumes of air. She seems happiest at 85 miles an hour. In the mornings, outside whatever Red Roof Inn or Best Western I’m staying at, I see her crouched neatly in the parking lot, compact and ready, and I greet her with joy. I pat her steering wheel as we drive along. I call her Baby Blue.

#### From the May 2020 issue: An ode to driving in America

At a La Quinta next to the airport in Amarillo, Texas, I ask the receptionist where I can get some food. Half a mile back down Route 40, she tells me. Walkable? I ignore her suggestion that I drive it, set off on foot, and blunder instantly into a side-of-the-highway moonscape of dead grass, gopher holes, broken fences, torpid little ditches, and trash that was expelled from passing vehicles, two minutes ago or two years ago. Everything discarded, unattended, ripe with the mad physics of neglect. Unwalkable. Hostile to pedestrians, hostile to everybody. Instant exile. It feels very important

somehow, as the trucks blow by with Chewbacca moans: I'm on the inside of the outside of America.

Approaching Oklahoma City, I panic. I haven't had a proper conversation for hundreds of miles. Is this how I'm doing it, this road trip, sliding through America frictionless as a dolphin? I take an off-ramp, and on a grass verge on the edge of a gas station I spot a little group sitting in carnivalesque disarray. They appear to have been centrifugally dislodged from the main event and deposited here at the fringes, and they receive me with the instinctive graciousness of street people everywhere. Isis, a middle-aged woman with her shoes off and a tiny, pop-eyed dog called Dobby in her lap, leads the conversation. She and her friends, D.J. and Butterfly, are currently involved in two situations, parallel projects: They have to recover a stolen Schwinn bicycle with Mongoose rims, and they need to find enough money for another night at the Green Carpet Inn.



*Left: Los Angeles, California. Right: Tucson, Arizona (Sinna Nasseri)*

Isis is telling her story. "They say God only gives you what you can take. Well, I've said to him so many times, 'I can't take no more.' I've had seven

therapists, and they've all said to me, 'Hey, if you wanna be a serial killer, with everything you've been through, you got the right.'" "Calm down," Butterfly urges quietly, as the monologue begins to accelerate. "I could talk to this man all day!" Isis says. I ask her what the Green Carpet Inn is like. "Hell itself." That bad? "The center of hell. And that's where God's throne of judgment will raise up." Right there in the middle of the Green Carpet? "Right there. And everybody will get what's coming to 'em." "Be safe," Butterfly says as I take my leave. "Don't let nobody push up on you."

[From the June 2020 issue: James Parker on being homeless in a city buffeted by plague](#)

(I Google the Green Carpet later and find that in between blasts of grievance from disgusted guests, it has some magnificent prank reviews, written—I like to think—by Isis and her friends: "We slipped into our free satin robes and pure cotton slippers and took a soke in our hot tub on our balcony. We had a free in room meal and the hotel cook even came to our room to prepare the meal and he served it to us. I never wanted to leave.")

That night I get drunk with a couple of air-traffic controllers, in town for a spot of top-up training at Oklahoma City's FAA Academy. I thrust myself rather clumsily into their conversation at the bar, having overheard one of them say that Joy Division is his favorite band. "I'm sorry," I say. "Joy Division? I have to jump in." And then I'm in it, for hours, in the beautiful loose warm magnanimous stream of American bar talk, which flows wittily and incoherently and aggressively and lovingly and expertly and ignorantly and eternally and momentarily out of orange-lit alcoholic portals from coast to coast. "People aren't shitty," one of my new friends insists. "If you give 'em 10 seconds, people are fantastic." He's a Florida punk rocker (his band once opened for a pre-famous Marilyn Manson) turned Christian. "When God calls," he tells me, "you have to pick up."

The next morning is the next morning. I am a hangover on wheels. I feel like I've rolled all night among huge, featherless birds. But it was worth it, and my spirits are high as I buzz across Oklahoma toward Arkansas.

Why are my spirits so high? Because of *True Grit*. God, I love *True Grit*—Charles Portis's book, both of the movies, the entire mythic-historical *True*

*Grit* landscape. Back when my son was of an age to be read to, we did *True Grit* three or four times, our responses deepening with each go-round.

### Read: The ‘uniquely southern storytelling’ of Charles Portis

And Fort Smith, Arkansas, is *True Grit* Central. It was in real-life Fort Smith, in 1875, that Judge Isaac Parker—“Hanging” Judge Parker, American superego, charged by Ulysses S. Grant himself with the subduing of the boiling-with-criminality western frontier—established his infamous court. Hawklike he brooded over the hinterland. Left and right he strung them up: 79 hangings during his time on the bench. And it’s in the Fort Smith of *True Grit* that young Mattie Ross connects with Rooster Cogburn, U.S. Marshal, an officer of Parker’s court, grizzled growling boozer, played first in the movies by John Wayne and then by Jeff Bridges, and hires him to ride out into the Choctaw Nation and catch the man who killed her father.

I linger happily in the foothills of the Winding Stair Mountains, where Rooster’s old adversary Lucky Ned Pepper goes to ground with his gang, and in the tiny edge-of-Oklahoma town of Talihina I eat a vicious piece of fried catfish and exchange pleasantries with a hard-of-hearing senior named Chicken Johnson. Pure Portis.

The next morning, I present myself at the Fort Smith National Historic Site. I’m twanging with *True Grit* nerdery. And also with some kind of enhanced historical sense, because there’s a fault line here at Fort Smith, a crack in the American psyche: The wilderness meets the law. But what gets me, what moves me, what brings me weirdly to tears, is not the re-creation of Judge Parker’s courtroom. It’s not the crushingly low-ceilinged jail below the courtroom. It’s not even the restored gallows. It’s an art exhibition on the theme of justice by the students of Western Yell County High School. *Saving Our Seas* is a painting by Dylan, Samantha, and Madison; it features a blameless-looking turtle plying his way through a bright-blue element. On one side of him floats a Coke can, on the other an empty bag of Lay’s chips. Caption: “It’s Not Fair Your Trash End’s Up In Their HOME.” I think of G. K. Chesterton: “Children are innocent and love justice; while most of us are wicked and naturally prefer mercy.”

And now, leaving Arkansas, post-*True Grit*, I lose my mojo. On the road, in my head, I wither. The trip turns. Aloneness claims me. American space is too much for me. I'm not a pilgrim, existentially stripped, bare to the bliss of the heavens and the batterings of God's grace. I'm a nervous man at the wheel of a Toyota Camry. I need more coffee. I need less coffee. I don't dig this solitude. With whom can I connect? *Time keeps on slippin', slippin', slippin' / Into the fu-ture.* The Steve Miller Band's "Fly Like an Eagle" is trailing me like a curse, a '70s stoner hex. It's floating at me from car windows and leaking from speakers by ATMs. Pure detachment boogie. *Fly-y like an eagle, let my spirit carry me.*

Graceland is not at all the debauch of tastelessness I've been led to expect. Or have I just got bad taste?

I wallow into Memphis, over the shimmery-shiny Hernando de Soto Bridge. A chatty dude in a record store, a cheery and welcoming couple in a bar—I'm talking, but I'm not getting through. I'm stuck in my brain again, diddling across the country like a cut-price version of [Milton's winged Satan: Which way I fly is Hell; myself am Hell.](#) Steve Miller Band Satan, flapping like a depressed eagle. The only thing I can say for myself at this point in my trip is that I'm not online: I am actually, physically, more or less here. I head for Graceland.



### A Waffle House in Tennessee (Sinna Nasseri)

“Elvis was an international *star*,” the guide on the doorstep of Graceland announces as we wait, a small disgorged busload, to be allowed into the house. “But he never performed across seas. Anybody know why?” We gape obediently. “Because,” she says, “because his manager, Colonel Tom Parker, was a criminal across seas.” We’re being shuffled through the totalitarian Graceland system. Form a semicircle … Move up to the gold rope … A short man in front of me begins to boil: “I don’t like this being controlled. Standing around doing nothing!” But no insurrection occurs, and soon enough we’re inside the house.

Which is not at all the debauch of tastelessness I’ve been led to expect. Or have I just got bad taste? I find its proportions cozy and humane, and its variegated decor expressive of a thoughtful eccentricity. Touches of private chapel, safari lodge, and bridal boutique—I like it, I like it. The yellow-and-brown TV room with its multiple embedded screens: rather a nice place. Here Elvis, watching all of his TVs at once, previewed the coming fragmentation, the splitting of the screens and the splitting of the minds. He lounged there between the yellow cushions, enthroned in the future. “Elvis,”

confides the voice of John Stamos in my headset, “watched news, sports, variety shows, and situation comedies.”

Across Elvis Presley Boulevard is the other Graceland, the blue-gray complex of buildings where you can gorge your imagination on the Grand Canyon-size posthumousness of Elvis. The Elvis-ness of Elvis. His pompadour like the plume of Achilles. Squint, squint, squint into the vacancy and you can just about see—can you?—the wriggling, brilliant germ of rock and roll way back in there, hear the slap and shudder of the upright bass on “Hound Dog,” the jangled bones of his dancing.

I find myself in a museum with the trappings of his late, mortal period all around me: the Tiffany Jumpsuit, the Gospel Suit, the Black Cisco Kid Suit with the red-leather shoulders, each outfit emptied of Elvis, each outfit throbbing with discrete and barbarous flamboyance on its tailor’s dummy. My God, this is a magical country. American space is crisscrossed with enchantments. Look at Elvis’s gear, this crazy high-priestly clobber with its bejewellings and emblazonings. Summon the man in his final phases, blubbering and sweating and suffering and [clanking onstage to “Also Sprach Zarathustra.”](#) He was a visitant. He was ziggier than Ziggy Stardust. But he never played across seas; America wouldn’t let him. America held him close.

On, Baby Blue, on. It’s Saturday night in Nashville: Broadway is heaving, American party time, and all the bar bands are doing covers. From one doorway I hear a tepid “Enter Sandman,” from another a fairly rocking “Jealous Again” (Black Crowes, not Black Flag). Anyone here not doing covers? Any rock and roll to save my soul? Any raw power? Through a window, I see a tattered and promisingly punky-looking unit plugging in and tuning up, so I go in. “I like your jacket, man,” says the bouncer. Well, that’s something. The band starts playing: *Dang-a-nang! Chikka-chikka-chikka-dang-a-nang!* ... God help me, it’s “[Smells Like Teen Spirit.](#)”

By the time I get to the NASCAR rally, at the Atlanta Motor Speedway, it’s late in the day. The gates are wide open, they’ve stopped checking tickets, and there’s a dizzy, entropic vibe about the place. Gas smell, tire smell, grill smell. Iridescent oil-atoms in the soft evening air. I look around: trucks and vans and encampments, a mechanized shire, flags flying, spreading in merry

medieval disorder to the outer verges and knolls of the farthest parking lots. And from the bowl of the speedway itself, as if from some enormous reactor, rise the great shearing gyres, the centripetal suck-you-in spirals of tire-sneer and engine-roar. What a sound. I stagger toward it like a supplicant.

The cars are all in a bunch, circuit after circuit, an American mantra. Repetition is holy. The void receives their fury. Carry me to heaven on a helix of NASCAR noise. Here we're all tuned to the same vibration. Every 30 seconds or so, as the cars pass, it baptizes you like a power chord: *nnNNEEEE00O!\*!\$\$\$\*!VWWWWMMFFHHHhhsss* ... Your whole body sings with it.

Somebody must be winning, right? "Can you tell me what's going on?" I ask a gray-faced man in protective headphones. "It's a race," he says. More hospitable is a writhing, octopoidal crew of drunken tattooed kids with their shirts off. Their messy energy is spilling over into the seating section next to me, which appears to be reserved for people in wheelchairs. A yellow-shirted steward guards this section like an avatar: When the kids get too close, when their flailing tattooed limbs infringe, she beats them back with fierce yet somehow soothing motions. I tell one of them it's my first time at NASCAR. "MINE TOO!" he yells. "I DON'T GO FOR THIS REDNECK SHIT!"



And now I have an amazing piece of luck: I meet a generous and voluble NASCAR aficionado. Eloquent, crisply excited, beer in hand but ablaze with relative sobriety, he tells me about the recent makeover and resurfacing of the Atlanta track, how the banking on the turns is now four degrees steeper, and how the cars that race the circuit must have restrictor plates on their engines to control the flow of air and thereby limit their speed. Atlanta is not his favorite speedway; that would be Talladega. “I’ll be honest, though,” he says, having taken stock of my non-NASCAR-ness. “You’re gonna see some things there you don’t like.” What could he mean? Some kind of Trumpist Sabbath? I don’t care. I am incoherent with arousal. “This fucking SOUND,” I shout. “I love it! It’s like when I saw Metallica at Woodstock, you know? ‘[For Whom the Bell Tolls](#)’! Ba-ba-ba-BAAA-ba-ba-ba-BUUUH ... You know?” He nods approvingly, his eyes never leaving the race. “That’s a very good analogy.”

“Maybe,” someone said to me at a warehouse rave in San Francisco in 1992, “maybe the problem isn’t that you’ve taken too much acid. Maybe the problem is that you haven’t taken enough.” I was in a state of temporary insanity—but not so insane that I couldn’t appreciate the neatness of the observation.

America, have I had too much of you or not enough? In search of you, I have scaled the mountain of nothingness and sat on the top—which is actually the bottom, because the mountain of nothingness is upside down. I came off my road trip, my lonely-man road trip, when I met up with my son and my nephew in South Carolina. There were still 1,000 miles to drive to Boston, long, yawning hours at the wheel of Baby Blue, but my solitude, and thus my journey into America, was ended.

The hard, compulsive generosity of this country—there's nothing like it. *Raise your game*, it says. *Raise your game*.

Things continued to happen, of course—American things. In Richmond, Virginia, as I wandered the nighttime streets in a condition of mild banishment (my son had kicked me out of our hotel room so he could Zoom with his therapist), a man approached me, wanting cash. Then he wanted to sell me some sneakers. We compromised on my buying him some chicken wings and walked to a chicken-wing place that was glowing helpfully nearby. He ordered 20 wings. “Hold on,” I said. “I’ll get you five.”

On the afternoon ferry from Orient Point, Long Island, to New London, Connecticut, I did some weighing and balancing. Salt wind, grinding of the screws, ocean clouds with their dowry of gold ... Could I get a handle on everything I’d seen, everyone I’d talked with? My blunderings and my blurtings? Doubtful. It would take a poet or a paranoid, wouldn’t it—or an idiot—to roll all of this together into a meaning. Into a grand theory. To connect the leering, oily-black rest-stop-haunting ravens of the Southwest, and the Amazon freight cars beetling through the desert, to the woman standing behind her housekeeping trolley in the hallway of a Hampton Inn outside Greenville, South Carolina, taking a long, meditative pull from her 12-ounce can of Red Bull. (“That’s a big can,” I said. “I’ve got ADHD,” she said, “and this stuff levels me out.”)

I’ll say this: American space embraced me. Then I fell out of it, or was kicked out, like Lucifer, son of the morning, for the sin of great solipsism. Then it embraced me again. The hard, compulsive generosity of this country —there’s nothing like it. *Raise your game*, it says. *Raise your game*. Each encounter seems to tune you up for the one that’s coming next, more

resonant, more of a gift, more desirous of your understanding. And that's pilgrimage, like it or not.

Three weeks after we get home, we're in a bar on gray Route 1A, outside Boston, my son, my dog, and I. Our other car—not the saintly Baby Blue—blew its fuel injector and we came slewing into the lot of this bar in a cloud of panic and gas fumes. Now we're having a beer and waiting for AAA. A patron making his unsteady way to the men's room stoops to pet my dog as he passes. My dog—a bag of nerves—neither growls nor sneers with anxiety, and I express surprise. "Dogs love me," the man says. "Women, on the other hand ..." And there we are, suddenly inside a country song. Roots music.

Bits and pieces, America. The glare of nonstop revelation refracted through a zillion facets. Day to day. Place to place. Your gorgeous, heartbreaking cities, your openhanded people. Winter sunlight glancing off a metal barn roof, glimpsed from a moving car. And all of us going through it, going through you, never more together than when we feel ourselves alone, because if we're all feeling it, loneliness is over.

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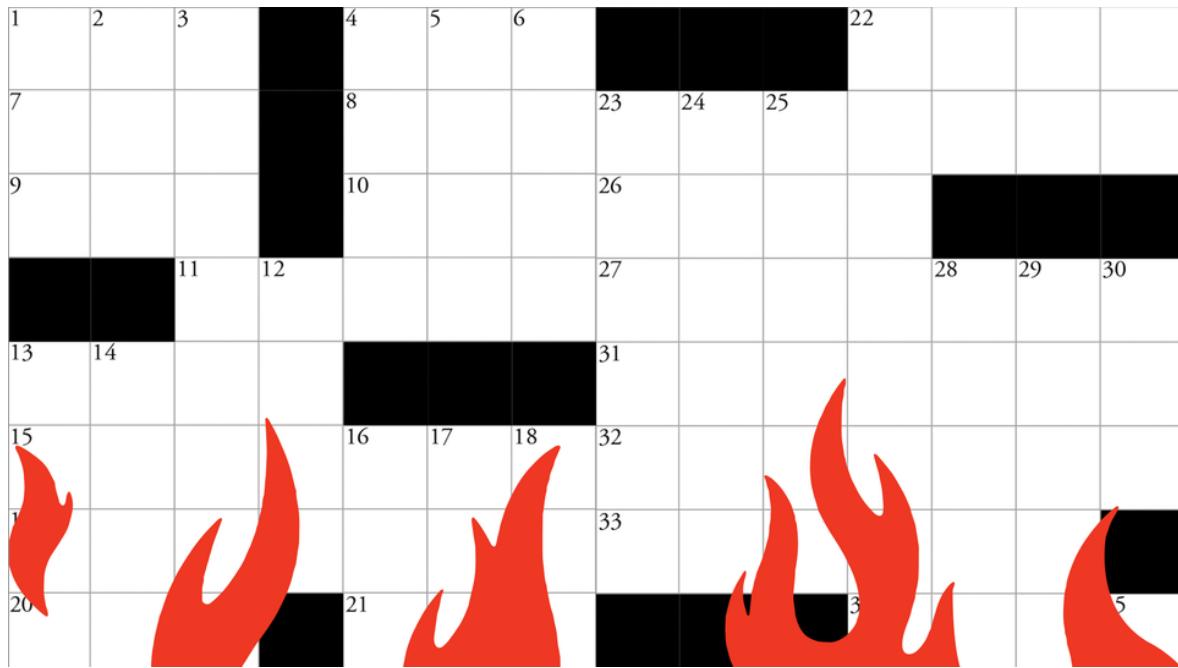
## Editor's Note

- [\*\*A Prize, a Puzzle, and an Ode\*\*](#)

# A Prize, a Puzzle, and an Ode

## On recent happenings at <em>The Atlantic</em>

by Jeffrey Goldberg



Our new crossword, Caleb's Inferno, is devilishly difficult. (The Atlantic)

In his recent bad-for-the-country-but-good-for-him appearance on CNN, Donald Trump said this about his decision, as president, to forcibly separate migrant children from their parents: “When you have that policy, people don’t come. If a family hears that they’re going to be separated—they love their family—they don’t come.” He went on to say, “I know it sounds harsh ... We have to save our country.”

The policy was not merely harsh. It was inhuman, and un-American. Yet Trump continues to endorse a policy for which (to borrow from my colleague Adam Serwer) [the cruelty is the point](#). And this policy could be revived if Trump were to win, or steal, the presidency next year.

Last September, when we published Caitlin Dickerson's magnificent cover story, "[We Need to Take Away Children,](#)" on the origins and execution of the family-separation policy, I did not fully believe that Trump could have a plausible path back to the presidency. Such is the deluding power of hope. We originally asked Caitlin to write what became a nearly 30,000-word investigation because we thought it necessary to document for future generations a homegrown human-rights grotesquerie. But now that Trump has a clear chance to again win his party's nomination, I'm especially proud that we published this story. I hope our readers will share it with all Americans of goodwill. And I'm pleased to say that Caitlin recently received the [2023 Pulitzer Prize in Explanatory Reporting](#) for her work. We did not publish this story to win prizes, but I'm overjoyed to see Caitlin and her editor, Scott Stossel, receive such acclaim, and such an endorsement of their revelatory work.

Caitlin's is the third Pulitzer Prize for *The Atlantic* in as many years. In fact, the [cover story from our September 2021 issue](#), by Jennifer Senior, was awarded the [Pulitzer Prize in Feature Writing](#) last year. We are now planning our September 2023 issue. And we are feeling a certain amount of pressure.

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If there were a Pulitzer Prize for crossword puzzles, I don't doubt that Caleb Madison, *The Atlantic*'s resident puzzle wizard, would win. Many of you are familiar with [his work from TheAtlantic.com](#). Beginning this issue, you will find [his latest invention, Caleb's Inferno](#), on the back page of our print edition. Caleb's Inferno puts a satanic spin on the traditional crossword puzzle; it is a tall, narrow grid that becomes progressively more challenging as you descend into its depths. In other words, it is a hugely fun puzzle that ends in hell. My goal this year is to solve, just one time, this damn (and damned) puzzle.

We are also saying goodbye to one of my favorite columns, the monthly Ode, written by [my brilliant colleague James Parker](#), in partnership with his

brilliant editor, John Swansburg. Across four years, James has produced enthusiasm-saturated encomia (he will mock me for this word) to, among other things, [mood swings](#), [bananas](#), [hotel rooms](#), [being late](#), [giving people money](#), [chewing gum](#), [being yelled at](#), [squirrels](#), and being yelled at by squirrels (well, not the last one). James will be concentrating on longer articles for us, including [the delightful story you will find in this issue](#), about his Hunter S. Thompson-esque journey across America, except without acid (I think). James's liquid, innocent, knowing, and joy-filled prose is a gift to us all. In his final Ode—[an Ode to Odes](#)—James wrote, “The universe will disclose itself to you, it will give you occasions for odes, it will blaze with interest and appreciability, but you've got to be ode-ready.”

Please consider all of *The Atlantic* to be ode-ready.

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# Dispatches

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-

# **Colorado's Ingenious Idea for Solving the Housing Crisis**

## **And why local governments hate it**

by Jerusalem Demsas



On a Wednesday afternoon in March, the Montview Boulevard Presbyterian Church, in Denver's South Park Hill neighborhood, was packed. The local chapter of the progressive group Indivisible was sponsoring a mayoral-candidate forum. Five candidates had been invited to attend. The moderator

asked the usual questions about crime and public safety, homelessness and guns. Then came a question comprehensible only to a close observer of Denver politics: “Do you support releasing the city-owned conservation easement on the Park Hill Golf Course to allow the currently proposed redevelopment of this site?”

Four candidates raised their hands, a couple only halfway, as if that sign of reluctance might lessen the coming disapproval. It didn’t. The crowd booed.

In 1997, [Denver paid the owners of the Park Hill Golf Course \\$2 million to place a conservation easement on the property](#), limiting how it could be used. More than 20 years later, Westside Investment Partners [bought the by-then-defunct golf course for \\$24 million](#). After a contentious community-input process, lawsuits, and [allegations of stolen lawn signs](#), the company settled on a proposal to build 2,500 homes (including a significant number of affordable, family, and senior units) as well as some commercial space. It also promised to reserve two-thirds of the 155-acre property as open space. In 2021, Denver voters approved a ballot measure giving themselves the power to decide the easement’s fate.

On April 4 of this year, voters declined to lift the easement. The split was 59–41, not exactly close. Some observers have taken this outcome as a signal that the people of Denver (or, at least, the fewer than 100,000 who voted down the proposal) reject new development. But in that same election, voters sent two candidates who supported the proposal to a mayoral runoff. Back in the 2022 statewide election, almost a quarter million Denver voters supported Democratic Governor Jared Polis, who campaigned on increasing housing supply and dismantling local roadblocks to construction in order to get a handle on Colorado’s housing-affordability crisis. Also that year, nearly 1.3 million Coloradans [voted to dedicate hundreds of millions of dollars to increasing affordable housing](#). In Denver, the measure won 70–30. Deciding “what the people believe” is not so easy.

Colorado is [short an estimated 127,000 homes](#). The Denver metro area alone is short nearly 70,000 homes. The housing shortage is the main driver of the region’s affordability crisis, and housing-policy experts—though they remain divided on many questions—are nearly unanimous in their belief that resolving it will require bringing many more homes to market. From 2012 to

2017, the region permitted only one new home for every 5.4 new jobs; over the same period, home prices in Denver jumped by 50 percent.

When someone who favors new development in theory opposes a specific project near where they live, we call them a NIMBY. NIMBYism is regularly characterized as a case of revealed preferences: Talk is cheap, and support for policies in the abstract is worthless. Voting for a candidate who champions pro-housing policies is one thing; agreeing to new development in your neighborhood is another.

Conflicting desires do not by themselves prove hypocrisy, however. Some people really do want to see more housing in general, even if they don't want construction next door. The problem is that the local institutions charged with land-use decisions are attuned to parochial complaints, not large-scale needs.

### Jerusalem Demsas: Housing breaks people's brains

The level of government at which we choose to resolve a conflict shapes public opinion and the eventual outcome. The same question posed at a town hall, at a county-council meeting, in the governor's office, or by Congress will not be answered the same way in each venue. The tools available, the norms of debate, and the architecture of accountability change drastically from place to place. Americans believe that housing is a local issue. And it *is* a local issue. But it is also a regional issue, a state issue, and a national issue. By restricting the debate to the hyperlocal level, we've blocked out our big-picture values.

Across metro areas, in states led by Democrats and Republicans alike, the same pattern emerges: Local governments decide what gets built and where, and they use that power to ban multifamily housing, entrench economic segregation, and perpetuate a national affordability crisis.

It's tough to admit, but sometimes NIMBYs have a point. In Denver, I spoke with dozens of community leaders, elected officials, and voters who live near the Park Hill Golf Course. Opponents of the project raised concerns about preserving open spaces, about gentrification, about the democratic process itself.

Former Mayor Wellington Webb told me he opposes developing the Park Hill site because it's "the last piece of open space, land, in Denver."

Leslie Herod, a Colorado state representative and an unsuccessful candidate in this year's mayoral race, also opposes the proposal. She told me she had identified more than 80 underutilized city-owned lots already zoned for residential development where she would rather see housing built.

The Denver city-council member Candi CdeBaca made a version of the "other places" argument too, questioning why development efforts are never focused on wealthy neighborhoods. "We're not talking about development in places where people have privilege," she told me. "Those places are protected with their zoning, those places are protected with their level of engagement, those places are protected by the people they have elected to represent them."

Some voters told me they simply distrusted the process. "There's no guarantee that if the conservation easement is lifted that the [developer] will honor what they've said with creating a park, creating affordable housing," a landscape architect with an antidevelopment yard sign said.

Of course, no project can solve every problem or skirt every concern. Comparison shopping for umbrellas is fine on a sunny day. When you're caught in a torrential downpour, it's wise to take what's available and run for cover.

For their part, proponents of the Park Hill project, in their eagerness to win votes, tended to oversell what it could accomplish. Some described it as a blow against racism or climate change, or a way to help the working class. In my conversations with the plan's backers, I sometimes had to remind myself that we were talking about a 155-acre lot, not the fate of the republic.

Land-use regulations and development patterns *are* a key driver of inequality, pollution, and financial strain. But whether or not the Park Hill plan was approved would have a negligible impact on these larger crises, which will require collective action beyond the scope of any one project. Asking a neighborhood or municipality to bear the responsibility for a

housing crisis and its knock-on effects is asking for failure. Local government simply wasn't built to do this.

Local government is about what you can do for me, right now. Because local officials have a narrow jurisdiction, engaged voters have a direct line to them and significant influence on their decisions. This tight relationship is good for handling issues like broken streetlights and potholes, but it doesn't lend itself to managing society-wide problems, such as a housing crisis. This is why the political logic of building a lot more housing rarely carries the day at the local level.

Who would have lived in the Park Hill housing development, had voters approved it? No one knows. It could have been a recent University of Colorado at Boulder graduate or empty-nesters from the suburbs looking to downsize. Many of the people who would most benefit from the new housing don't yet live in Denver—so they don't have a vote.

Local housing-policy debates are thus asymmetrical. Construction projects have no readily identifiable beneficiaries, but they do levy clear harms, in the form of excessive noise and street closures and changing neighborhood aesthetics.

Just a small fraction of people even engage in local housing fights. Many of those who do are extreme voices or otherwise unrepresentative of the broader community. Look at Fort Collins, Colorado. After more than five years of community engagement, and many months of work by city planners, a 5–2 majority on the city council voted to liberalize land-use policies to allow more housing. But a small group of opponents [pressured the council to reverse itself](#), gathering 6,500 petition signatures—this in a city of more than 160,000. And they won. The council voted again, this time 7–0 to repeal the change.

In interviews, both the head of the Colorado Municipal League, Kevin Bommer, and Denver's current mayor, Michael B. Hancock, touted regional collaboration as a solution to the affordability crisis. But just as one town cannot ensure that the entire region maintains adequate green space while increasing density, it cannot force neighboring towns to work together to find the right balance. The incentive is too strong for an individual

government to say to its neighbor, “You can have all the apartments—we’ll just keep our parks.”

In addition to the Colorado Municipal League, Colorado has several influential regional associations, including the Metro Mayors Caucus and Colorado Counties Inc. Yet greater Denver is still tens of thousands of housing units short of its needs.

The Denver metro area is particularly desperate for small multifamily dwellings (two to nine units) to meet the demand for affordable housing. According to Carrie Makarewicz, a professor at the University of Colorado at Denver, roughly 10 percent of homes in the region meet this criteria. By contrast, 85 percent of residentially zoned land is reserved for single-family homes. By this measure, too, the regional associations have come up short.

Collective-action problems require a body that can hold everyone accountable. Regional associations—which rely on voluntary participation—aren’t going to cut it.

The democratic process begins by defining the democratic body. And when it comes to housing, the body of concern does not end at a town’s boundary line. People moving to the Denver metro area look across the city and into the suburbs for a place to live. One suburb’s opposition to building more housing directly affects prices miles away, because it constrains the supply in a market that spans municipalities. Local governments, in seeking to satisfy local concerns, undermine statewide goals. At least, they do in the absence of state intervention.

State government is also about what you can do for me, but on average: That’s the electoral reality of representing voters across geographic constituencies. Governors and other statewide officials are forced to see the bigger picture because they’re accountable not only to the people who live in a particular community, but also to past residents priced out of and displaced from that community, and to future residents as well. (Nor are newcomers overwhelmingly from out of state, as many seem to believe; census data reveal that about 82 percent of moves happen within states.) Denver’s city council represents the people of Denver, not Aurora, and vice versa. The state represents them all. And in recent polling, 60 percent of registered

voters supported eliminating local restrictions to allow for multifamily housing.

The Colorado state capitol is just a short drive from Park Hill and a brisk walk from city hall, but feels miles away from the thrum of local politics. I went there two days after the Indivisible forum to interview Governor Polis. From across a large round table in his office, Polis told me that “housing, transit, travel, roads: These are interjurisdictional issues because really, very few Coloradans live their whole lives in one jurisdiction.” Unencumbered by the need to defend any one project or developer, the governor reiterated a simple point: “Demand has exceeded supply for the last couple decades, and prices have gone up.” Colorado has to “create more housing now.”

Two citywide votes, multiple lawsuits, and accusations of racism, classism, and harassment that divided Denver. What was the point?

Soon after providing that clean summary of what Colorado needs, Polis announced his best shot at providing it. Washington, Oregon, California, Utah, Montana, and Massachusetts have, to varying degrees, pulled authority for land-use decisions up to the state level. Following their lead, he proposed a bill compelling local governments to adjust their land-use policies to meet housing goals, a process that state officials would oversee. The bill addressed climate, infrastructure, and equity concerns; included provisions for increasing and preserving affordable and multifamily housing; encouraged development near transit; and removed onerous parking requirements.

I asked the governor how he would deal with the political opposition to his bill. “People across the board—Republican, Democrat, independent—housing costs is one of the top items of concern,” he replied. I asked again. “People understand that housing needs to be built,” he told me.

Polis’s original proposal was greeted by fierce opposition from local governments, though not because of objections to open space, affordability, or new parking rules. The fight was over where the power to make land-use decisions should lie.

Kevin Bommer, of the Colorado Municipal League, offered a pithy synthesis of local governments' position: "Respectfully, get off our lawn," he told me.

I asked Bommer about his policy disagreements with the governor, but he kept stressing the issue of local control. "My members statewide don't necessarily disagree with a lot of [Polis's] goals, but to start with saying that the state gets to set a model code and the state gets to regulate and the state will be in charge of land use going forward is a nonstarter," he said.

Bommer pointed me to an old amicus brief filed in defense of a local moratorium on fracking by then-Representative Polis. It defended local government's authority over land-use decisions as both a state-constitution matter and a policy matter. Polis wrote that local democracy allows for "widespread citizen input and broad stakeholder involvement," as well as "more opportunities for public participation."

The fact that Representative Polis disagrees with Governor Polis is exactly the point. A congressman represents his district; he has little reason to care that local control can harm the rest of the state. A governor has a wider remit. If Polis the representative was right, and localities really are the best transmitters of their residents' housing preferences, then what explains clear, widespread discontent with the outcomes of those decisions? Colorado's housing crisis is undeniable, and its land-use authority has rested with local government virtually unquestioned for decades.

Colorado's legislative session ended on May 8. The bill died in the Senate without a final vote.

Afterward, the governor told me he intends to keep fighting. States that have passed land-use reforms, such as California and Washington, suffered multiple defeats before seeing a first victory. Polis told me he's frustrated by communities that said, *No, we should do it.* "The thing is, they're not doing it!" he said with a laugh. Polis returned again to his central argument: "It's beyond the capabilities of [local government] even if there's a city council or mayor with the best of intentions ... We have to figure this out together."

[Annie Lowrey: Everything is about the housing market](#)

Two citywide votes, multiple lawsuits, and accusations of racism, classism, and harassment that divided Denver. What was the point? The property owner is now promising that the former golf course will become ... an active golf course. (This despite the fact that the company has never developed a golf course; its founder told me they're "doing research on it now.") Well-meaning objectors judge proposals against a hypothetical better option, but in reality, the alternative to a decent project is often no project at all.

Kelly Brough, who supported the development project and was in the runoff to become Denver's next mayor, is nevertheless hesitant to embrace state interference. "I can't say Denver should not control its destiny ... I'm just not ready to give it up yet."

This power struggle is playing out across the country. It's ostensibly a struggle over housing affordability, but it is also a fight over how we see voters. In polls and interviews, voters express deep empathy for people experiencing homelessness and deep frustration with widespread housing unaffordability. But that's not the part of us that local government can hear. Instead local politics magnifies our selfish concerns: *How will this affect my parking availability? What will this do to my view?*

Everyone has a little NIMBY in them. It doesn't have to be the part that wins.

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*This article appears in the [July/August 2023](#) print edition with the headline "Local Government Has Too Much Power."*

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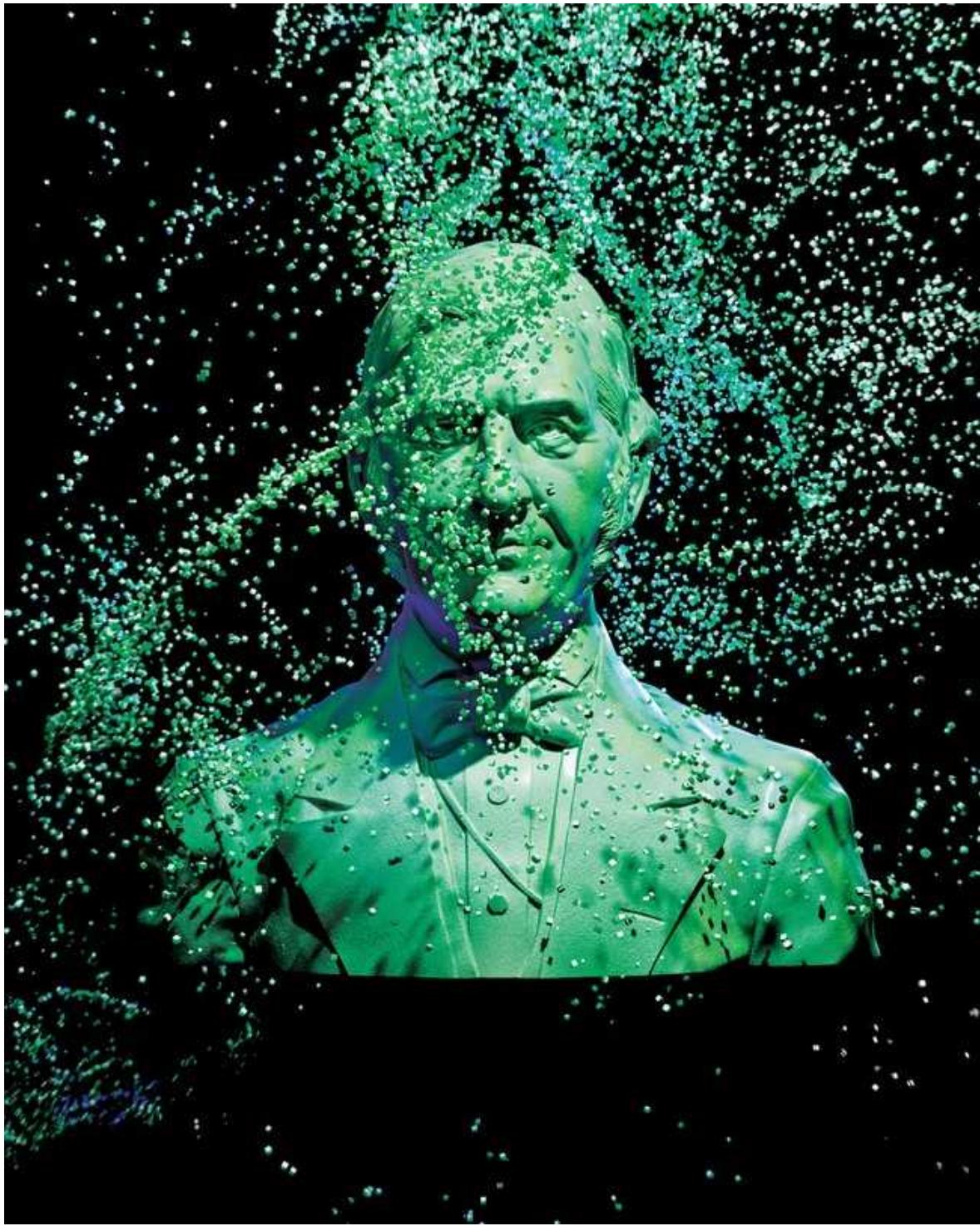
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# The Coming Humanist Renaissance

**We need a cultural and  
philosophical movement to meet the  
rise of artificial superintelligence.**

by Adrienne LaFrance



*This article was featured in One Story to Read Today, a newsletter in which our editors recommend a single must-read from The Atlantic, Monday through Friday. [Sign up for it here.](#)*

On July 13, 1833, during a visit to the Cabinet of Natural History at the Jardin des Plantes, in Paris, Ralph Waldo Emerson had an epiphany. Peering

at the museum's specimens—butterflies, hunks of amber and marble, carved seashells—he felt overwhelmed by the interconnectedness of nature, and humankind's place within it.

The experience inspired him to write "[The Uses of Natural History](#)," and to articulate a philosophy that put naturalism at the center of intellectual life in a technologically chaotic age—guiding him, along with the collective of writers and radical thinkers known as transcendentalists, to a new spiritual belief system. Through empirical observation of the natural world, Emerson believed, anyone could become "[a definer and map-maker](#) of the latitudes and longitudes of our condition"—finding agency, individuality, and wonder in a mechanized age.

America was crackling with invention in those years, and [everything seemed to be speeding up](#) as a result. Factories and sugar mills popped up like dandelions, steamships raced to and from American ports, locomotives tore across the land, the telegraph connected people as never before, and the first photograph was taken, forever altering humanity's view of itself. The national mood was a mix of exuberance, anxiety, and dread.

#### [From the June 2018 issue: Henry A. Kissinger on AI and how the Enlightenment ends](#)

The flash of vision Emerson experienced in Paris was not a rejection of change but a way of reimagining human potential as the world seemed to spin off its axis. Emerson's reaction to the technological renaissance of the 19th century is worth revisiting as we contemplate the great technological revolution of our own century: the rise of artificial superintelligence.

Even before its recent leaps, artificial intelligence has for years roiled the informational seas in which we swim. Early disturbances arose from the ranking algorithms that have come to define the modern web—that is, the opaque code that tells Google which results to show you, and that organizes and personalizes your feeds on social platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok by slurping up data about you as a way to assess what to spit back out.

Now imagine this same internet infrastructure but with programs that communicate with a veneer of authority on any subject, with the ability to generate sophisticated, original text, audio, and [video](#), and the power to mimic individuals in a manner so convincing that people [will not know what is real](#). These self-teaching AI models are being designed to become better at what they do with every single interaction. But they also sometimes hallucinate, and manipulate, and fabricate. And you cannot predict what they'll do or why they'll do it. If Google's search engine is the modern-day Library of Alexandria, the new AI will be a mercurial prophet.

### [From the May 2018 issue: The era of fake video begins](#)

Generative artificial intelligence is advancing with unbelievable speed, and will be applied across nearly every discipline and industry. Tech giants—including Alphabet (which owns Google), Amazon, Meta (which owns Facebook), and Microsoft—are locked in a race to weave AI into existing products, such as maps, email, social platforms, and photo software.

The technocultural norms and habits that have seized us during the triple revolution of the internet, smartphones, and the social web are themselves in need of a thorough correction. Too many people have allowed these technologies to simply wash over them. We would be wise to rectify the errors of the recent past, but also to anticipate—and proactively shape—what the far more radical technology now emerging will mean for our lives, and how it will come to remake our civilization.

Corporations that stand to profit off this new technology are already memorizing the platitudes necessary to wave away the critics. They'll use sunny jargon like “human augmentation” and “human-centered artificial intelligence.” But these terms are as shallow as they are abstract. What’s coming stands to dwarf every technological creation in living memory: the internet, the personal computer, the atom bomb. It may well be the most consequential technology in all of human history.

People are notoriously terrible at predicting the future, and often slow to recognize a revolution—even when it is already under way. But the span of time between when new technology emerges and when standards and norms are hardened is often short. The Wild West, in other words, only lasts for so

long. Eventually, the railroads standardize time; incandescent bulbs beat out arc lamps; the dream of the open web dies.

The window for effecting change in the realm of AI is still open. Yet many of those who have worked longest to establish guardrails for this new technology are despairing that the window is nearly closed.

Generative AI, just like search engines, telephones, and locomotives before it, will allow us to do things with levels of efficiency so profound, it will seem like magic. We may see whole categories of labor, and in some cases entire industries, wiped away with startling speed. The utopians among us will view this revolution as an opportunity to outsource busywork to machines for the higher purpose of human self-actualization. This new magic could indeed create more time to be spent on matters more deserving of our attention—deeper quests for knowledge, faster routes to scientific discovery, extra time for leisure and with loved ones. It may also lead to [widespread unemployment](#) and the loss of professional confidence as a more competent AI looks over our shoulder.

### [Annie Lowrey: Before AI takes over, make plans to give everyone money](#)

Government officials, along with other well-intentioned leaders, are groping toward ethical principles for artificial intelligence—see, for example, the White House’s “[Blueprint for an AI Bill of Rights](#). ” (Despite the clunky title, the intention is for principles that will protect *human* rights, though the question of civil rights for machines will eventually arise.) These efforts are necessary but not enough to meet the moment.

We should know by now that neither the government’s understanding of new technologies nor self-regulation by tech behemoths can adequately keep pace with the speed of technological change or Silicon Valley’s capacity to seek profit and scale at the expense of societal and democratic health. What defines this next phase of human history must begin with the individual.

Just as the Industrial Revolution sparked transcendentalism in the U.S. and romanticism in Europe—both movements that challenged conformity and prioritized truth, nature, and individualism—today we need a cultural and philosophical revolution of our own. This new movement should prioritize

humans above machines and reimagine human relationships with nature and with technology, while still advancing what this technology can do at its best. Artificial intelligence will, unquestionably, help us make miraculous, lifesaving discoveries. The danger lies in outsourcing our humanity to this technology without discipline, especially as it eclipses us in apperception. We need a human renaissance in the age of intelligent machines.

In the face of world-altering invention, with the power of today's tech barons so concentrated, it can seem as though ordinary people have no hope of influencing the machines that will soon be cognitively superior to us all. But there is tremendous power in defining ideals, even if they ultimately remain out of reach. Considering all that is at stake, we have to at least try.

[From the June 2023 issue: Never give artificial intelligence the nuclear codes](#)

Transparency should be a core tenet in the new human exchange of ideas—people ought to disclose whenever an artificial intelligence is present or has been used in communication. This ground rule could prompt discipline in creating more-human (and human-only) spaces, as well as a less anonymous web. Any journalist can tell you that anonymity should be used only as a last resort and in rare scenarios for the public good. We would benefit from cultural norms that expect people to assert not just their opinions but their actual names too.

Now is the time, as well, to recommit to making deeper connections with other people. Live videochat can collapse time and distance, but such technologies are a poor substitute for face-to-face communication, especially in settings where creative collaboration or learning is paramount. The pandemic made this painfully clear. Relationships cannot and should not be sustained in the digital realm alone, especially as AI further erodes our understanding of what is real. Tapping a “Like” button is not friendship; it’s a data point. And a conversation with an artificial intelligence is one-sided—an illusion of connection.

Someday soon, a child may not have just one AI “friend,” but more AI friends than human ones. These companions will not only be built to surveil the humans who use them; they will be tied inexorably to commerce—

meaning that they will be designed to encourage engagement and profit. Such incentives warp what relationships ought to be.

Writers of fiction—Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Rod Serling, José Saramago—have for generations warned of doppelgängers that might sap our humanity by stealing a person’s likeness. Our new world is a wormhole to that uncanny valley.

Whereas the first algorithmic revolution involved using people’s personal data to reorder the world for them, the next will involve our personal data being used not just to splinter our shared sense of reality, but to invent synthetic replicas. The profit-minded music-studio exec will thrill to the notion of an AI-generated voice with AI-generated songs, not attached to a human with intellectual-property rights. Artists, writers, and musicians should anticipate widespread impostor efforts and fight against them. So should all of us. One computer scientist recently told me she’s planning to create a secret code word that only she and her elderly parents know, so that if they ever hear her voice on the other end of the phone pleading for help or money, they’ll know whether it’s been generated by an AI trained on her publicly available lectures to sound exactly like her and scam them.

We should resist overreliance on tools that dull the wisdom of our own aesthetics and intellect.

Today’s elementary-school children are already learning not to trust that anything they see or hear through a screen is real. But they deserve a modern technological and informational environment built on Enlightenment values: reason, human autonomy, and the respectful exchange of ideas. Not everything should be recorded or shared; there is individual freedom in embracing ephemerality. More human interactions should take place only between the people involved; privacy is key to preserving our humanity.

Finally, a more existential consideration requires our attention, and that is the degree to which the pursuit of knowledge orients us inward or outward. The artificial intelligence of the near future will supercharge our empirical abilities, but it may also dampen our curiosity. We are at risk of becoming so enamored of the synthetic worlds that we create—all data sets, duplicates,

and feedback loops—that we cease to peer into the unknown with any degree of true wonder or originality.

We should trust human ingenuity and creative intuition, and resist overreliance on tools that dull the wisdom of our own aesthetics and intellect. Emerson once wrote that Isaac Newton “used the same wit to weigh the moon that he used to buckle his shoes.” Newton, I’ll point out, also used that wit to invent a reflecting telescope, the beginnings of a powerful technology that has allowed humankind to squint at the origins of the universe. But the spirit of Emerson’s idea remains crucial: Observing the world, taking it in using our senses, is an essential exercise on the path to knowledge. We can and should layer on technological tools that will aid us in this endeavor, but never at the expense of seeing, feeling, and ultimately knowing for ourselves.

A future in which overconfident machines seem to hold the answers to all of life’s cosmic questions is not only dangerously misguided, but takes away that which makes us human. In an age of anger, and snap reactions, and seemingly all-knowing AI, we should put more emphasis on contemplation as a way of being. We should embrace an unfinished state of thinking, the constant work of challenging our preconceived notions, seeking out those with whom we disagree, and sometimes still not knowing. We are mortal beings, driven to know more than we ever will or ever can.

The passage of time has the capacity to erase human knowledge: Whole languages disappear; explorers lose their feel for crossing the oceans by gazing at the stars. Technology continually reshapes our intellectual capacities. What remains is the fact that we are on this planet to seek knowledge, truth, and beauty—and that we only get so much time to do it.

As a small child in Concord, Massachusetts, I could see Emerson’s home from my bedroom window. Recently, I went back for a visit. [Emerson’s house](#) has always captured my imagination. He lived there for 47 years until his death, in 1882. Today, it is maintained by his descendants and a small staff dedicated to his legacy. The house is some 200 years old, and shows its age in creaks and stains. But it also possesses a quality that is extraordinarily rare for a structure of such historic importance: 141 years after his death, Emerson’s house still feels like *his*. His books are on the shelves. One of his

hats hangs on a hook by the door. The original William Morris wallpaper is bright green in the carriage entryway. A rendering of Francesco Salviati's *The Three Fates*, holding the thread of destiny, stands watch over the mantel in his study. This is the room in which Emerson wrote *Nature*. The table where he sat to write it is still there, next to the fireplace.

[From the October 1883 issue: Ralph Waldo Emerson's 'Historic Notes of Life and Letters in Massachusetts'](#)

Standing in Emerson's study, I thought about how no technology is as good as going to the place, whatever the destination. No book, no photograph, no television broadcast, no tweet, no meme, no augmented reality, no hologram, no AI-generated blueprint or fever dream can replace what we as humans experience. This is why you make the trip, you cross the ocean, you watch the sunset, you hear the crickets, you notice the phase of the moon. It is why you touch the arm of the person beside you as you laugh. And it is why you stand in awe at the Jardin des Plantes, floored by the universe as it reveals its hidden code to you.

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*This article appears in the [July/August 2023](#) print edition with the headline “In Defense of Humanity.” When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.*

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# I Saw You Standing There

## Reflections on my 1964 trip to New York City—and what Beatlemania felt like to me and my bandmates

by Paul McCartney



The crowd on West 58th Street (Paul McCartney)

Success in America was what we'd always wanted. When we were growing up, it was where all the film stars came from—people like Marilyn Monroe, Marlon Brando, and James Dean. And everything we listened to was from America. You didn't really listen to many British bands, but if you did, they were getting their influences from America too. Without the music of Elvis,

Buddy Holly, Little Richard, The Everly Brothers, and so many more, there wouldn't have been The Beatles.

I still get asked about the pressure of that first trip to the U.S. So many people back home were rooting for us—it was a huge deal for a British band to be No. 1 over there. It sounds like a lot to put on the shoulders of four lads in their early 20s but, in reality, we were just wisecracking guys, and we had fun with one another whatever we did and wherever we went. I think this comes across in my photos.



George Harrison naps on the plane to New York, February 7, 1964. (Paul McCartney)

But nothing could have prepared me for the wild Friday afternoon that launched the hysteria and madness—“Beatlemania,” as they already called it back home—that characterized 1964 for us. Looking at these pictures today, I’m still taken aback by it all. Landing at JFK Airport to this huge reception of fans and press was only the start; the rest of the trip became even more chaotic.



*Top and bottom: Fans and photographers in Central Park (Paul McCartney)*

At the airport press conference, we found that the American reporters were obsessed with our hair; they asked if we were going to get haircuts. George

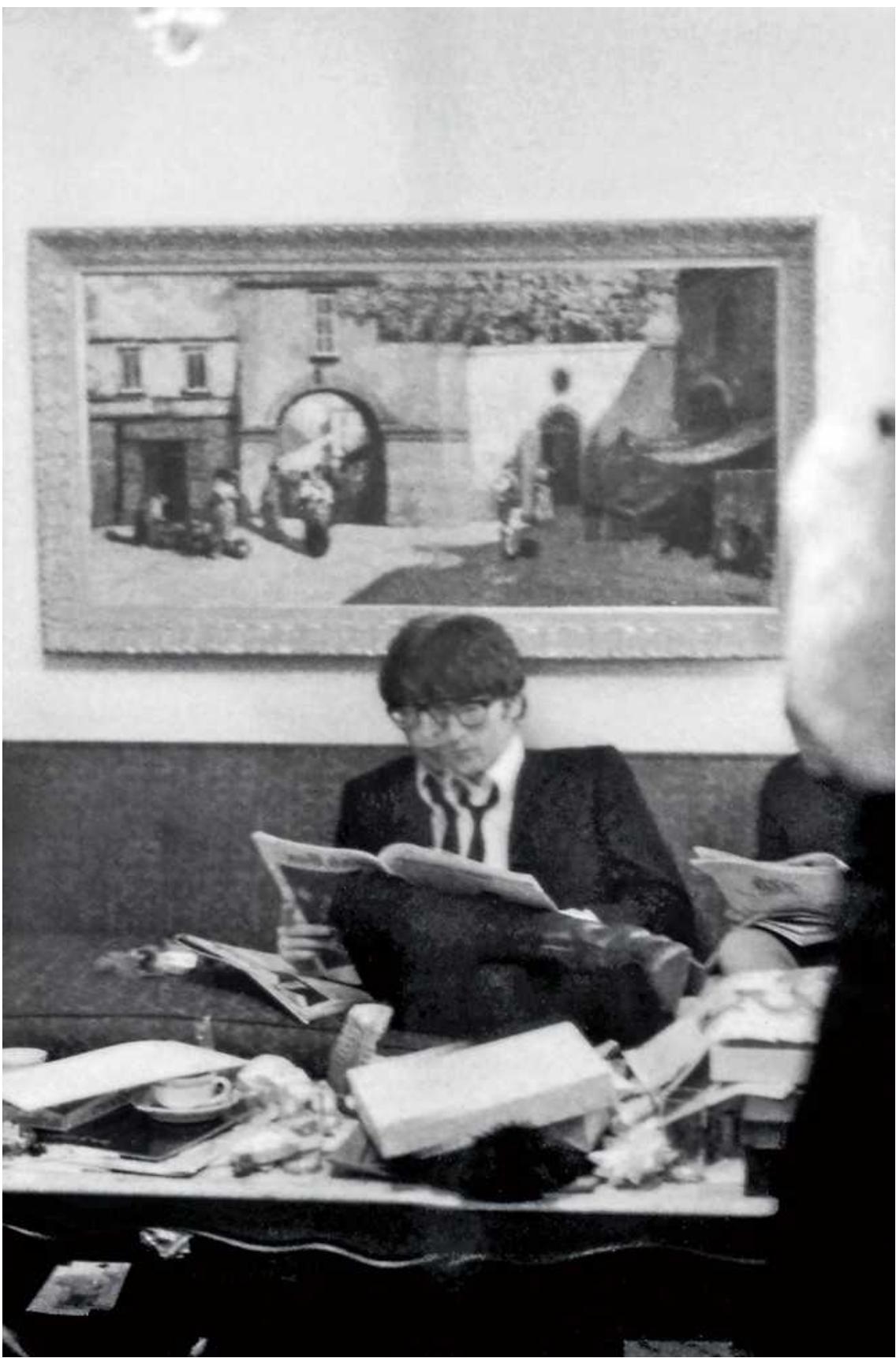
replied that he'd had one the day before. That still makes me smile. It was just perfect, because once they saw that we weren't going to be scared of them, they loved throwing their questions at us, and we would bat them right back. It became a fun little game. I remember one journalist who always asked the same question: "What are you going to do when the bubble bursts?" It got to be a running joke, and we'd ask him to ask us: "What are you going to do when the bubble bursts?" Our answer? "Well, we would go *pop!*"

You can see in the photos the fans chasing us and waving to us along the New York streets. We had these portable radios, so in the car we discovered WABC, one of the city's most influential Top 40 stations. They were broadcasting things like "The Beatles are now in town!" Murray the K, a famous DJ on the WINS station at the time, latched on to us. We liked him. He was a ballsy New Yorker who we thought was funny. We were staying at the Plaza Hotel; the staff was pretty horrified by all the hullabaloo, with photographers from magazines and newspapers we'd never heard of lined up in the crowded corridors, trying to get something exclusive. A number of adventurous fans were also doing everything they could to try to sneak into our rooms.

The photographs from New York show the commotion that followed our arrival in the city. There is the frenzied crowd chasing us down West 58th Street, between the Plaza and Avenue of the Americas, that I caught out of the car's rear window. We did a photo shoot in Central Park, and I had my camera with me, so I captured people taking pictures of me up close, and you can see how we were constantly surrounded by cameras. These photos contrast with those from our hotel suite, which show unguarded, quiet moments.



The Ronettes' Ronnie Spector in The Beatles' Plaza Hotel suite (Paul McCartney)



John Lennon (Paul McCartney)



DJ Murray the K (Paul McCartney)

When I'm looking at the photos, memories come floating back, and I find, with memories, it's often the more trivial things that seem to stick. In the U.K., we had been used to wearing a pancake makeup called Leichner—but for *The Ed Sullivan Show*, the makeup artists were suddenly packing on this orange stuff, layer after layer. And we were going, “Are you sure about this?” They said, “Yeah, we know. We know the show.” The show was broadcast in black and white, so they knew the makeup had to be thick. And they were right! We came out the color of orange juice, but on the show you can't really tell we are wearing makeup.



Ringo Starr sets up his drum kit during rehearsals for *The Ed Sullivan Show*.  
(Paul McCartney)

When I watch that [first Ed Sullivan Show performance](#) now, I'm struck by how much fun we're having. Following commercials for Aero Shave and Griffin Liquid Wax shoe polish, we played three songs: "All My Loving," "Till There Was You," and "She Loves You." Then, later in the show, we performed "I Saw Her Standing There," and finally "[I Want to Hold Your Hand](#)." That night, *The Ed Sullivan Show* had a far greater audience than usual: 73 million people, way more than the entire U.K. population. It was a wildly exciting time.

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*This article was adapted from Paul McCartney's book [1964: Eyes of the Storm](#). It appears in the [July/August 2023](#) print edition with the headline "[I Saw You Standing There](#)."*

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## ‘Hell Welcomes All’

# Can hard-core gamers learn to play well with others?

by Spencer Kornhaber



When I listen to the voice recording I made at the Irvine, California, headquarters of the video-game company Blizzard Entertainment this past January, I hear a noise that many gamers find blissful: the sound of utter mayhem. Playing a prerelease version of *Diablo IV*, the latest installment in

a 26-year-old adventure series about battling the forces of hell, I faced swarms of demons that yowled and belched. My character, a sorcerer, shot them with lightning bolts, producing a jet-engine roar. I jabbed buttons arrhythmically—*click ... click ... clickclickclick*—while trying to stifle curses and whimpers. But the strangest sounds came from the two *Diablo IV* designers who sat alongside me. As I dueled with an angry sea witch, Joseph Piepiora, an associate game director, gently noted that I was low on healing potions. “But that’s okay,” he said, “because you’re conducting an interview while doing a boss fight. It’s okay.”

The kindness was appreciated if incongruous: The world of *Diablo* is violent and lonely, a classic example of the hard-core-gaming experience. Earlier editions are notorious for beckoning a certain kind of player—typically male—to hunker down alone in marathons of virtual hacking and slashing, immersed in a simplistic fantasy in which might makes right and women wear bikini-like armor. But Blizzard Entertainment is trying to show its sociable side these days. With tens of millions of monthly users of its products, the studio is one of the most important brands in gaming, an industry whose nearly \$200 billion in annual revenues [exceed those of the global box office and the recording industry combined](#). Blizzard is also a business under siege: an object lesson in how gaming’s old guard is facing new pressures.

In 2021, [allegations in a lawsuit](#) brought by California’s Department of Fair Employment and Housing against the studio’s parent company, Activision Blizzard, seemed to confirm the worst stereotypes of gaming as a realm of testosterone-fueled brutality and indulgence—and not just within the universe of the games themselves. According to the complaint, the company had become a “frat house” where female employees were underpaid, discriminated against, and groped; “women who were not ‘huge gamers’ or ‘core gamers’ and not into the party scene were excluded and treated as outsiders.” Activision Blizzard [initially described](#) the allegations as “distorted, and in many cases false,” a response that the company’s CEO soon after [called](#) “tone deaf.” The suit is still in litigation, but a number of company leaders have departed since it was filed, including developers originally tasked with steering *Diablo IV*, Blizzard’s most anticipated new title in years.

Gaming's association with antisocial, immature dudes is dying hard.

The company has pledged to hire more women, treat employees better, and make more inclusive products—all while being vetted for a \$68.7 billion acquisition bid by Microsoft, a deal that [regulators are scrutinizing](#), wary of the market power that the resulting megacorporation could wield.

“It’s taking time for us to grow up,” Rod Fergusson, *Diablo*’s general manager, told me. By “us” he meant the industry at large. No longer the niche activity it was when Blizzard was founded in 1991, gaming has become a mass pastime (two-thirds of Americans participate) and a diverse one (nearly half of gamers are women). New and so-called casual users, many playing on their phone, have driven the sector’s surging growth. But the mainstreaming has triggered purist pushback, tinged with machismo and aggression. In the mid-2010s, the “Gamergate” campaign saw hard-core players systematically harass “fake gamer girls” who dared to denounce, say, the “jiggle physics” commonly used in the animation of female characters across the medium. Multiplayer-chat channels remain, as ever, rife with bigotry and sneers at “newbies.” The allegations against Activision Blizzard, along with recent harassment scandals at a number of other prominent companies, suggest an intractable culture. Gaming’s association with antisocial, immature dudes is dying hard.

I visited Blizzard’s headquarters because, to tell the truth, I was once an antisocial teenage dude who spent a lot of time with *Diablo II*, the 2000 iteration of the franchise. Playing as an ax-wielding barbarian with bulging muscles, I slashed across screens full of monsters, striving to acquire power (by gaining experience points) and lucre (gold, gems, and gear dropped by vanquished foes). The franchise’s creators had wanted the time “from boot-up to kill” to be less than a minute, and for combat to reward players like slot machines reward gamblers. The resulting rhythm of pummeling and prospering—the game’s “core loop,” to use an industry term—was more validating than anything in my real life as a high schooler. I was so hooked that I eventually decided to quit the game cold turkey, fearing that my schoolwork and friendships would wither away if I didn’t.

[From the October 2021 issue: Confessions of a Sid Meier’s Civilization addict](#)

Ostensibly, the industry has changed a lot since then. The first *Diablo* sequel in 11 years is being released by a scandal-chastened company touting a PR-savvy mission to “foster joy and belonging for everyone,” as Blizzard’s president, Mike Ybarra, put it to me. The goal is to appeal “to as many players as we could possibly think of, because we want this game to be inclusive,” another *Diablo* team member said. But as it turns out, *Diablo*’s hard-core-friendly hellscape hasn’t been reformed so much as made roomier. For Blizzard, is growing up really about finding new ways to grow its bottom line?

Blizzard has already helped shape and reshape the idea of what video games are and who plays them. By pairing vibrant, inviting aesthetics and fanaticism-inducing complexity, the early hits *Warcraft* (1994), *Diablo* (1997), and *StarCraft* (1998) created masses of devoted gamers in the first generation to come of age with PCs. But Blizzard’s most significant contribution to gaming may have been its 2004 smash, *World of Warcraft*, which instilled the idea that games could serve as virtual communities.

Smartphones and social media brought new users into gaming’s fold—many of them more interested in camaraderie and creative expression than combat.

A “massively multiplayer online role-playing game,” *World of Warcraft* offered a sprawling environment populated by hundreds or thousands of other human-controlled heroes who were encouraged to quest together. Fostering an online civilization where one can feel like both a fearsome mage and an admired camp counselor, the game became an example of how to profitably fulfill the cravings of multiple constituencies: By 2009, it was the most popular paid title among women ages 25 to 54.

Smartphones and social media brought new users into gaming’s fold—many of them more interested in camaraderie and creative expression than combat. Across a range of tried-and-true genres, video-game designers took the Hollywood-blockbuster approach, creating games that catered to mixed audiences: male and female, old and young. Well-populated virtual playgrounds such as Epic Games’ *Fortnite*—in which scores of competitors trade bullets, banter, and funny dances, much to the derision of hard-core gamers—have contributed to the doubling of global gaming revenues since the mid-2010s.

This influx of new players brought with it new tensions. As Blizzard unsteadily adjusted to the marketplace it had helped create, the company started to face criticism from multiple directions. The streamlined gameplay and brighter-hued, somewhat-cute visual style of 2012's *Diablo III* [angered many veteran gamers](#) by appearing to pander to newbies. Yet soon after that, to the dismay of some female fans, Chris Metzen, then a vice president at Blizzard, referred to a new *World of Warcraft* storyline [as "a boys' trip."](#) Elizabeth Harper, the editorial director of the fan site Blizzard Watch, told me she recalled having "a sinking feeling" about his remarks: "He's up onstage saying, *Yeah, this is a 'no girls allowed' club.*" Eight years later, the California Department of Fair Employment and Housing's allegations against Activision Blizzard suggested that the club was alive and well.

In making inclusion central to its pitch for *Diablo IV*—"Hell welcomes all," goes one marketing tagline—Blizzard has introduced some cosmetic changes. You can customize your barbarian avatar to appear nonbinary, if you so choose. The game's lead villain, the ram-horned demon Lilith, might even be seen as a strong (if, alas, homicidal) female character. More notable, however, are the structural changes, which take their cues from *World of Warcraft*'s capaciousness and encourage more varied, and social, styles of play.

Rather than move through a linear sequence of challenges, players roam a sprawling "open world," tackling quests in whatever order they want, or ignoring them altogether. This format has its appeal for hard-core completists—after all, it multiplies the number of missions to master—but Ash Sweetring Vickey, a producer on the game's dungeons team (which endows ghoul-infested caverns with the thrilling infinitude of a casino floor), pointed out that it's also great for low-stress time killing. "If I wanted to go spend a hundred million hours just looking at wraiths in the wild, I could do that," she told me.

For veterans, the most controversial development is who resides in this open world: throngs of gamers adventuring all at once. Many fans relished playing previous editions of *Diablo* solo, fulfilling the fantasy of being a lone savior overcoming immense odds. But in *Diablo IV*, some key areas are populated with the avatars of other players. In theory, you can ignore these

avatars, but the game nudges you to engage with them by featuring a few gargantuan monsters who are nearly unbeatable on one's own.

"We got pushback from people who heard about the shared world," Fergusson, the general manager, said. "They were like, 'I don't want to see other players. I want to be alone. This is my journey.'" Last fall, the fan site Pure Diablo [published an open letter](#) to Blizzard, advising against so-called forced multiplayer. "Focus on making the game a ... game!" one commenter wrote. Meaning: Keep it old-school; don't turn it into a social network.

But the business rationale for mandatory online play could hardly be clearer, as the makers of *World of Warcraft* learned long ago and as recent juggernauts such as *Fortnite* have confirmed. (A social environment also entices players to pay for extra content, such as the "cosmetic upgrades" that will be available in *Diablo IV*—don't you want to be the best-dressed sorcerer in the land?) Ybarra, Blizzard's president, mentioned wanting to eventually reach 1 billion people with Blizzard's games—which means that serving hard-core players alone is not the main quest.

Yet Blizzard isn't ditching the old guard, and has crammed *Diablo IV* with elements they crave: endless options for combining weaponry and gear; beasts that get smarter and meaner as you progress; amped-up scariness and gore. (I nearly gagged while fighting through a dungeon encrusted with festering intestinal pustules.) Reconciling obsession-breeding depth and intensity with buffet-style breadth and access was, the developer Piepiora told me, the main design challenge: "trying to take the ideas of this massive, interconnected world and meaningfully tie them back to the core loop." The hope, in other words, is to extend the game's allure while strengthening the cycle that potentially turns newbies into addicts of the bashing and looting that was, and remains, *Diablo*'s essence.

The end product is a bit surprising for a company that aims to present itself as emerging from scandal and eager to foster joy, in Ybarra's words. *Diablo IV* is bleaker, eerier, and perhaps even more mania-inducing than any earlier installment. In the hours I spent playing it, I fell under the same spell I did as a teen. My character traversed a nightmarish realm, strewn with the ruins of villages (*Don't forget to inspect the corpses of the villagers for gold*, I told myself). When other players flitted by on the battlefield, they didn't alter my

trajectory or jolt me out of my hypnosis. I had no idea who my peers in demon-slaying were; they had customized their appearance and were embarking on bespoke adventures. What I did know was that they were doing exactly the same thing I was doing: *click ... click ... clickclickclick*.

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*This article appears in the [July/August 2023](#) print edition with the headline “Hell Welcomes All.”*

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# What's So Funny About Dying?

**Death is everywhere in Lorrie Moore's strange new novel, and so is the author's trademark jokiness.**

by Judith Shulevitz



Not having read Lorrie Moore in a while (too long!), I forgot how uncanny her stories are. Or perhaps I never knew. I mistook the first short story of hers that I ever encountered, “[You’re Ugly, Too](#),” for how-we-live-now fiction—dark and mordant, but not particularly spooky. Zoë is the token

female in the history department of a liberal-arts college in Illinois. Her East Coast sarcasm has a bite that confuses midwesterners, or so she thinks: “*What is your perfume?*” a student once asked her. *Room freshener*, she said. She smiled, but he looked at her, unnerved.” She has a mysterious growth in her abdomen; avoiding a phone call with test results, she visits her sister in Manhattan and attends her god-awful Halloween party. *I’ve been to that party*, I thought: the women in the sexy-witch costumes; people saying “the usual things”; the guy on the balcony interrupting Zoë’s joke to tell his.

Rereading Moore’s story, however, I see that I hadn’t understood it, especially not the ending. Spoiler alert: Zoë comes up behind the obnoxious guy on the balcony, who is decked out in an insufferable naked-woman costume. He leans on the railing, 20 stories above the street. She shoves him, hard. His arms slip forward; beer sloshes out of its bottle. Moore winds down with a cryptic exchange:

He gazed at her, appalled and frightened, his Magic Marker buttocks turned away now toward all of downtown, a naked pseudo-woman with a blue bracelet at the wrist, trapped out on a balcony with—with *what?* “*Really, I was just kidding!*” Zoë shouted. The wind lifted the hair off her head, skyward in spines behind the bone. If there were a lake, the moonlight would dance across it in conniptions. She smiled at him, and wondered how she looked.

With what was he trapped? Given the eerie ascension of hair, the vision of manic moonlight, the wildly inappropriate smile, I’d say a witch. Terrified and angry, with a caustic edge that is not quite under her control, Zoë—*what a witch!*—has become the real thing, at least in comparison with the impostors in the apartment.

The weird, in the weird-sisters sense of the word, [has a discernible place in Moore’s fiction](#), albeit in the margins. The membrane between this world and the other is permeable; unearthly beings ooze through. Sometimes they stay in thoughts or dreams, but occasionally they materialize. Who, or what, is the little girl who keeps spitting at Mary in the short story “Two Boys”? She seems to have no home, never goes to school, and compares sausages hanging in a shop window to dead boyfriends; when she lopes away, Mary sees “a bird rarely seen unless believed in, wretchedly, like a moonward

thought”—some sort of dark angel, or so I take her to be. Tessie, the protagonist of *A Gate at the Stairs* (2009), Moore’s third novel, is visited by the silent apparitions of her brother and an ex-boyfriend, “neither vaporous nor cadaverous, but wordless and turning and walking away,” at around the same time that the brother dies while serving in Afghanistan. In the story “[Terrific Mother](#),” Adrienne, racked by guilt over having accidentally dropped and killed a friend’s baby, senses the child behind her, “a little older now, a toddler,” walking “in a ghostly way,” accompanied by Adrienne’s dead parents.

### From the 2011 Fiction issue: Don’t write what you know

In her new novel, *I Am Homeless If This Is Not My Home*, Moore puts the supernatural front and center. The publicity material calls the book a ghost story, but that doesn’t quite capture the nature of its paranormality. Ghost stories defamiliarize the known world; this novel is off-kilter from the beginning.

Its very structure disorients. The novel toggles between two seemingly unrelated narratives, separated in time by roughly 150 years. Each echoes the other, but atmospherically, not in terms of the plot; it’s as if two pieces of music were exchanging motifs. They share a down-and-out ambience, an obsession with President Abraham Lincoln, a peculiar relationship to corpses. When the stories finally intersect two-thirds of the way in, some mysteries are solved but more are created. You will not understand this novel if you read it only once.

One part of *I Am Homeless* belongs to Elizabeth, the eccentric owner of a boardinghouse in an unspecified southern state shortly after the Civil War, who writes letters to her sister. With macabre cheerfulness and a 19th-century indirection to her storytelling, Elizabeth describes her questionable innkeeping: “I can hardly tell you what I do with the squirrels,” she writes. “Well, all right: I drown them with a contraption like a see-saw that dumps them” in water also used for the laundry. The poor creatures show up in the lodgers’ stew. The boarders are a sundry lot—card sharps, magicians, Jews, Shawnees—caught up in excitements of the modern age, like electricity, railroads, the West and its gold. Elizabeth tells her sister that a gentleman lodger, a handsome and crafty roving actor in straitened circumstances, is

“keen to relieve me of my spinsterhood.” Only later will we understand why she compares him to Lucifer.

### From the March 2014 issue: Lorrie Moore’s aliens next door

The other part of the novel describes a period in the life of Finn, a high-school history teacher in late middle age. It’s October 2016, a few weeks before the election. He has driven from somewhere in Illinois to a Manhattan steaming in Indian summer; he’s come to visit his brother, Max, who lies dying in a hospice in Riverdale. The city assaults Finn with jackhammering and stinking trash bags. Schizophrenic people lie next to pieces of paper scrawled with phrases like “I am not homeless. This is my home.” Moore intimates where Finn really is: the mouth of the inferno. “Sulfurous sewage” exhales “from the hard open mouth of the Broadway local.” The hospice parking lot is “a concrete descent that seemed endless but purposeful—a preparation for hell.”

Ghost stories defamiliarize the known world; this novel is off-kilter from the beginning.

When Finn leaves the hospice, Moore makes clear that he has been in purgatory: Finn refers to it as a “bardo,” a Buddhist term for a transitional state, usually between death and rebirth. (Readers [may hear echoes of](#) George Saunders’s [\*Lincoln in the Bardo\*](#).) Elizabeth and Finn both qualify for a life beyond life as we understand it, their ties to the humdrum having all but snapped. Elizabeth is on her way to becoming a “bitter old recluse.” Finn has been suspended from his job and bounced from his condo by his suicidal ex-girlfriend, Lily, who works as a therapy clown and has left him for another man; she needs “time to think.” Humiliation follows Finn around like a bad joke. He is literally a chauffeur of shit: Sliding around on the floor of his car is a cat litter box his landlord asked him to dispose of, an act he has yet to perform.

Moore even seems to insinuate that Finn is dead without knowing it—like Bruce Willis in *The Sixth Sense*—and that Elizabeth may never have died. As Finn navigates nightmarish highways on his way to the hospice, a truck, “reaping and grim,” looms in his rearview mirror, and a flash of light makes him veer and almost crash. Finn does have an accident later on, spinning out

of control and landing in a field. His car's wheels are "stopped dead," the engine likewise "dead." A "huge and toothless and grimy" tow-truck operator gets him on his way. The engine inexplicably starts right up. I couldn't help thinking of Charon, the ferryman of Hades. As for Elizabeth, Moore leaves open the possibility that this disquieting creature has survived long enough to meet Finn.

Death and life are not easy to tease apart in Moore's work. What I mean is not that characters die (people are always dying in fiction) but that many of them are dead even in life. Women ghost-walk through existences that are more "like life" (the title of one of Moore's story collections) than actually lived. "A life could rhyme with a life—it could be a jostling close call that one mistook for the thing itself," a young woman muses in "[Wings](#)." Husbands are simulacra of themselves. In "[Paper Losses](#)," Kit's husband grows remote, his smile "a careless yawn," or was it "just stuck carelessly on?" He must have a brain tumor, Kit thinks, or else he's a space alien. "All husbands are space aliens," a friend says.

But the commingling of life and death need not be deadening. Death can open a door to uncharted states of being—or rather, not-being. In *A Gate at the Stairs*, Tessie watches two toddlers play a game in which one pretends to be dead and the other tickles her back to life. Children aren't afraid of death, Tessie thinks, because they see that "death occurred in different forms" and "in varying degrees, and that it intersected with life in all kinds of ways that were unofficial."

Death in its unofficial forms and varying degrees is the curiously euphoric theme of *I Am Homeless*. If adults are afraid of death and children are not, perhaps that's because adults think in obsolete categories. "Do you know about Schrödinger's cat?" Lily asks Finn. He does: "He knew that it was about the dead and the living lying side by side." Lily is Finn's Eurydice. After many attempts, she finally succeeds in killing herself. Finn still loves her, desperately, and has come to the realm of the dead to find her. The cemetery in which she lies is "green," however, meaning that it doesn't have headstones, and he wanders, lost. And then Lily rises up behind him, begrimed and splotchy, already decomposing, "with a mouth full of dirt, her face still possessed of her particular radiant turbulence." They banter in what appears to be their usual emotion-deflecting repartee. "You're in fine

“fucking fettle for a dead lady,” he says. She shrugs. “I suppose death’s a kind of spectrum,” she says. “So—you aren’t *deeply* dead,” he says a few moments later. “I guess I’m death-adjacent,” she says. And “the unbearable, agonizing joy of it” bursts on Finn “like hot lights within him.”

“Death is the new life.” Finn made that joke to himself at the hospice, after one of Max’s young Ghanaian aides told him that in his country death is seen as a part of life. And indeed, death turns out to be life-giving. Lily’s skin bruises as if she were an old piece of fruit destined for the compost heap—Finn actually refers to her at one point as compost. The imagery of putrefying vegetation in which Moore wreathes Lily gives her the tipsy air of a goddess at a bacchanal. Clutching her shroud, silverfish in her hair, she could be a figure in a Frans Hals painting parodying fertility myths. Lily is Eve in an orchard past peak harvest: A “late fall smell of applewood burning” seems to rise from her skin.

Finn and Lily set off on a road trip, giddy with love and mournful in anticipation of loss. Their destination is gruesome, but never mind. The one-liners keep coming. “I’m sorry to be so perishable,” the rotting Lily says. Finn drives until he’s tired and comes upon a decrepit inn (“janky,” Lily says) with a proprietor who seems strangely familiar to us, though not to the weary travelers.

Jokes are Moore’s signature trope, [to the dismay of critics who have called her drollery intrusive and immature](#)—facetious, compulsive rather than disciplined, emotionally evasive. But I think Moore’s jokes are supposed to draw attention to themselves, certainly in this novel. A point is being made about comedy, and Lily, the late therapy clown, is the one who makes it. “*Vesti la giubba*,” she says to Finn, referring to an aria sung by a heartbroken clown in Ruggero Leoncavallo’s opera *Pagliacci* (“Clowns”): “Put on your costume, your powder and paint. The people are paying and want to laugh.”

#### [From the December 2004 issue: Lorrie Moore on Alice Munro’s fiction](#)

Lily’s creator is working hard to entertain, and she wants her readers to be aware of that: We should know that sardonic clowning is the only solace she can offer in a deranged world. In *I Am Homeless*, her characters, too, can seem to be, if not entirely in on that joke themselves, at least partially in the

know. When Finn wisecracks, privately, “Death is the new life,” adding that “he hoped it would be cheaper,” he is both tweaking the Ghanaian aide’s remark and riffing on Moore’s meditations about death and life mirroring each other. Moore’s gallows humorists perform best in pairs, though, like Finn and Lily, using misery as material for quipfests. Jokes are “flotation devices on the great sea of sorrowful life,” Lily reflects, and also “the exit signs in a very dark room.”

When Lily’s offstage, as it were, the jokes abate, the room darkens, the sea of sorrow swells. Max dies, and death no longer seems to Finn like a joyous extension of life. Hell is just hell. He leaves the reception after the funeral, overcome. But then Max’s stepson rushes out and demands he come back in: “Max is here!” And indeed, as Max’s friends dance to his playlist and the fond stories told seem to fill the room, Max is conjured up, at least for a moment.

The dead die in degrees and do us the favor of haunting us for as long as they can. The bygone await resurrection in dusty objects, photographs, scrapbooks. At the inn, Finn finds a leather-bound journal containing Elizabeth’s letters and takes it home. In its pages lies the secret history of a noteworthy corpse that would seem to confirm a certain conspiracy theory about Lincoln’s assassination. What will he do with the story? What do any of us do with stories?

*I Am Homeless If This Is Not My Home* is not an easy novel. It’s dense with allusion—perhaps one day it will come with footnotes—and its two parts don’t fit together neatly; you have to wiggle them, work them, and even then they don’t interlock. But life is like that, and death even more so. “The road was an unfurling ribbon without a gift,” Moore writes of the highway that leads Finn and Lily to their terminus. I hope I’m not making the novel sound discouraging. It’s not. Moore has made death elating, and that’s a pretty good trick.

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# How Parking Ruined Everything

**America has paid a steep price for devoting too much space to storing cars.**

by Dante Ramos



*This article was featured in One Story to Read Today, a newsletter in which our editors recommend a single must-read from The Atlantic, Monday through Friday. [Sign up for it here.](#)*

When you're driving around and around the same block and seething because there's nowhere to put your car, any suggestion that the United

States devotes too much acreage to parking might seem preposterous. But consider this: In a typical year, the country [builds more three-car garages than one-bedroom apartments](#). Even the densest cities reserve a great deal of street space to store private vehicles. And local laws across the country require house and apartment builders to provide off-street parking, regardless of whether residents need it. Step back to assess the result, as the *Slate* staff writer Henry Grabar does in his lively new book, [Paved Paradise: How Parking Explains the World](#), and it's sobering: "More square footage is dedicated to parking each car than to housing each person."

That Americans like driving is hardly news, but Grabar, who takes his title from a Joni Mitchell song, says he isn't quibbling with cars; his complaint is about parking—or, more to the point, about everything we have sacrificed for it. All those 9-foot-by-18-foot rectangles of asphalt haven't only damaged the environment or [doomed once-cherished architectural styles](#); the demand for more parking has also impeded the crucial social goal of housing affordability. This misplaced priority has put the country in a bind. For decades, even as rents spiraled and climate change worsened, the ubiquity and banality of parking spaces discouraged anyone from noticing their social impact.

Parking was once the stuff of sweeping urban visions. In the decades before World War II, as car ownership surged in the U.S., drivers in downtown urban areas simply parked curbside—or double- or triple-parked—leaving streetcar operators and fellow drivers to navigate around their vacant vehicles. Local notables saw this obstacle course as one more threat to cities that were beginning to lose businesses and middle-class residents to the growing suburbs. The Vienna-born architect Victor Gruen, best known as the father of the shopping mall, came up with a solution: Preserve urban vitality by making more room for vehicle storage—a lot more room. In 1956, at the invitation of a top business leader in Fort Worth, Texas, he [proposed](#) a pedestrian-only downtown surrounded by a freeway loop and served by massive new parking garages. He wanted to shoehorn so many additional parking spaces into the urban core—60,000 in all—that visitors would never have to walk more than two and a half minutes back to their car.

In hindsight, his idea was bonkers. "Gruen was telling downtown Fort Worth to build more parking than downtown Los Angeles, a city seven times its

size,” Grabar writes, and “in a city that, with its wide, cattle-friendly streets, was already an easy place to drive.” Yet at the time, not even Jane Jacobs—the now-sainted author of the urbanist bible *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*—appreciated the dangers lurking in plans like Gruen’s. Grabar notes that in a “fan letter” (her term) to Gruen, Jacobs gushed that the Fort Worth plan would bring back “downtowns for the people.”

An off-street parking spot, plus the room necessary to maneuver in and out of it, requires more than 300 square feet—about two-thirds the size of a typical new studio apartment.

It didn’t. Gruen’s proposal was never executed; Texas legislators rejected a necessary bill. Yet Gruen had validated the postwar belief that cities had a parking shortage they desperately needed to fix. The result was an asphalt kudzu that has strangled other parts of civic and economic life. Over the years, cities and towns have demolished grand old structures to make way for garages and surface parking. When you see vintage photos of most American downtowns, what’s striking is how densely built they once were—before the relentless pursuit of parking helped hollow them out.

As early as the 1920s and ’30s, some local governments had sought to cure their nascent [parking problem](#) by making [private developers build off-street spaces](#). Architects adapted: In Los Angeles, Grabar explains, a distinctive apartment-building style called the dingbat—with eight or so units perched on poles over a common driveway—arose after 1934, when the city started requiring one parking space per new apartment. Those rules proliferated in the postwar years. They also became more demanding, and acquired a pseudoscientific precision: Detroit, for example, requires one off-street space per 400 square feet of a museum or an ice rink, one per 200 square feet of a bank or laundromat, and one per 100 square feet of a beauty shop. The rules vary from city to city, frequently in arbitrary ways, but they change the landscape everywhere. An off-street parking spot, plus the room necessary for a car to maneuver in and out of it, requires more than 300 square feet—which, by one estimate, is about two-thirds the size of [a typical new studio apartment](#). On lively main streets that predate parking regulations, shops and restaurants abut one another, but today’s rules produce little islands of commerce surrounded by seas of blacktop.

## [Michael Manville: How parking destroys cities](#)

The opportunity cost of building new spaces quickly became evident. When Los Angeles upped its parking requirement from one to 1.5 spaces for a two-bedroom apartment in 1964, Grabar notes, even the car-friendly dingbat building became infeasible. Off-street-parking mandates, it turns out, are easy to satisfy when suburban developers are building fast-food outlets, strip malls, and single-family homes on cheap open land; meanwhile, large downtown commercial and residential buildings can generate enough revenue to pay for expensive garages. But projects in between fall into what's been described as the "Valley of High Parking Requirements": The government-mandated number of spaces won't fit on a standard surface lot, and structured parking would cost too much to build. This is how parking rules killed off the construction of rowhouses, triple-deckers, and other small apartment buildings. Grabar reports that in the past half century, the production of new buildings with two to four units dropped by more than 90 percent.

Many housing experts believe that the waning supply of cheap market-rate apartments in small and midsize buildings is a major cause of the current housing crisis. Since 1950, the U.S. population has grown by more than 180 million people, at least some of whom—to judge by real-estate prices in New York's Greenwich Village, Boston's South End, and other former bohemian enclaves—would happily move to dense neighborhoods with lousy parking if they could. But many residential and commercial parts of cities that look like, well, cities cannot legally be replicated today. "If the Empire State Building had been built to the minimum parking requirements of a contemporary American city ... its surface parking lot would cover twelve square blocks," Grabar writes.

Precisely because parking mandates discourage apartments without banning them, local governments can make unrealistically high demands—two parking spaces for a studio, six for a four-bedroom apartment—as a way of excluding renters and preserving neighborhood homogeneity. For NIMBY homeowners, parking rules have become an all-purpose tool for preventing change in any form, no matter how seemingly innocuous. Grabar describes the plight of Ben Lee, a Los Angeles entrepreneur who wanted to turn his father's carpet store into a New York-style delicatessen. Local regulations

required so many parking spaces—roughly three times the square footage of the deli itself—that Lee would have had to buy and raze three nearby buildings. He tried a work-around: The mall garage across the street always had plenty of unused spots, so Lee arranged to rent a few dozen of them. “Unfortunately,” Grabar writes, “getting a parking variance in Los Angeles is, like trying to make it in Hollywood, a long and degrading process with little chance of success.”

### [Henry Grabar: EVs make parking even more annoying](#)

Although the city did ultimately approve Lee’s plan, a homeowner group sued on the grounds that Lee didn’t have clear title to the parking he planned to use. “It took another two years for Lee to prove his legal right to those empty parking spaces in the mall garage,” Grabar continues, “by which time he was down \$100,000 and no longer on speaking terms with his father, who couldn’t believe his son had gotten them into this mess.” Lee gave up—a victim of curmudgeonly neighbors, yes, but also of rules insisting on new spaces even amid a glut of parking.

Something about parking reveals a glitch in our mental programming. A driver might well realize in the abstract that too much pavement, besides making downtowns less vibrant and more barren, also leads to pollution, aggravates flooding, and soaks up too much heat from the summer sun. Yet when Americans presume that parking on demand is almost a civil right, the default assumption will be the more supply, the better—whether it’s necessary or not. And the collective downsides simply don’t register in comparison with the personal joy of finding a parking spot when you’re running late—or with the frustration of being denied one. In what may be Hollywood’s most famous parking scene, in the 1991 film *Fried Green Tomatoes*, Kathy Bates sits in a car, waiting to park outside a Winn-Dixie, when a younger driver in a red Volkswagen convertible steals her spot. She responds by stepping on the gas and crashing into the VW. Then she backs up and does it three more times. The maneuver, mind you, signals that she’s taking charge of her life.

If America’s long misadventure with parking has a hero, it’s a once-obscure UCLA urban-planning professor named Donald Shoup. In a 2005 book, [The High Cost of Free Parking](#), he revealed vehicle storage for what it was: not

anyone's birthright or an inexorable landscape feature, but a highly subsidized activity with profound social consequences. Shoup called for ending minimum-parking requirements and letting the market decide how many spaces private developers should build. Making the real-world costs of parking more transparent would benefit everyone, including motorists, he contended. And if cities simply charged for street spots according to market demand, drivers would relinquish them faster, freeing them up for use by others. Although parking meters date back to the 1930s, cities have been oddly coy about deploying them. Surprisingly few streetside spaces are metered—just 5 percent in New York and Miami, 3.4 percent in Boston and Chicago, and 0.5 percent in Dallas and Houston—and the hourly rates, which local governments are reluctant to raise, are almost invariably lower than in nearby garages.

For many people who had never given the issue of parking a second thought, listening to Shoup was like acquiring secret knowledge of how the world really worked. His ideas have deeply penetrated the precincts of those who write books, articles, and tweets about housing and transportation policy. Indeed, *Paved Paradise* itself is a translation of Shoupism for a broader audience.

Under Shoup's influence, San Francisco began adjusting parking-meter rates according to demand. (During [a pilot phase from 2011 to 2013](#), rates that started at \$2 an hour rose to \$3.50 on popular streets and fell to \$1 on others; with more spots opening up, the time that drivers spent looking for one fell by nearly half.) City after city [began reducing or even eliminating](#) parking requirements for new development. (Blessedly, Austin, Texas, may soon [abolish mandatory-parking rules for bars](#).) A new generation of reformers is pushing housing developers to unbundle parking charges from rents, on the theory that tenants who don't have cars shouldn't have to pay for their storage—and that some drivers might give up their vehicle to save a couple hundred bucks a month in rent.

Yet when local governments try to raise parking-meter rates, many critics see a money grab, not a street-management strategy. Some proposals to abolish parking mandates have been assailed from the left as a giveaway to developers. For conservatives, parking reform makes for strange politics. Lifting parking mandates does have a distinctly libertarian vibe—"Let me

build my apartment building the way I want to, and if people don't want to live here because there's no parking, well, that's my problem," one Sun Belt developer tells Grabar. Yet to some on the populist right, technocratic reforms that reduce fossil-fuel emissions and challenge Americans' driving habits look like a cultural affront.

#### From the March 1938 issue: No parking

Here an optimist would interject that, right now, some of the country's largest cities and their densest inner suburbs have no choice but to renegotiate the relationship among people, cars, and parking spaces. The pandemic-fueled movement toward remote and hybrid work will affect how often people commute. Vacant commercial towers and underused office parks might have a second life as dense housing. The shift toward electric cars—which are easy to charge if you have a garage but not if you rely on street parking—might nudge more city dwellers to give up their vehicles entirely. The biggest variable is whether habits will change once vehicles can drive themselves; if, instead of buying, driving, and parking their own cars, Americans decide they'd rather rely on robot vehicles (cheaper than human-operated Ubers or taxis) to ferry them around, they might not guard parking spaces so jealously.

But technology alone won't solve the current mess. People need to recognize that the rules have to change. If ideological divisions lead to a vigorous public debate about the way parking in the United States works, and doesn't, great—that's overdue. Parking's triumph over the city in the 20th century was so complete that, in the 21st, even a modest shift in the opposite direction could liberate a lot of space from cars.

Toward the end of *Paved Paradise*, in a chapter titled "How Americans Wound Up Living in the Garage," Grabar follows housing activists' efforts to legalize in-law apartments carved from single-family houses, in many cases from the garage. The mere fact of this movement epitomizes the underlying problem: Local regulations have blocked apartments while allowing parking structures because, for most of seven or eight decades, city planners got hung up on the wrong issue. The visionaries of Victor Gruen's day simply failed to foresee how the relentless promotion of parking spaces might enervate cities and crowd out other needs. Some of the most

consequential social problems are the ones hiding in plain sight, but parking isn't even hiding. It's just everywhere.

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*This article appears in the [July/August 2023](#) print edition with the headline “How Parking Ruined Everything.”*

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# Inside Frank Bascombe's Head, Again

## Richard Ford's hero is back.

by Adam Begley



Half a century ago, at the 1974 Adelaide Festival of Arts, in South Australia, John Updike delivered a muscular manifesto: “We must write where we stand,” he said. “An imitation of the life we know, however narrow, is our only ground.” His call for accurate and specific witness, for a realism

dedicated to the here and now, was surely in part an apology for the repeat appearances of Harry “Rabbit” Angstrom, the former high-school-basketball star Updike called his “ticket to the America all around me.” Already the hero of *Rabbit, Run* (1960) and *Rabbit Redux* (1971), Harry was destined to star in two more alliterative Rabbit novels, *Rabbit Is Rich* (1981) and *Rabbit at Rest* (1990), as well as the postmortem novella *Rabbit Remembered* (2000). Restless and hungry, open to experience and eager to learn, as fallible as the rest of us, and a staunch, often dismayed patriot, Harry is Updike’s everyman.

Following in Rabbit’s zigzag footsteps, Richard Ford’s recurring character, the endearing, occasionally exasperating Frank Bascombe, steers what he calls his “uncompassed course” through the sequence of novels beginning with *The Sportswriter* (1986) and stretching to *Be Mine*, the fifth and probably final book of Frank. While graciously acknowledging Updike’s influence (“Anything I might’ve learned from him I gladly concede”), Ford has taken care to distinguish Frank from his precursor. Too ruminative, too intellectual to be an everyman (“Never my intention,” Ford once declared), Frank is nonetheless an accurate and specific witness to the American ground on which Ford stoutly stands.

Frank is different from Harry physically (in high school, Frank was hopeless at basketball), morally (you won’t catch Frank in flagrante with his daughter-in-law), and socially. Until he got rich as a middle-aged Toyota dealer, Harry was unequivocally blue collar. College-educated Frank is white collar all the way: a short-story writer, a sportswriter, a college professor (very briefly), then a real-estate agent. Frank has always had an expansive range of highbrow references. In *Be Mine*, “the old Nazi Heidegger,” “that scrofulous old faker Faulkner,” and the novels of J. M. Coetzee all pop up—not names Harry would ever drop.

But the key difference between a Rabbit book and a Bascombe book is the texture of the prose. Both authors write in the present tense, but whereas Updike uses a finely calibrated close-third-person perspective, hovering over Harry and cloaking him in luscious Updikean phrases, Ford hides himself away and lets the inescapably, unstoppably logocentric Frank tell his tale in his own distinctive, discursive voice, a roving “I” addicted to description and speculation. Every Bascombe book is full-on Frank.

One more thing Frank has in common with Harry (and Philip Roth's Nathan Zuckerman): He belongs to the most overexposed cohort in history, the heterosexual white male strutting through postwar America. If the mere mention of those three characters brings on a wave of old-white-guy fatigue, better to give the latest Frankathon a miss. But if you're up for a dazzling, acutely painful 342-page monologue from a 74-year-old whose favorite shoe is a Weejun, who likes to rhapsodize about suburbia, and who is right now preoccupied with an unspooling tragedy on a road trip through a tranche of Trump country, *Be Mine* is just the ticket.

Each Bascombe book is loosely centered on a public celebration: Easter for *The Sportswriter*, Fourth of July for *Independence Day* (1995), Thanksgiving for *The Lay of the Land* (2006), Christmas for the four novellas collected in *Let Me Be Frank With You* (2014), Valentine's Day for *Be Mine*. None of these books is plotted; they stumble from incident to incident—never artlessly, but seemingly by accident. Ford has said of the first three that they were “largely born out of fortuity.” The latest is somewhat more focused and linear, though the usual digressions and flashbacks give it the haphazard feel cherished by Frank’s fans.

The astonishing core of *Be Mine* is the barbed, tender, despairing bond between father and son.

Now, in the dying days of the Trump administration, Frank is caring for his 47-year-old son, Paul, recently diagnosed with ALS, the fatal neurodegenerative disorder also known as Lou Gehrig’s disease. Paul is participating in an experimental-drug trial at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota. When the trial finishes, they drive west to Mount Rushmore in a rented Dodge Ram with a vintage camper bolted onto the bed—an all-American journey, like the trip to the Baseball Hall of Fame in *Independence Day*—father-and-son excursions that play into Frank’s faintly ironic idea of himself as an “arch-ordinary American.”

#### From the December 2006 issue: Richard Ford, out of character

All but retired, rooted in Haddam, New Jersey, a town “as straightforward and plumb-literal as a fire hydrant,” Frank has a part-time job answering phones in the office of a “boutique realty entity” with the inspired name of

House Whisperers. In the earlier books, he endured the death of his oldest son, age 9; two divorces; prostate cancer; and being shot in the chest—as an innocent bystander—by a punk with an AR-15. All of that, even his beloved Haddam, even the recent death from Parkinson’s of his first wife (Paul’s mother), is shoved to the side by his surviving son’s illness. In Rochester and on the road, Frank and Paul are “alone together, joined unwillingly at the heart.”

Readers of *The Sportswriter* will remember Paul as an appealing little boy who kept pigeons in a coop behind the house in Haddam and sent them off with forlorn messages to his dead older brother—who Paul thought lived on Cape May. In the next novel, Paul was a teenager, troubled, abrasive, yet still intermittently appealing. Then he was briefly married and worked for Hallmark writing “dopey” greeting cards. Familiarity with these previous incarnations is in no way necessary, though it does add to the illusion of depth, an accretion of sedimentary layers. The astonishing core of *Be Mine* is the barbed, tender, despairing bond between father and son, a bond both battered and strengthened by the cruel “progress” of Paul’s disease.

By the time they embark on their road trip—knowing, as they’ve always known, that no miracle cure will present itself—every step Paul takes, every gesture, is a struggle. Even when he sits, his right hand trembles, “clenching and curling”; knees shudder; feet fidget. His life “pares down to arch necessities—ambulation, swallowing, talking, breathing.” Devastating as this is for Paul, it also takes a heavy toll on an already death-haunted Frank, who early in the novel scattered the ashes of his first wife. “If three house moves are the psychic equivalent of a death, a son’s diagnosis of ALS is equal to crashing your car into a wall day after day, with the outcome always the same.”

As he did so often in the earlier novels—especially *The Sportswriter*, when his sexual magnetism (age 38) was irresistible and his conquests legion—Frank seeks the comfort of a woman’s love. He visits a massage parlor called Vietnam-Minnesota Hospitality, improbably located in an isolated farmhouse 18 miles north of Rochester. His “massage attendant,” Betty Duong Tran, is a diminutive 34-year-old “with bobbed hair … darkly alert eyes … pert, friendly gestures.” Frank takes Betty on dinner dates; afterward, “inside my still-frozen car … we’ve kissed and embraced sweetly

a time or two.” The smarmy soft focus is unusual for Ford, but less disappointing than the safe, generic description that accompanies those occasions when Betty—“for reasons I never anticipate”—decides to strip naked for the massage session: “Undressed, she is as tiny as she seems clothed, but unexpectedly curvy and fleshy where you wouldn’t expect.”

Frank’s “love” for Betty Tran (“Much of life should have quotes around it,” he observes) is surely meant to relieve the gloom of degenerative disease. Frank knows that he’s “reached the point in life at which no woman I’m ever going to be attracted to is ever going to be attracted to me.” He quite reasonably asks, “How do you stand it, these dismal facts of life, *without* some durable fantasy or deception or dissembling?” Naked Betty and her sweet embraces are presented as fact, as real as the chrome ram’s head on the hood of the Dodge, but even if she were presented as fantasy and the nude massage as erotic reverie, surely a writer of Ford’s inarguable talent should do better than “curvy and fleshy.” He doesn’t do explicit sex—only very rarely does he do bland cliché.

What a contrast with the exact and wholly convincing descriptions of Paul’s inexorable decline. On the morning of the visit to Mount Rushmore, he emerges from their motel room at the Four Presidents Courts, stumbles on the curb, and bashes his hand and face on the bumper of the Dodge. The challenge is then to hoist him into the truck:

“My hand hurts, and I can’t control my fucking feet,” Paul says, reaching for the hand grip on the windshield post.

“Yes, you can,” I say. “Shift your weight. I’ll push you.” I *am* pushing him—his pillow-y butt, his still-muscled thighs straining, straining ...

With his bad hand Paul loops his wrist through the inside hand-hold, manages a foot up to the running board, grasps the seat back with his good hand, and I push him forward and up like a sack of rocks. I fear he might fart more or less in my face where I’m close to him, helping him ... Miraculously he doesn’t.

And then he is almost in. I give another grunting upwards lift, ignoring

everything but what I'm doing and doing my best to do. And in he sags. At which point nothing else matters.

Ford has a loud and faithful following among writers on both sides of the Atlantic. Lorrie Moore, John Banville, Elizabeth Hardwick, and Geoff Dyer, among others, have been effusive in their praise. My hunch is that he won their admiration (as he won mine) with both the care he takes and the risks he takes. Every sentence is considered, yet many look like they're about to fall apart in their devious careening. Something similar can be said of the meandering Bascombe books, too: Their course, like Frank's, is uncompassed by design. Every detour offers an opportunity to ponder. Here we are in Rapid City, South Dakota:

What causes places to be awful is always of interest, since places can be awful in myriad ways—though you sense it the moment you step off the bus. It's never the air quality or the car-truck congestion or income differential or racial mix or number of parks, miles of bike paths and paved jogging trails, a developed waterfront, access to public transit or a thriving art scene. A town can be on this year's "best place to live and raise a family" list—alongside Portland Maine, Billings Montana, and Rochester—and be wretched. It's about yawning streets, deathwatch stoplights and the aggregate number of used car lots ... It's about how fast new "loft" projects pave over old cow pastures, and how the older malls are faring and whether new-car dealerships look like Ming pagodas.

The path from car-truck congestion to yawning streets and deathwatch stoplights to old cow pastures and Ming pagodas is crooked and jumbled in true Ford fashion, a curated chaos. What Frank says about himself also applies to his voice: "I personally have never minded a low-grade sensation of randomness and have sought, as much as convenient, to keep randomness nourished."

One of the risks Ford skirts is boredom. Are there things you'd rather be doing, you wonder, than listening to Frank bloviate? Ford pulls back from the brink with the brilliant set pieces that punctuate the narrative: traversing the atrium of the Mayo Clinic, "where, on any given day, thousands enter and thousands leave 200% confident that if there's a cure for them, this is

where it lives”; a visit to the World’s Only Corn Palace, in Mitchell, South Dakota (“everything in your wildest dreams made out of corn”); the “Life-Changing Patriotic Experience” of Mount Rushmore.

The four chiseled visages. L to R—Washington (the father), Jefferson (the expansionist), Roosevelt #1 (the ham, snugged in like an imposter) and stone-face Lincoln, the emancipator (though there are fresh questions surrounding that). None of these candidates could get a vote today—slavers, misogynists, homophobes, warmongers, historical slyboots, all playing with house money.

Ford is far too subtle to make an explicit connection between Paul’s degenerative disease and whatever has happened to our nation, but those four “granitudinally white faces” inevitably evoke an absent other. On a television screen in an airport lounge a few months earlier, Frank had caught a glimpse of “President Trump’s swollen, eyes-bulging face … doing his pooch-lipped, arms-folded Mussolini.” He’s got his number: “tuberous limbs, prognathous jaw, looking in all directions at once, seeking approval but not finding enough.”

Paul’s desperate condition insulates Frank from “the whole nationwide Busby-Berkeley” of impeachment and election. Proliferating yard signage elicits a characteristic response: “Trump–Biden. Hard to know which bunch I’d rather run afoul of—a mob of shrieking, sandaled liberals waving blue security blankets, or a stampede of tattooed muscle-bound yokels with AR-15s and redacted copies of the constitution.” As usual, he’s willing to see every side of every story.

Always the meditative humanist (at one point he kept a copy of Emerson’s “Self-Reliance” in his car), Frank dedicates himself in *Be Mine* to the problem of happiness—a problem particularly acute when you’re a septuagenarian caring for your dying middle-aged son. In Sioux Falls, with Heidegger’s help, he comes to a tentative conclusion: “Being old *really is* like having a fatal disease, at least insofar as I’m no more ready than my son is to give up on comfort, idleness and taking grave things lightly.” Later he plumps for Augustine of Hippo (just as “good is the absence of bad … happiness is the absence of unhappiness”) with an added dash of William Blake (“Good [is] only good in specifics”). Here’s what he tells himself:

I know the hollow in the heart that is longing and longing's opposite—doing good because you want to do good and are a good man in spite of what you know is true of you. Yes. Happiness can still be yours, ole chap; since happiness is not a pure element like Manganese or Boron, but an alloy of metals both precious and base, and durable.

What does he crave in the aftermath of his road trip with Paul? “I desire to feel free for a moment of airy, well-earned ease and clear-sightedness. Which is to say, not walled off.” Uncompassed is Frank’s default mode; unencompassed suits him too. He’ll stand his ground, keep his distance, look around—and withhold judgment if possible. If not, he may offer his favorite equivocation: “Yeah-no. The entire human condition in two words.”

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*This article appears in the [July/August 2023](#) print edition with the headline “Inside Frank Bascombe’s Head, Again.”*

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# ‘To Live With a Serious Mental Illness Is to Be in a Constant Fight for Your Agency’

## Readers respond to our May 2023 cover story and more.



American Madness

*Thousands of people with severe mental illness have been failed by a dysfunctional system. One of them, [Jonathan Rosen](#) wrote in the May 2023 issue, was his friend Michael.*

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Like Michael Laudor, I was diagnosed with a serious mental illness, and like Michael Laudor, I graduated from an “elite” law school, just this spring. Certainly this makes us part of a small club—but it’s not as small as Rosen or the *New York Times* profile he references would suggest. Perhaps the most notable example is Elyn Saks, a professor whom I had the privilege of communicating with when I had a psychotic episode as a first-year law student. Why doesn’t Rosen compare Laudor’s story to Elyn’s? Two Jews who developed schizophrenia and went to Yale Law School; one murdered his partner and the other won a MacArthur genius grant. This reflects a larger failure in Rosen’s article, I think: By not acknowledging that Laudor’s story is an aberration—that mental illness isn’t statistically correlated with violence—he further stigmatizes mentally ill people.

To live with a serious mental illness is to be in a constant fight for your agency, your autonomy. What a shame that Rosen has joined New York City Mayor Eric Adams’s side of that fight.

**Name Withheld by Request**

*Washington, D.C.*

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Jonathan Rosen’s poignant “American Madness” hit home for me: I was diagnosed with borderline personality disorder and chronic depression. I, too, have experienced the malfunctions of American psychiatry. I spent 38 years un- or underemployed and suffered 47 years of inept psychiatric care in community mental-health centers and university clinics, which turned me into a desperate, dependent outpatient. I finally received the treatment I needed—70 months of excellent psychotherapy—because when I turned 65, I at last had insurance, Medicare, to pay for private treatment.

I am now recovered and living a productive life. And despite my mental illness, I managed to earn a degree in economics and experienced some success as a writer and poet. Today, though, I still must work full-time, because my 38 years of poor employment devastated my Social Security benefits. Rosen’s contention is true: How we treat mental illness in the U.S. is sheer madness.

**George Fish**  
*Indianapolis, Ind.*

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As a mother whose child was hospitalized for serious mental illness, I've seen the worst and the best of the mental-health system. I agree with Jonathan Rosen that the system is broken, but not for the reasons he discusses. Rosen argues that Michael Laudor and his partner would have been saved if only Michael had been forced into treatment, reflecting the widespread view that people with serious mental illness refuse treatment for no other reason than their being delusional.

I used to share this view, before I saw how forced treatment made my daughter's psychosis much worse. My daughter entered the hospital with relatively mild delusions. It was in the hospital that she became paranoid and lost all touch with reality. Unfortunately, her negative experience of psychiatric hospitalization appears quite typical. Studies show that prior negative encounters with the mental-health system are among the main reasons those on the verge of a psychotic breakdown refuse to seek help. Fears of being locked up compel many people to hide their problems, sometimes with tragic outcomes. Such tragedies are extremely rare, but when they occur, the calls for force and coercion increase, driving more people into hiding and away from mental-health services.

Thankfully, there is a way to break this vicious cycle: evidence-based, noncoercive treatment methods, such as Open Dialogue and Soteria. Providers trained in these methods know how to build trust and establish connections with even the most severely psychotic and paranoid individuals. My daughter recovered completely under the care of a clinician using Open Dialogue. Now, more than three years later, she is healthy and thriving. These and other treatment methods bypass the false dichotomy between patients' rights and public safety, using medications sparingly and only with the patient's consent.

What Michael needed was indeed asylum, but asylum premised on these methods, not the kind where people are kept isolated. Mayor Adams would have done better had he invested in treatments like Open Dialogue instead of

business-as-usual on steroids. A real opportunity for visionary leadership—and robust healing—has been lost.

**Yulia Mikhailova**

*Socorro, N.M.*

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In 1973, the same year Jonathan Rosen met Michael Laudor, I took a position in New York City’s mental-health-services office, where I worked throughout the ’70s and early ’80s. Deinstitutionalization was our highest goal, and federally funded community mental-health centers (CMHCs) were to be the means of realizing it. My colleagues and I sincerely believed that we were working toward a revolution in mental-health care. But as Rosen points out, the CMHC initiative fell short of what we’d envisioned. In New York City, only about a quarter of the more than 50 planned centers ever opened. Lack of funding and community resistance were part of the reason. The psychiatric profession itself was divided on whether CMHCs could replace institutional care for the most severely ill. Many of those who “returned to the community” slipped through the cracks in the system that was supposed to support them. Later in my career, though, as an associate director of a community mental-health center in the Bronx, I witnessed how much good CMHCs could do for people in need of care, even if they didn’t meet their ultimate goal.

I still support progressive solutions to many social issues. But I’ve come to realize that great intentions live in a world of political, fiscal, and social realities that we ignore at our peril.

**Joseph A. Buonocore**

*Dumont, N.J.*

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Jonathan Rosen replies:

*The varied responses to the extract of my book reinforce a lesson I learned over and over in the years I spent researching and writing [The Best Minds](#): A single story can never capture the essence of severe mental illness, any more than a single medication can resolve its symptoms, or a single policy*

*can repair the damage of past systemic failures. The Best Minds grew out of a childhood friendship, and spans five decades of cultural and political transformation; nevertheless, I'm amazed to find so many echoes of past battles in current debates about what we owe people with severe mental illness, especially those too sick to care for themselves and who reject treatment, convinced that they are not ill.*

*I'm grateful for the mention of Elyn Saks, a heroic figure who wrote in her memoir that news of Michael killing his fiancée, Carrie, initially convinced her to keep her illness hidden. In my book, Saks wonders aloud why she never became violent like Michael, given the paranoid impulses that prompted her to conceal a knife in her pocketbook when she visited her therapist, before she had come to terms with her schizophrenia and the medication she needed to control its symptoms. When I asked the dean of Yale Law School if he could hold both Michael and Saks in his mind at the same time, he told me he wasn't sure.*

*Making room for Saks, for Michael, for Carrie, and for many other lives was part of the challenge of writing a book about a tragedy many years in the making, which explores a mystery of infinite complexity that benefits from many voices, including the passionate responses of Atlantic readers.*

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## Behind the Cover

In this issue's cover story, "[How Baseball Saved Itself](#)," Mark Leibovich goes inside the effort to rescue baseball from irrelevance, reporting on MLB's attempts to speed up what had become a slow-paced sport. For our cover image, the photographer Tony Luong captured a shot of Mets left fielder Mark Canha poised for action at New York's Citi Field. Luong is best known for his portraits and architectural photos, and he brought to his shoots in New York and Boston a keen eye for the formal shapes and structures of ballparks.

— **Bifen Xu, Photo Editor**

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## Corrections

“[We’re Already in the Metaverse](#)” (March) stated that two Boeing 737 Max airplanes crashed in 2019. In fact, one crashed in October 2018 and another in March 2019. “[Burned](#)” (June) originally misattributed a quote recalling a conversation with Jeff Carpoff about his possible contingency plans. The quote was from Brian Caffrey, not Mimi Morales.

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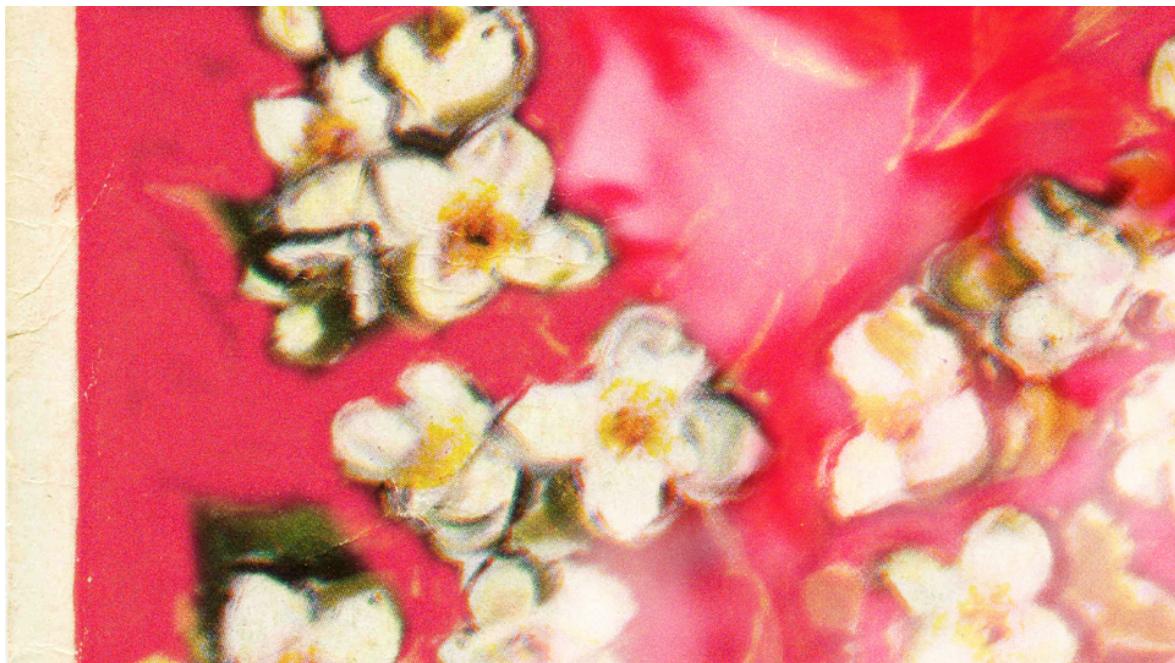
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# Poetry

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# A Room of One's Own

by Divya Victor



*“But, you may say, we asked you to speak about women and fiction—what has that got to do with a room of one’s own? I will try to explain.”*

— Virginia Woolf

That I haven’t written, will not write  
can’t mean I am not writing  
about having written, about standing still  
in the hereafter. I have, of course,  
outlined the arguments, tried on  
the opening gambit like a silk blouse.  
Can’t mean I didn’t gather  
a bouquet from my wild—  
a sliver of wit, a peck of curiosity,  
a crisp riposte, the curve of a dimple—  
to offer you. “To have offered,” as in:

“to have had it be offered to (someone).”  
I did try to be prepositional,  
to stray near you.

I rehearsed the syntax—should I  
first: apologize? confess? joke?  
—a fern here, a lily there,  
the subject here, the object there. Run  
on I creased the sentences  
into flightless origami; drafted monographs on silence—its juicy neurosis,  
its daft meter, my poor scansion. The predictable comparisons. Alphabetized  
my 12 memories; abridged the rest.  
Check  
and check.

By the next edit:  
I would have drawn  
the curtains against the fret  
of your neck.  
I could have shaded my eyes  
from your laughter,  
I will have pruned the light  
branching on my skin where  
you might have taken root;  
I should have folded up the map  
to my heres. Conditional  
as they all were, anyway.

Yet I keep walking  
into these stanzas—where you stay  
baffling the rafters,  
a rasp of feathers.  
I nest into the floss  
of those four hours,  
story myself to sleep.

So, hi. As promised, I have moved  
the furniture and flooded the room

with shade. My hands are now free  
to file night further, further into day.

Sorry, sorry, on my way  
to write you, the words left me  
at a stoop. The one where, for e.g.:  
“jasmine grows,” “is growing,” “will grow.”  
In being so out of time, tenses  
“have mattered,” “are mattering,”  
“will.”

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