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The Fugitive Princesses of Dubai

As the emirate's ruler espoused gender equality, four royal women staked their lives on escaping his control.

By [Heidi Blake](#)



Far out on the Arabian Sea one night in February, 2018, Sheikha Latifa bint Mohammed Al Maktoum, the fugitive daughter of Dubai's ruling emir, marvelled at the stars. The voyage had been rough. Since setting out by dinghy and Jet Ski a few days before, she had been swamped by powerful waves, soaking the belongings she'd stowed in her backpack; after clambering aboard the yacht she'd secured for her escape, she'd spent days racked with nausea as it pitched on the swell. But tonight the sea was calmer, and she felt the stirring of an unfamiliar sensation. She was free.

Latifa was thirty-two and petite, with a loose ponytail and intense dark eyes. Beside her was her friend Tiina Jauhainen, a Finnish martial-arts instructor who had helped prepare for her escape. The night was cool, and the women were huddled in hoodies, but Latifa urged her friend to sleep on deck with her. Jauhainen was tired, and promised they could do it another time: from now on, there would be plenty of chances to see the stars.

For more than half her life, Latifa had been devising plans to flee her father, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, the leader of Dubai and the Prime Minister of the United Arab Emirates. Sheikh Mohammed is an ally of Western governments, celebrated for transforming Dubai into a modern power. Publicly, he has placed gender equality at the heart of his plan to propel the U.A.E. to the top of the world economic order, vowing to “remove all the hurdles that women face.” But for his daughter Dubai was “an open air prison,” where disobedience was brutally punished.

In her teens, Latifa had been ferociously beaten for defying her father. As an adult, she was forbidden to leave Dubai and kept under the constant surveillance of guards. Escape presented a challenge of “unfathomable immensity,” Latifa knew. “It will be the best or last thing I do,” she wrote. “I have never known true freedom. For me, it’s something worth dying for.” (I have drawn details of Latifa’s experience from hundreds of letters, e-mails, texts, and audio messages that she sent to friends in the course of a decade.)

Latifa had kept her plan secret for years as she laid the groundwork: training in extreme sports, obtaining a fake passport, and smuggling cash to a network of conspirators. By the time she revealed the scheme to Jauhiainen, she had already hired a yachtsman to collect her off the coast and convey her to India or Sri Lanka, from where she hoped to fly to the United States and claim asylum. She just needed help getting to the rendezvous point, sixteen miles offshore, in international waters.

Jauhiainen is a sturdy, forthright woman, with high cheekbones and ice-blue eyes. She had grown close to Latifa while giving her capoeira lessons on the palace grounds, and wanted to help her see the world. “I was so excited,” she told me. “Finally, we will be able to do this together.” She’d promised to accompany Latifa all the way to freedom.

Before they set off, Latifa sneaked over to Jauhiainen’s apartment, which had become a storehouse for the scuba equipment, satellite communicators, and boat parts the two women had amassed, and sat down in front of a video recorder. Dressed in a loose blue T-shirt, she recorded almost forty minutes of testimony, to be released in the event of her capture. Her father, she said, was a “major criminal,” responsible for torturing and imprisoning numerous women who disobeyed him. Her older sister had languished in captivity

under sedation following her own attempt to get out, eighteen years earlier, she said, and her aunt had been killed for disobedience. Latifa was running away to claim a life “where I don’t have to be silenced,” where she could wake up in the morning and think, “I can do whatever I want today, I can go wherever I want, I have all the choices in the world.” (Attorneys for Sheikh Mohammed denied any wrongdoing on his part, but declined to respond to detailed questions.)

Aboard the yacht, Latifa texted a friend, “I really feel so free now. Walking target yes but totally free.” A week into the voyage, though, the captain spotted another ship apparently tailing them, and a small plane circling overhead. The runaways were about thirty miles off the coast of India, and the yacht was running low on fuel. The captain feared that Latifa had been located. “They will kill her,” he texted a friend on March 3rd.

The next day, another plane flew over. By nightfall, all was calm, but Latifa had become unreachably silent, Jauhiainen said. At around 10 p.m., the two women descended to their cabin, and Latifa brushed her teeth in the cramped bathroom. As she emerged, the air exploded with a series of blasts. Boots pounded on the deck overhead. “They’ve found me,” Latifa said. The friends shut themselves in the bathroom and sent a string of S.O.S. messages. Soon, smoke was pouring in through the air vents and light fixtures. As they struggled for breath, Latifa said that she was sorry, and Jauhiainen hugged her. Then they stumbled from the room.

The darkness was sliced in all directions by the laser sights of assault rifles. Masked men seized the women and forced them up to the deck, where the captain and his crew lay bound and beaten. The floor was pooled with blood. Latifa’s hands were tied behind her back and she was thrown down, but she resisted: kicking, screaming, and clinging to the gunwales. As the men dragged her away, Jauhiainen heard her cry out, “Shoot me here! Don’t take me back.” Then the princess vanished overboard.

The Zabeel Palace, Sheikh Mohammed’s royal seat, is a white-columned citadel set in palm-fringed grounds with elaborate fountains and roaming peacocks. When it was built, in the mid-sixties, it stood on bare sand, alone in the desert. Now it divides the futuristic whirl of downtown Dubai from the souks of the old town—balanced, as its occupants are, between

modernity and the past. When Sheikh Mohammed receives guests, he likes to remind them how the skyline sprang from the sand. “All this was nothing in 2000,” he told a film crew in 2007, gesturing at the city with a conjurer’s sweep of the arm. “But look now.”

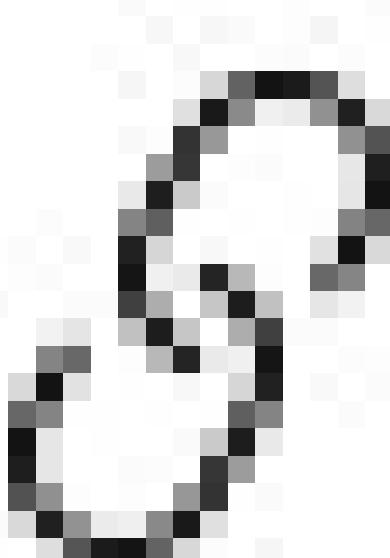
When Sheikh Mohammed was born, in 1949, his birthright was a tiny coastal port, one of seven desert sheikhdoms under the control of the British Empire. His family ruled from a clay-and-coral compound where they slept on the roof in summer, sprinkling themselves with water to stay cool. Sheikh Mohammed’s memoir, “My Story,” emphasizes a childhood steeped in Bedouin tradition. By the age of eight, he was hunting in the desert with dogs and falcons. An early photograph shows a tiny, jug-eared boy, stroking a huge hunting bird perched on his wrist. The memoir describes his mother as a figure of mythic virtue—“with a queenly bearing that enchanted all around her”—but also as a strong woman, who could shoot “better than many men” and rode horses “as if she had been born to be in the saddle.” Her name was Latifa.

At around the age of ten, Mohammed accompanied his father, Sheikh Rashid, on a trip to London. Landing at Heathrow, he gazed at the teeming airport—a “symbol of the powerful economy that drove it”—and felt a presentiment: “We, in Dubai, had the potential to become a global city.” Later, at Downing Street, he watched his father argue that Dubai should build an international airport of its own.



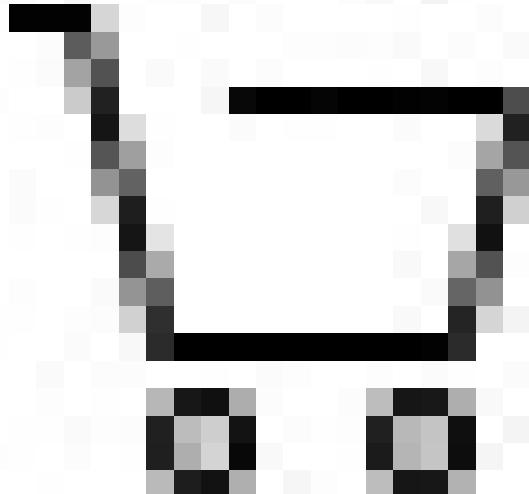
"Your landlord sent me. I'm the cheap guy who won't solve the problem."
Cartoon by Sofia Warren

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The British announced their withdrawal from the Gulf in 1968, and the newly formed U.A.E. became a major exporter of oil. Sheikh Mohammed returned from military training in England to take a leading role in his father's government. Half a century later, he is hailed as a modernizing genius who transformed Dubai into a thriving center of commerce, with an airport that long ago replaced Heathrow as the busiest international hub in the world.

When Sheikh Rashid died, in 1990, custom dictated that his eldest son, the mild-mannered Sheikh Maktoum, take over as ruler, but no one doubted who was really running the country. It was Sheikh Mohammed who devised the open-skies initiative that welcomed global travellers and who launched the Emirates airline. He introduced a customs-free policy that turned Dubai into one of the world's busiest shipping centers, and a network of zero-tax zones that lured international banks and businesses; he made Dubai the first place in the Gulf where foreigners could own property. In the resulting real-estate boom, he flaunted Dubai's riches with a series of imposing landmarks, including the Burj Al Arab, frequently billed as the world's most luxurious hotel, and the Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest building. Grander still were several archipelagoes of artificial islands, including two in the shape of palm trees and another representing a map of the world, all so vast that they can be seen from space.

Sheikh Mohammed officially took the throne after his brother's death, in 2006. At home, he cultivated the image of a traditional Arab leader, styling himself as a devoted family man, a prolific author of Nabati poetry, and a champion endurance horseman. Abroad, he assiduously courted the West.

After the September 11th attacks, the U.A.E. became a crucial strategic partner in the war on terror. Dubai cracked down on terror financing through its banks and became America's largest naval port of call outside the U.S. Meanwhile, the Emirati government invested tens of billions of dollars in America and Britain, and Sheikh Mohammed amassed a vast global property portfolio. He is one of Britain's biggest private landholders, with a collection of homes that includes Dalham Hall, a grand neoclassical residence set in thirty-three hundred acres of Suffolk parkland, and a seventy-five-million-pound manor in Surrey. He also owns the world's largest Thoroughbred-racing operation, through his stable Godolphin, in Newmarket—the basis of a valuable friendship with Queen Elizabeth, who loved horse racing.

As his stature grew, Sheikh Mohammed sought to counter the perception of the U.A.E. as a repressive autocracy. His government passed a law guaranteeing women equal pay for equal work and elevated nine female leaders to cabinet positions. In a message to mark Emirati Women's Day last year, he called women "the soul and spirit of the country."

Many experts dismiss these changes as insufficient. "There are women in very prominent positions now, but in reality a lot of that is window dressing," Neil Quilliam, a fellow in Middle East affairs at the Chatham House think tank, told me. "Women are expected to behave within very tight boundaries, and if they go outside them they are dishonoring the family." Emirati women continue to live under male guardianship, unable to work or marry without permission. Men can marry multiple women and unilaterally divorce their wives, but women require a court order to dissolve a marriage. Men who murder women can still be pardoned by the victim's relatives, which allows honor killings to go unpunished, since in such cases victim and perpetrator are often related.

Within Dubai's ruling family, women inhabit a wrenching dual role: they are exalted as emblems of female advancement while privately obligated to "carry the honor" for the dynasty. Sheikh Mohammed has married at least

six women, who have borne him dozens of children. According to Hussein Ibish, a senior resident scholar at the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, female disobedience in the Emir's circle provokes a "politically dangerous" question among subjects: How can you really tell us what to do when you can't control your own family? The logic of absolute power requires that such rebellions be crushed swiftly and publicly. "That's performative patriarchy," Ibish said. "You want to watch me control my family? Here you go."

Latifa passed the first decade of her life without knowing that she had sisters. Her mother, Houria Lamara, was an Algerian beauty who married Sheikh Mohammed and bore him four children. But Latifa did not grow up with her birth family. She and her younger brother were taken away as babies and presented as gifts to their father's childless sister.

Life in her aunt's palace was "horribly suffocating," Latifa recalled. She was kept with dozens of other children and minded by governesses, who made them memorize the Quran and hardly ever let them out of their rooms. Her aunt rarely visited, and when she did she was cruel. On one occasion, Latifa recalled, she burst into the nursery and beat the children until their bodies were covered with welts. (The government of Dubai declined to comment on this incident.)

"I remember as a kid always being at the window watching people outside," Latifa wrote. From time to time, photographers showed up and costumed her "like a doll, in jewels, dresses and makeup," she recalled. They gave her puppies to play with, and took photos that she later learned were sent to her mother. But when the shoot was over the props were taken away and she was sent back to her room. At night, she dreamed of flying a kite so huge it carried her into the sky.

Once a year, Latifa was taken to visit Houria and her other daughters, Shamsa and Maitha, whom she was told were her aunt and cousins. Shamsa, four years older, made a particular impression. She was "full of life and adventure," Latifa wrote, a "real thrill seeker but also a compassionate person." When Latifa was about ten, she learned the truth. Shamsa marched into her aunt's palace and demanded that her younger sister and brother be

sent home. “Shamsa was the only one who fought for us and wanted us,” Latifa wrote. “I saw her as a mother figure and best friend.”

The siblings were returned to their mother, and Sheikh Mohammed visited from time to time. A staff member described him as a “doting father,” plying his daughters with hugs and kisses. But the Sheikh was also enraged by challenges to his authority. Latifa told friends that she once saw him punch Shamsa repeatedly in the head for interrupting him. (Sheikh Mohammed’s attorneys deny that he was violent with his daughters.)

As Shamsa matured, she began to chafe against the constraints of royal womanhood. She wanted to drive and travel and study, and hated covering herself with the traditional abaya. “Shamsa was rebellious and so was I,” Latifa wrote. “But Shamsa had a shorter fuse.” Shamsa and her father clashed over his refusal to allow her to go to college. “He didn’t even ask me what I was interested in,” Shamsa wrote to a cousin. She had considered suicide, but now she recovered her resolve. “I want to depend on myself, completely,” she wrote. “The only thing that scares me is imagining myself old and regretting not trying when I was 18.”

In early 2000, soon after sending the letter, Shamsa appeared at Latifa’s bedroom door and told her that she was leaving. “Will you come with me?” she asked.

Latifa was stricken. She was fourteen, and Shamsa was her mainstay. A silence hung between them.

“Never mind,” Shamsa said. She turned and walked away.

“That moment was etched into my memory,” Latifa wrote. “Because had I said yes maybe the outcome would have been different.”

The Longcross Estate is a vast manor set in the Surrey countryside. When Sheikh Mohammed bought the property, he took possession of a swath of landscape that had captivated him as a child. In “My Story,” he recalled driving in England with his father. “Nothing could have prepared me for the beauty of this land,” he wrote. “There were green hills that rolled away like waves on the sea.”

During the summer, when Dubai grew oppressively hot, Sheikh Mohammed would bring a few favored wives and children to England. In 2000, despite Shamsa's rebelliousness, she was allowed to join the party at Longcross. She loved England—it was her favorite place, she had told Latifa. She also had a soft spot for one of her father's British guards: a former policeman and Army officer in his early forties named Grant Osborne. Shamsa tried to get close to Osborne, according to a friend she spoke to frequently that summer, but he rebuffed her.

Security at Longcross was tight: the estate was monitored by CCTV cameras and patrolled by guards. But on a night in June, when the house was still, Shamsa crept out through the darkness and climbed into a black Range Rover that had been left unattended. Though she had not been allowed to drive, she managed to start the engine and veer off across the grounds. When she reached the outer wall, she ditched the car and slipped through a gate on foot.

After the abandoned car was discovered, the next morning, Sheikh Mohammed helicoptered in from his equestrian base in Newmarket to lead the hunt. Staff fanned out in cars and on horseback, but all they found was Shamsa's cell phone, dropped outside the gate. No one at Longcross could offer any clue to her whereabouts—but back in Dubai Latifa heard from her sister. She had secured a new phone, and was staying at a hostel in southeast London, considering her next move.

On June 21st, Shamsa walked into an unassuming office on a backstreet in London's West End. She was greeted by a man with pale-blue eyes and a soft chin: a lawyer named Paul Simon, whom she had found through the Yellow Pages. She told him that she had fled the royal family of Dubai and wanted to claim asylum. Simon was out of his depth—his firm normally dealt with routine immigration cases, processing work visas and citizenship applications—but he knew enough to advise Shamsa that her claim would almost certainly fail, “in light of the friendly relations” between the U.K. and the U.A.E.

Shamsa met Simon twice more in the following weeks. She was now staying with an Australian friend in Elephant and Castle, a South London neighborhood of tenement blocks and litter-strewn streets. She told him she

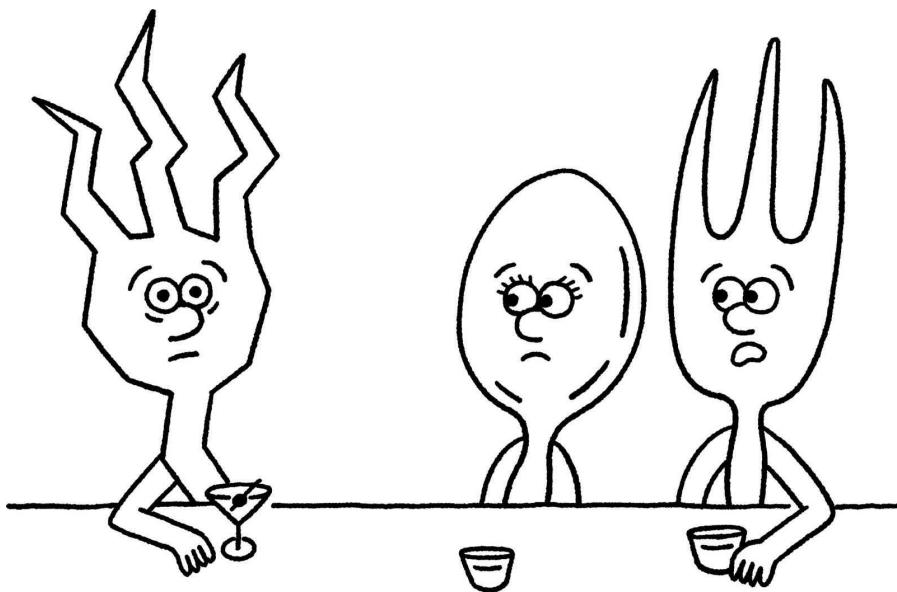
feared her father would find her and force her to return to Dubai—but Simon said it would be difficult to help her unless she produced her passport, which was in her family’s control.

Shamsa was running out of options. She told Latifa that their father had visited a friend of hers in the Emirates, offering a Rolex in exchange for help tracking her down. Shamsa believed that her friend’s phone had been bugged, but she kept calling anyway. Latifa was appalled, but she reasoned, “She had nobody else to talk to.”

Late that summer, Shamsa reached out to Osborne, the security officer, and begged for his help. This time, he responded warmly, arranging to take her to Cambridge, where he booked a room for two nights at the University Arms, the city’s oldest and grandest hotel. (Osborne said that this account contained “incorrect and false information” but refused to point to specifics.)

On August 19th, Shamsa and Osborne were captured on CCTV exiting the hotel and climbing into a car. She was drunk, and Osborne took the wheel. He drove Shamsa to a nearby bridge, where he pulled over abruptly and got out. It was an ambush. Four Emirati men leaped into the vehicle, and it sped away. Shamsa was driven to her father’s Newmarket estate, where she spent a desolate night in the manor house, Dalham Hall. At first light, she was hustled out of the country, bound for Dubai.

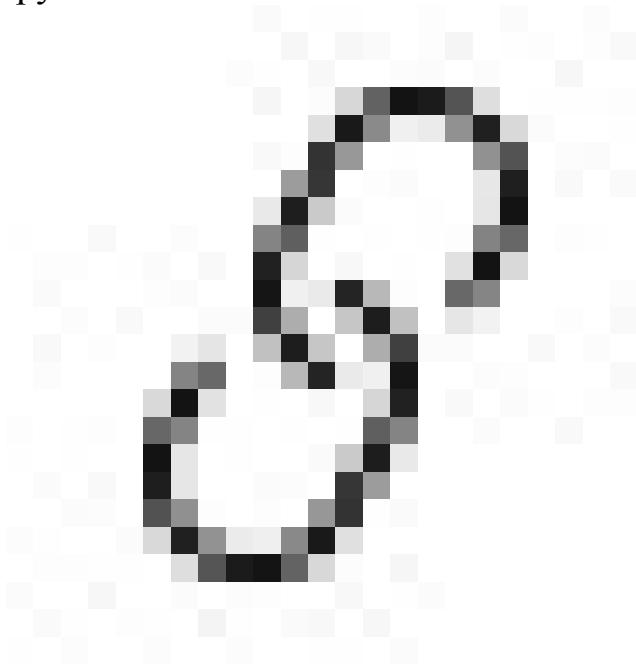
On the first of September, a Surrey woman named Jane-Marie Allen came home from vacation to find a strange message on her answering machine, left by someone who gave a name sounding like “Shansa.” The caller said she had been “returned to Dubai against her will” and asked that her attorney, Paul Simon, be alerted. Allen didn’t know the woman—a wrong number, presumably—but she was clearly in trouble. Allen called the police.



m.E.mcnair

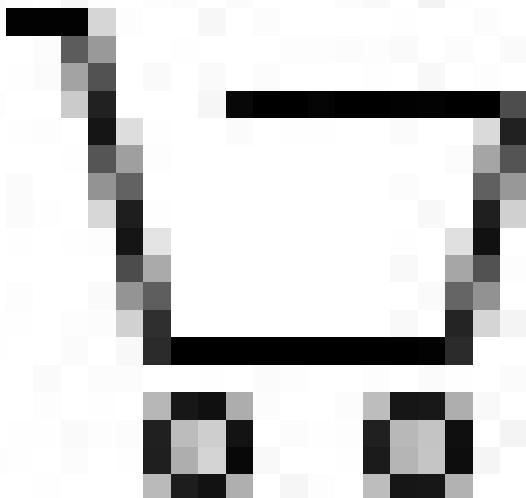
"He once fell into the garbage disposal and doesn't like to talk about it."
Cartoon by Elisabeth McNair

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Officers in Surrey talked to Simon and learned about his meetings with Shamsa. When they heard she was a member of Dubai's royal family, they referred the matter to the local Special Branch, a police unit that handled national security. Officers contacted representatives of the family, who, according to the police log, insisted that they "had no knowledge of the name given or any such incident." Whether or not the officers believed this falsehood, they reasoned—in consultation with Simon—that Shamsa had access to a phone, and could call the police herself if she needed to. The matter was closed without any crime being recorded. (Simon declined to comment for this article, citing client confidentiality.)

Six months after the abduction, Simon got an e-mail containing a message from Shamsa. "I'm being watched all the time so I'll get straight to the point. I was caught," she wrote. "Paul, I know these people, they have all the money, they have all the power, they think they can do anything." Shamsa was being held on the palace grounds in Dubai, where she said her father's guards were "trying to terrorise me and break me." But she had found a way to get messages out, by persuading an attendant to smuggle notes in her hair and deliver them to Latifa and other supporters. In one, Shamsa instructed Simon to involve the British authorities "immediately."

Simon went back to the police and conveyed Shamsa's message: she had been removed from the country against her will, in contravention of the U.K.'s laws against kidnapping. (Sheikh Mohammed's attorneys deny this.) When officers took Simon's statement, he told them everything he knew—but said that his “lack of competence and expertise” outside the field of immigration law meant he could no longer act on Shamsa's behalf. His report worked its way sluggishly through the system. It trickled from the Surrey police back through the secretive echelons of Special Branch, before it reached the desk of a senior detective in Cambridgeshire—whose office happened to face the University Arms Hotel, the last place Shamsa was seen.

One morning in February, 2001, Detective Chief Inspector David Beck was settling down with a cup of coffee and the monthly crime statistics when an officer from Special Branch handed him a file. He read it with growing astonishment. A junior officer, dispatched to the hotel, brought him back a copy of the CCTV footage showing Shamsa and Osborne leaving together.

Beck had two daughters about Shamsa's age, and he told me that he knew the late teens could be a “difficult time” for families. Staring at the surveillance-camera imagery, he wondered, “Are you just trying to make trouble for your father? Or are you serious about this?”

Beck contacted Simon, who told him that Shamsa now had a phone; Latifa, who had occasionally been able to send her sister clothes and other items, had smuggled it in. When he dialled the number, he noted in a police memo, Shamsa recounted Osborne's involvement in her capture and gave the names of three of the men who she said had ambushed her on the bridge. Among them was the head of the Dubai Air Wing, which provided helicopters and pilots for the Sheikh. According to Shamsa, the men drove her to Dalham Hall, and she was forcibly sedated. The next day, they flew her by helicopter to France, where they were met by another longtime employee of her father's—a British man named David Walsh—and taken by private jet to Dubai. (Walsh declined to comment.)

Further inquiries confirmed more of Shamsa's story. A customs officer described receiving a call from a helicopter pilot of Sheikh Mohammed's around midnight on the date of Shamsa's abduction. He was giving notice of a flight from Dalham Hall to France the following morning. According to

another pilot, he'd confided that the trip had to be handled discreetly, because the family "did not want anyone in the U.K. to be involved."

When Beck drove out to Dalham Hall to interview Sheikh Mohammed's staff, he was met by an attorney who politely told him that no one was prepared to speak with him. "That was the first clue I had that things probably wouldn't go as smoothly as I would like," he said. Beck had by then identified a fourth suspect in Shamsa's abduction: Mohammed Al Shaibani, a sleek, cultivated man who served as the president of the Dubai royal family's private office in the U.K. Al Shaibani called him not long afterward, cordially offering assistance. When Beck told him that he was a suspect in the investigation, he quickly hung up. (Al Shaibani denies involvement in the abduction and being told he was a suspect.)

Behind the scenes, the Sheikh's office was lobbying the British government over the inquiry. Beck heard from an official at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office named Duncan Norman, who requested a report. The detective was wary—he had always disliked "the world of secret handshakes," he told me—and conveyed only the broad outlines of the case. Norman wanted more information. In his notes, Beck wrote, "He has since told me that the Foreign Secretary has been asked to be kept informed of any developments."

Norman, who went on to become a senior diplomat, told me he did not recall Shamsa's case. Sir William Patey, who was then the head of the Middle East Department at the Foreign Office, also said he had no memory of Shamsa—but he acknowledged that the government was leery of anything that might antagonize Dubai's ruling family. "The U.A.E. are major trading partners, a strategic ally," he said. "Mohammed bin Rashid is a big racing buddy of our late departed Queen. They've got interests here, we want to encourage investment here, and we'd rather that their family-honor issues were not litigated here."

At the end of the year, news of Beck's investigation leaked to the *Guardian*. The paper reported that Shamsa had given detectives an account of her abduction over the phone. Soon afterward, Shamsa lost all contact with the outside world and was placed under heavy sedation. "It was a very hard day for me," Latifa later wrote.

Beck trawled back through his notes as he figured out what to do next. In one memorandum, he had cited another incident that drew the attention of the British government in the year of Shamsa's disappearance. That April, there had been a separate "kidnap scare" involving Emirati royals in the U.K.

Sheikha Bouchra bint Mohammed Al Maktoum made her London début in the spring of 2000. A Moroccan woman of twenty-seven with waist-length auburn hair, she had married Sheikh Maktoum—Mohammed's brother, who was three decades her senior—when she was still a teen-ager. With greater maturity had come a growing frustration with the limitations of life in Dubai.

Bouchra installed herself and her three young sons in a white stucco mansion block in Belgravia's Lowndes Square and gave an interview to *hello! Magazine*, signalling her mission: "I want the women in my country to have the courage to show what they can do." The interview was splashed across seven pages, with photography of Bouchra reclining on gold upholstery in tight white jeans and patent-leather boots.

Bouchra was a painter, and she hired a P.R. man named Nick Hewer to stage a grand exhibition of her work, followed by an auction to raise money for Doctors Without Borders. She told Hewer that she hoped her increased prominence in the West would bolster her husband against the encroachments of his powerful younger brother—"the Beard," as she called Sheikh Mohammed. "He's pushing my husband into the shade," she kept protesting.

Bouchra imagined that the exhibition would be thronged by wealthy Emiratis who would pay generously for her paintings. The centerpiece was a jewel-encrusted landscape she called "La Nature," depicting a mountain stream studded with topazes, aquamarines, and green garnets, beneath diamond stars. But "La Nature" fetched just nine thousand pounds—money that Bouchra had apparently given to her hairdresser's boyfriend to drive up the bidding. Not one of the Emirati invitees turned up. That, Hewer recalled, was an early sign that Bouchra was in trouble.

After the auction, her behavior seemed increasingly untethered. Once, she invited Hewer to her mansion on the Avenue Foch in Paris, emerging in skintight silver overalls to take him to the cabaret Le Lido, with her three young sons in tow. He watched in horror as the table was surrounded by burlesque dancers in rhinestone jockstraps and nipple tassels, while Bouchra’s Emirati security guards averted their eyes. “It was the most inappropriate thing,” Hewer said.

Bouchra seemed to be calibrating her behavior to draw attention. When Hewer visited her in private, he found her “very demure, quiet, graceful,” with an unaffected tenderness toward her boys. In public, though, “she made a little bit of a display of herself.”

One day in April, Hewer received a panicked call from Bouchra’s younger brother, who had been visiting her in London: “The Sheikha has been kidnapped!” Bouchra was already at Farnborough Airport, on Sheikh Maktoum’s private jet, and Emirati guards had come for her sons. In the background, Hewer said, he could hear “all kinds of ruckus,” as the children’s nanny struggled with the men.

The incident led to a standoff at the airport. The nanny called the police to report the boys kidnapped; Scotland Yard tracked them to the runway, and the plane was held. Patrick Nixon, who was then Britain’s Ambassador to the U.A.E., told me he received a call from an Emirati diplomat, demanding that he “get in touch with the police and tell them to clear off.” Nixon refused, suggesting that the diplomat take up his complaint with the Foreign Office. Soon afterward, the plane was allowed to leave. According to one former civil servant, officials at the Foreign Office viewed any such incident as “another family dispute in which the Emiratis are playing fast and loose.” He added that Bouchra’s kidnapping would have been considered “a forty-eight-hour wonder”—a short-term annoyance. After the plane took off, “the woman would have been incommunicado,” so “there wouldn’t be much pressure to do anything.”

When the *Daily Telegraph* reported on the standoff the following day, Scotland Yard dismissed it as “a rather big domestic.” A spokesperson said at the time that officers had “quickly established that the children were safe,” and that the whole imbroglio was merely “a misunderstanding among

relatives.” Later, though, Nixon heard from sources in the Emirates that Bouchra had been “locked up in a villa in Dubai.” A person with ties to the royal family confirmed this to me: “They made her house prisoner, and they would just keep drugging her with tranquilizers to say that she’s crazy.”

In 2007, the year after her husband died and Sheikh Mohammed took over as ruler, rumors spread through palace circles that Bouchra had died. She was thirty-four. Some said she had slipped away in her sleep. But, in the video that Latifa recorded before her own escape, she accused her father. “Her behavior was too outrageous,” she said. “He felt threatened by her, so he just killed her.” She repeated the claim in several letters to friends. In one, she said Bouchra had been beaten to death by her father’s guards.

Sheikh Mohammed’s attorneys deny this, but Latifa’s account was supported by two sources close to the royal family. “They had no mercy,” one said. “They killed her because she was a problem for them. She was a strong woman who would stand for her rights.” A former member of the Sheikh’s personal staff told me, “She was killed off. Here one minute, gone the next.”

Years later, Hewer got a text message from an unfamiliar number in Dubai. One of Bouchra’s sons was getting married, it said, and the wedding present that would mean the most to him was a painting by his mother. Hewer wrote back to ask if his former client was alive. “Mama Bouchra had passed away in 2007,” came the reply, accompanied by a broken heart. “May her beautiful soul rest in peace.” Hewer had held on to “La Nature.” He packed up the painting nobody had wanted and mailed it to the one person who did.

In the spring of 2002, almost two years after Shamsa’s abduction, David Beck finally received a statement from Al Shaibani, the president of the Dubai royal family’s U.K. office. In prim English, he confirmed driving to Dalham Hall with the three men Shamsa had named as her kidnappers, but denied that she was in the car. “The journey was uneventful,” he wrote. “I recall some general conversation about falcons.” Soon after they arrived, he said, he had left to pick up a takeout meal, and returned to find that “a lady was present.”

Al Shaibani claimed not to know the woman, but wrote that she “appeared confident, cheerful and rather loud. Indeed I formed the view that she had

been drinking.” The following morning, he watched her depart by helicopter. If this indeed was Shamsa, he stated, “she was not taken from Dalham Hall against her will.”

Beck decided that he needed to interview Shamsa in person, and applied for clearance to travel to Dubai. Officials at the Crown Prosecution Service (C.P.S.) told him that his request would have to pass through the Foreign Office. Several weeks later, he heard that permission had been refused.



Sheikha Bouchra's life style breached the strictures of Sheikh Mohammed's circle. Photo illustration by Joan Wong; Source photographs from Getty; Shutterstock

The news was infuriating, but Beck told me he had half expected it. “Because you’re a rich and powerful person, you can effectively break any law you want in our country,” he said. Ben Gunn, the chief constable of the Cambridgeshire police at the time, told me Beck had gathered “clear evidence” that Shamsa had been “kidnapped off the street,” but the case stalled. “Politics intervened,” he suspected.

The Foreign Office has always insisted that it does not interfere in law enforcement; a spokesperson declined to respond to detailed questions about Shamsa’s case. Officials have refused to produce files related to the investigation, arguing that doing so would “reduce the UK government’s ability to protect and promote UK interests.”

Raj Joshi, who led the C.P.S. division handling international prosecutions at the time of Beck's request, said that his work was routinely impeded by the Foreign Office. "They would stick their oar in every month or so," he told me. Though he was not involved in Shamsa's case, Joshi considered the curtailment of Beck's investigation "an affront to justice." He told me, "It's really galling that we allow economic and other interests to ride roughshod over what is right."

I spoke to Beck by Zoom last October. Long retired, he is living quietly with his wife in a seaside town in Yorkshire. "Powers that were out of my control influenced the course of what happened," he told me. Yet he had never attempted to speak to two of the suspects Shamsa named: Grant Osborne and David Walsh, both of whom lived in Britain. And he accepted the outcome without protest. "Those sorts of decisions are taken way above my pay grade," he told me, with a shrug. "You've just got to go with it."

In the following years, Britain's relationship with Dubai grew still closer. Sheikh Mohammed funnelled hundreds of millions of pounds into British horse racing. He appeared often at the Queen's side at Ascot, joining her in the Royal Box and even travelling to the event in her carriage, at the head of the royal procession.

"Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid always had a soft ride because of the Newmarket connection, to put it rather crudely," Nixon, the former Ambassador, told me. "Money talks," he added. "He gets whatever he wants."

One Saturday in June, 2001, Detective Chief Inspector Colin Sutton was at home in Surrey when he received a call from the dispatch room. A serious crime had been reported on Sheikh Mohammed's Longcross Estate: a twenty-year-old sex worker said she had been picked up in London by a chauffeur and driven to the property, where she claimed to have been held captive and repeatedly raped by a member of the Dubai royal family.

Sutton set out to investigate, but then he received a second call, from a colleague in Special Branch. The matter had been cleared up "government to government," Sutton said his colleague told him. "We had this woman who had finally been released after days of being subjected to all sorts of abuse in

this house, and we were just sort of told, ‘Don’t worry about it, she’s been paid for her time, and Her Majesty’s favorite sport will carry on in this country,’ ” Sutton told me.

Surrey police say that officers were dispatched to Longcross to investigate, accessing the property with the help of Special Branch, but the alleged rapist’s identity could not be confirmed, and no charges were brought. A spokesperson said that the inquiry was thorough, with no evidence of government meddling. But several former senior Foreign Office officials told me that criminal complaints about Gulf royals in the U.K. were often managed out of public view.

Three chauffeurs who worked for the Dubai royal family for years told me that they were regularly sent out to pick up sex workers from across London and bring them to Dalham Hall when Sheikh Mohammed and his entourage were in residence. They said that groups of women were collected from London’s Carlton Tower hotel, which is owned by Dubai’s ruler. Some were experienced professionals, but others were young women in their late teens and early twenties who had been recruited by scouts in night clubs, or were making money to fund their studies. The women were not told where they were going, and their phones were taken away before they went inside the house. The drivers couldn’t say exactly what happened there, or who was involved, but when it was finished they were called back to take the women away.

One of the drivers is an owlish man in his mid-seventies named Djuro Sinobad, who moved to England from Serbia and worked as a chauffeur at Newmarket for seventeen years, until the end of 2020. He told me that some of the younger women he drove became distressed when they realized what was expected of them. One, he recalled, ran off into the grounds of Dalham Hall half clothed, pursued by a member of Sheikh Mohammed’s staff, who followed her into the bushes and beat her with a stick. “She was in a state of shock,” he told me. “There were marks on her back where he had been hitting her.” Returning to London, he said, she cried all the way.

On another occasion, Sinobad said, he brought a group of women back to the Carlton Tower in the early morning. All disembarked but one—“a young, sweet English girl.” When he went to check on her, she, too, was

crying, and there was blood on her seat. “She was shivering, like somebody who cries but doesn’t cry loud,” he said. “Like a dog.”

Trevor Holtby, a second longtime driver, told me, “Some of the women didn’t like what they were having to do.” But another chauffeur, Godwin Nimrod, said that the women seemed content and well compensated. “The envelopes were fat,” he said. “When they were in the back of the car, you can hear them flipping through the fifties.” A chauffeur at the Carlton Tower told me, “It made me uncomfortable, but no one was forcing them in handcuffs to go into the room.”

This pattern was not limited to the U.K. A former bodyguard who travelled with Sheikh Mohammed said that groups of women were brought into the hotel suite where the ruler was sequestered with his entourage almost every night, wherever he stayed. In Dubai, a source close to the royal family recalled seeing Sheikh Mohammed in his private quarters in the Zabeel Palace, reclining with some twenty young women. (Several of the former staffers I spoke to lost their jobs, under conditions that they felt were unfair. Sinobad has filed a wrongful-dismissal suit. Sheikh Mohammed’s attorneys deny that he exploited sex workers.)

Yet some considered Sheikh Mohammed’s proclivities moderate by comparison with those of his older brother. When Sheikh Maktoum travelled to the U.K. on his private jet, he brought along underage girls, several of the drivers said. They would be deposited at addresses around Knightsbridge and given spending money. Sinobad and Holtby both told me they had brought girls from these lodgings to Sheikh Maktoum’s residence. Some carried dolls and Teddy bears, they said. Holtby remembers collecting girls who travelled in their nighties.

Both men said these jobs made them sick, but they couldn’t afford to quit. When they complained to managers, they were taken off Sheikh Maktoum’s detail, but they still saw young girls come and go. Nimrod said, “All the drivers knew he had these girls, and they were underage.”

I met Nimrod and Sinobad at a pub in Knightsbridge on a freezing afternoon in January. Nimrod, a small, bespectacled man, wore a woolly hat against the weather. Sinobad had on a blue cable-knit sweater. The two drivers

sipped brandy and shared memories of Sheikh Mohammed, who they said had treated them kindly, sometimes inviting them to eat from his own table once he had finished his meal. “Sheikh Mo is a nice man,” Nimrod said. “He’d say hello. He wouldn’t pass you.”

At first, Sinobad agreed. But as Nimrod recounted more of their former employer’s benefactions, he grew flustered. “This is all to cover the nasty part of the character,” Sinobad said. “They are no good, especially with the women and the young girls.” He was pensive for a while. “It’s hard to see them crying in the back of the car,” he said.

One night in June, 2002, Latifa took a pair of scissors and cropped her long hair to the scalp. She covered her clothes with an abaya, pulled on a pair of blue-gray Skechers, and packed a bag with cash, water, wire cutters, and a knuckle knife. Then she crept out of her mother’s house and jumped the wall. She was sixteen, and it was the first time she had ever been out alone. Her plan, she later wrote, was to “cross over to Oman without being noticed” and “find a lawyer over there to help my imprisoned sister.”

Latifa caught a taxi to an area near the border, where she stopped a passing cyclist and persuaded him to sell her his bicycle. She rode on as the sun rose over the desert, until she reached a fence and cut the wire to squeeze through. When an Army car pulled up beside her, she kept moving, but before she got far men in camouflage gear jumped out and bundled her into the back.

Latifa was taken to a police station, where she was met by a “toadish” man who worked for her father. He took her home, where, she recalled, she was beaten until blood poured from her nose. Her mother watched, she wrote: “She was dressed up with a face full of makeup and frosty lilac lipstick as if she was expecting my father to visit.”

When the beating was over, Latifa was put back in the car and driven to a desert prison. Inside, she was taken to a cell and told to remove her shoes. Then one guard held her down while another battered the soles of her feet with a heavy wooden cane. “He could not have beaten me harder than he did,” she wrote in a detailed account of her imprisonment. The next torture session lasted five hours and left her unable to walk; she had to drag herself

along the floor to drink from a tap next to the toilet. She squeezed her broken feet back into her Skechers, hoping they would act as a cast, and slept with them on. She was awakened by guards dragging her out of bed for more beatings. (The Sheikh's attorneys deny that he mistreated or imprisoned Latifa.)

Latifa was in captivity for thirteen months. She slept on a thin bloodstained mattress, in the same clothes she had worn since her escape. She had no soap or toothbrush. Sometimes the lights were switched off for days, so she had to navigate her cell in the dark. "I was treated worse than any animal," she wrote.

One day, in July, 2003, she was pulled from her cell and put in a waiting vehicle. "I had not moved for one year and one month, so the car felt like I was in a rollercoaster," she wrote. She was taken home, where, she recalled, her mother greeted her as if nothing had happened. But when Latifa looked in the mirror she was horrified by the sight of her hollow eyes and jutting hip bones. For a week, she showered five times a day, luxuriating in the soap and the fresh towels. Then she blew up. "I was so sad, angry and heartbroken," she wrote. She screamed over and over that she wanted to see Shamsa. Eventually, she said, she was tranquillized and taken away. After that, she was locked up for two more years.

She got out in October, 2005, just before her twentieth birthday—a few months before her father became Dubai's official ruler. For years, Latifa trusted no one. "I spent a lot of time with animals, with the horses, with the dogs, with cats, with birds," she recalled in her escape video. She was forbidden to leave Dubai and accompanied everywhere by guards—sometimes the same ones who had caned her in prison. "If I heard a slight sound I would jump up from my sleep, preparing to get dragged and beaten," she wrote.

Shamsa came home from prison three years after Latifa. "She's only a shell of her former self, with all the will power tortured out of her," Latifa wrote. Shamsa had attempted suicide three times: slashing her wrists, overdosing, and trying to set fire to her cell. She had been released after staging a hunger strike. Now she was given tranquilizers and antidepressants that left her "like a zombie." At first, Latifa wrote, Shamsa wasn't comfortable opening

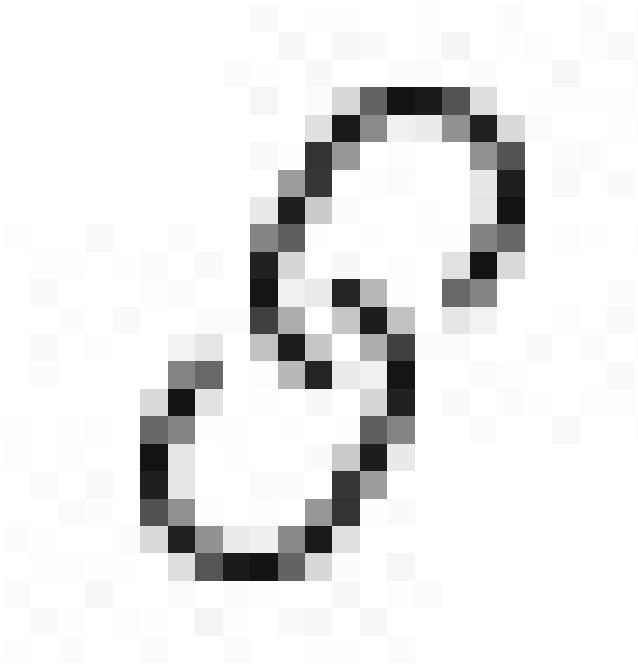
her eyes, because she had lain in the dark for so long. She had to be led around by the hand.

The sisters' reunion was agonizing. Latifa struggled to forgive Shamsa the lapses of judgment that had led to her capture. "I almost died and ruined my life for her and I'm still upset that she was so reckless," she wrote. "But at the same time she has no-one else who'll fight for her."



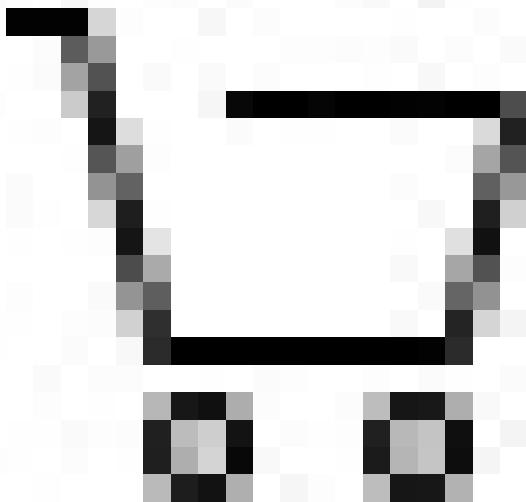
"If only every summer were autumn, and every autumn spring, and every late spring summer, and every winter only the holiday season, then I think I might finally be happy."
Cartoon by Erika Sjule

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Latifa decided to make one final bid to save herself and her sister. “I must identify every possible single point of failure and have a plan for every scenario that can go awry,” she wrote. “If I get caught in the act I’m not willing to submit to more years of torture, dehumanization and

hopelessness,” she declared. “For me it’s *liberte ou mort*, absolutely nothing, nothing in between.”

In November, 2010, Tiina Jauhiainen was working at a martial-arts school in Dubai when she received an e-mail from Latifa, asking for capoeira lessons. Jauhiainen was directed to the Zabeel Club, a private recreation complex beside Sheikh Mohammed’s palace. Latifa arrived accompanied by guards, who swept the club before she entered to make sure no men were present. She struck Jauhiainen as unassuming, wary of eye contact. But once they were alone in the club, an echoing space surrounded by portraits of Sheikh Mohammed and favored children, she threw herself into the training.

Latifa wanted to work out punishingly every day, Jauhiainen told me; she seemed determined to become stronger and more agile. At first she was too proud to show exhaustion, but eventually she began to admit when she couldn’t go on, and then the two women would order food and talk.

Latifa appeared to be steeped in extraordinary privilege, living from leisure appointment to leisure appointment. “How perfect,” Jauhiainen thought. Yet the princess was enraptured by the quotidian details of her instructor’s life. She liked to ply Jauhiainen with fruits she’d never tried, such as custard apples and star fruit, while asking questions.

Jauhiainen grew up on a flower farm in central Finland, in a tiny settlement bounded by more than a hundred lakes. While her parents tended their tulips, the work of caring for her younger siblings fell to her. She left as soon as she could, studying in London before moving to Dubai in 2001. The rootlessness of the place appealed to her, and she lived in a series of furnished high-rise apartments, cherishing the sense that she could “easily pack two bags and walk out” anytime she pleased. Yet ten years later she was still there.

The relationship with Latifa soon filled Jauhiainen’s life. She had been working in sales while moonlighting at the martial-arts school, but she agreed to quit her day job so that they could train full time. Then Latifa asked if they could start skydiving together, too. At their first class, Latifa was the only student who jumped solo. After that, Jauhiainen said, she made “jump after jump after jump, like crazy.” Latifa started wingsuit flying, and

tumbling out of hot-air balloons. She had taken a similarly fevered approach to scuba training, racking up thousands of dives.

“She was my reason for still being in Dubai,” Jauhiainen told me. Still, much of Latifa’s life remained a mystery. “Why all that intensity?” she wondered. Jauhiainen gathered that her friend was allowed to pursue approved hobbies but forbidden to leave Dubai, or to go out unchaperoned. When she questioned these constraints, Latifa deflected her. After a few years, she began to be allowed to meet Latifa alone—but even then she had no idea of the role for which she was being recruited.

As Latifa had refined her plans, she had got hold of a book called “Escape from Dubai,” in which a man named Herve Jaubert described how he had fled the Emirates by using scuba gear and a rubber dinghy to reach a getaway boat in international waters. She read it and tracked Jaubert down, sending him an e-mail to ask for help. “I’ve begun my planning for emancipation many years ago,” she wrote, declaring that she was unafraid of water, skilled in extreme sports, and ready to undertake whatever training might be necessary. If he agreed to extract her by sea, she knew that she’d need help reaching the rendezvous. “I’ll organize a lady to chaperone,” she said, assuring him, “It shouldn’t be difficult.”

Jaubert was a French American marine engineer and former naval officer in his fifties, who had left Dubai to escape embezzlement charges, which he insisted were false. He claimed to have worked undercover in the French secret service, and he cultivated an air of mystery, augmented by shiny black hair, coarse stubble, and a heavy French accent. At first, he was skeptical about Latifa’s identity, but, in a series of e-mails, she supplied details of her life. Eventually, he agreed to help her, for a price.

Latifa and Jaubert corresponded for more than seven years. In that time, by her calculation, she sent him more than five hundred thousand dollars. She was not allowed to have a bank account, so she saved the funds from pocket money, evading her chaperone on shopping trips to pass bundles of cash to Jaubert’s envoys. Sometimes his demands weighed heavily. “I’m really struggling with this and feel like a hamster on a wheel,” she wrote to him in 2014. She promised to send him a jewel worth more than fifty thousand dollars, but told him, “You need to meet me halfway on this because after I

give this diamond I have nothing left.” (Jaubert told me any funds he received from Latifa were just to cover his expenses. This was a “human-rights rescue,” he said, so it was important that he not be seen to have profited if they got caught. “She would pay me after,” he reasoned.)

Latifa envisaged an array of swashbuckling escape scenarios, by seaplane, combat boat, helicopter, private jet, and underwater scooter. She studied what Jaubert called “spy stuff”: encryption, countersurveillance, escape routes, disguises. She even managed to obtain a fake Irish passport, which she guarded carefully, strapping it under her dry suit when she went diving.

One spring, Latifa hoped she might be allowed to travel to England during racing season, and sent Jaubert Google Earth imagery of the Longcross Estate, to look for an extraction point. The grounds appeared impenetrable, so they planned a fake kidnapping, in which Jaubert would snatch Latifa from her bodyguards while she was out shopping. But when the racing party left for England she was told to stay behind.

In the end, she and Jaubert agreed to replicate his escape route. Jaubert bought a U.S.-flagged yacht—named *Nostromo*—as well as Jet Skis and a set of satellite navigators. He identified a rendezvous point sixteen miles off the coast of Oman. Latifa planned to cross the border by underwater scooter, using a scuba rebreather, then take a dinghy to the boat. They would sail to India or Sri Lanka, and Latifa would use her fake passport to fly to the U.S.

Latifa agonized over how she could bring Shamsa. “They give her sedatives as well as psychiatric drugs every single day,” she told Jaubert; “her mind is fragile and I don’t trust that she won’t freak out.” Then, without warning, Shamsa made her own move.

It had been seventeen years since Shamsa had run away. She was now thirty-six. Evading the scrutiny of her guards, she had obtained another secret cell phone—and, in the spring of 2017, she contacted the Cambridgeshire police. Beck was long retired, so a new detective retrieved Shamsa’s file. But Superintendent Adam Gallop said in a statement that, despite some “new lines of enquiry,” the evidence was insufficient to pursue such a “uniquely challenging and complex case.” Soon after, Shamsa’s rooms were searched,

and her phone was confiscated. She was placed in a separate wing of the residence, and her sedatives were increased, Latifa said.

Latifa felt that she couldn't wait any longer for her sister. She explained in her escape video, "The only way I can help myself, I can help her, I can help a lot of people, is to leave." Latifa asked Jauhiainen to meet her for lunch at a restaurant called Saladicious, a few blocks from the sea. It was quiet and she chose a table in the corner. When they sat down, Latifa told her friend everything that had happened since Shamsa first fled. By the time she finished, both women were in tears. "I felt so much anger towards the people who had done it to her," Jauhiainen told me. So when Latifa finally briefed her on the plan to escape she replied without hesitation: "I'm ready to go."

One Saturday in February, 2018, Latifa left her mother's mansion at sunrise and told her driver to take her to meet Jauhiainen at a café on Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Boulevard. While Jauhiainen ordered coffee to go, Latifa went into the bathroom, removed her abaya, and dropped her cell phone in the sanitary bin. Then the two women hurried into a borrowed Audi Q7 and headed for the border.

Since agreeing to help free Latifa, Jauhiainen had been meeting with Jaubert in Manila, where he lived, finessing the escape plan and delivering cash to settle his expenses, along with a set of diamond jewelry that she said Latifa planned to sell when she reached America. Jauhiainen travelled to Indonesia, Sri Lanka, the U.S., and Singapore to make preparations and assemble equipment: a dinghy motor, scuba gear, Garmin satellite navigators, and two powerful underwater scooters. But, practicing the subaquatic swim in her mother's pool, Latifa had felt dangerously dizzy, so Jauhiainen had proposed an alternative plan.

In a quiet area close to Oman, the two women pulled over and opened the trunk. They lifted out several large blue bags of *IKEA* flat-pack furniture, and Latifa climbed into the empty spare-tire compartment. Jauhiainen pulled down the cover and piled the bags on top. At the border, twenty minutes on, they passed through a series of checkpoints before guards opened the trunk. Jauhiainen's heart hammered, until they slammed the lid shut and waved her on.

By the time Jauhiainen cleared the border and stopped the car, she expected to find her friend blue-lipped and lifeless. But Latifa leaped out, fizzing with excitement. The two women snapped selfies, grinning in hoodies and reflective shades, as they drove on toward the sea.

They met another accomplice, Christian Elombo, in a suburb of Muscat, Oman's coastal capital. Elombo was Jauhiainen's own former capoeira instructor, a powerfully built Frenchman in his early forties. He had never met Latifa, but when Jauhiainen had explained her friend's plight, he thought for "two seconds" before agreeing to help, he told me. "I knew my conscience would not let me think that there's something that I could have done and I haven't done."

It had been Elombo's idea to hide Latifa in the spare-tire compartment of a car, and his Audi that they had used for the escape. His last job was to convey the two women out to Nostromo aboard a rubber dinghy. When they reached the beach, though, fishermen urged him to turn back. A storm was coming, and huge waves were crashing along the shore. The three pressed on, casting the dinghy out into the churn. Elombo took the tiller, while Jauhiainen navigated and sent coordinates to Jaubert. Latifa clung to the sides of the craft as it pitched violently and took on water.

The rough seas made for slow progress. When it became clear that the dinghy wouldn't reach the yacht before dark, Jaubert and another crew member set out by Jet Ski to meet it. The two women were repeatedly thrown into the waves as they struggled to clamber on. Once they were safely astride, Elombo waved goodbye. "See you next time!" he called.

Back on shore, Elombo went out for seafood, planning to dispose of the evidence and hide out in Europe. But when he set off to dump the dinghy his car was surrounded by armed police officers. "If you sneeze, they're gonna shoot you," he thought. Elombo was taken to the solitary wing of an Omani jail, where he would be held for two months. Soon, officials arrived to interrogate him.

Latifa and Jauhiainen reached Nostromo at sunset, too exhausted and nauseated by the journey to celebrate. Still, Latifa wrote a triumphant farewell to her mother and siblings, and soon posted a message on Instagram

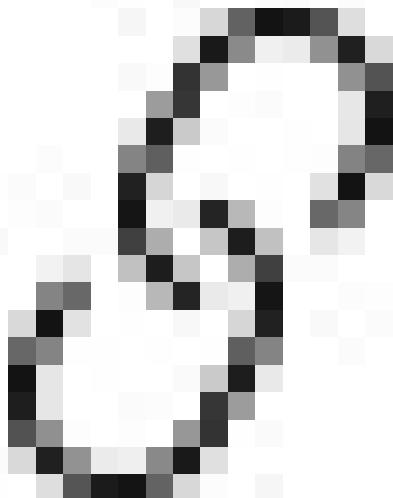
declaring her freedom: “I have escaped UAE after being trapped for 18 years.”

But Latifa and Jauhiainen quickly began losing faith in their captain. The boat was filthy, Jauhiainen said, and their supplies were riddled with cockroaches. They subsisted on porridge, boiled potatoes, and beans. “His mind was always on money and profit,” Latifa wrote about Jaubert.



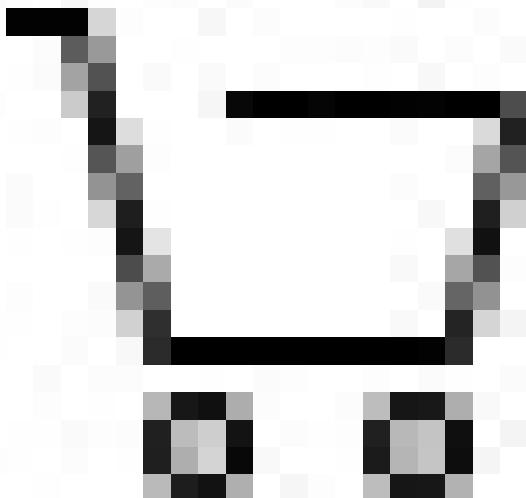
Cartoon by Maggie Larson

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Soon after setting out, Jaubert contacted a lawyer in Florida and asked her to draw up a “settlement agreement,” demanding three hundred million dollars from Sheikh Mohammed on Latifa’s behalf. Because Latifa did not have a bank account, he wrote, the money “should be transferred directly to my

account in the Philippines.” He would split it evenly with Latifa and Jauhiainen, he promised. Latifa told Jauhiainen that she had gone along with the plan just to appease Jaubert, knowing that her father would never pay. (Jaubert denied pressuring Latifa; he said that the settlement had been her idea, and that his share was to serve as payment for aiding her escape.)

After a week at sea, thirty miles off the coast of India, Nostromo was low on fuel. “I am running out,” Jaubert texted a friend; in a “couple of days” the tank would be empty. (Jaubert told me that he had enough fuel to reach the original destination but feared they would have to change routes. He also insisted that his boat was “immaculate” and that cockroaches are an inevitable part of seafaring.)

When they learned that Elombo had been arrested, Latifa seemed to freeze. “It became so tense, so stressful,” Jauhiainen told me. “We were not talking to each other, because it was just, like, nobody’s responding, we have no plan, we’re running out of petrol.”

On Jaubert’s recommendation, Latifa reached out to a group called Detained in Dubai, begging for help in publicizing her case. “The time is ticking and they have a target on my head,” she wrote. Two human-rights campaigners at the organization, David Haigh and Radha Stirling, set about verifying Latifa’s identity. Then, one night in early March, Stirling received a string of panicked messages: “Please help. Please please there’s men outside.” When she texted back, she got no reply.

Sheikh Mohammed had faced few difficulties in finding his fleeing daughter. Her communications had been intercepted, and at the U.A.E.’s request Interpol had issued Red Notices for her accomplices, accusing them of kidnapping her. When the yacht was located, off the Goa coast, Sheikh Mohammed spoke with the Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, and agreed to extradite a Dubai-based arms dealer in exchange for his daughter’s capture. The Indian government deployed boats, helicopters, and a team of armed commandos to storm Nostromo and carry Latifa away.

Lamorna Cove in Cornwall is a tiny nook on the westernmost tip of England, where rough surf breaks along a crescent shore. The area is a destination for summer vacationers, and in the off-season its smattering of

granite cottages mostly stand vacant. But on the night of March 4, 2018, the lights of one house shone over the water.

Its occupant, David Haigh, was an incongruous figure in rural Cornwall: tall and athletic, in his early forties, with a year-round tan and sculpted blond hair. Haigh had formerly worked for a Gulf-based investment firm, but his employers accused him of fraud and slander, and he'd spent nearly two years in Dubai jails. Though he later testified that he had been beaten, raped, and forced to sign an Arabic document that appeared to be a confession, the conviction hung over him, and he was still fighting a freeze on his assets. Since his release, two years earlier, he had retreated to Lamorna, and from there he had signed up to help Detained in Dubai.

On the phone, he and Radha Stirling grappled with Latifa's messages. "It's a hostage situation," Haigh said. "What do we do?" They filed a missing-persons report with Scotland Yard, and notified the Indian Coast Guard that a U.S.-flagged yacht had vanished. But no authority would take up the case, so they reached out to the police and to palace representatives in Dubai. Stirling told me that they hoped to send a message: "We know this has happened, we're watching, so don't start executing them all."

Days went by with no news. Then the campaigners received an e-mail from the lawyer in Florida, containing Latifa's escape video, with instructions to release it. "If you are watching this video, it's not such a good thing. Either I'm dead or I'm in a very, very, very bad situation," she said to the camera. "What do I talk about? Do I talk about all the murders? Do I talk about all the abuse I've seen?"

Haigh's mouth fell open. "Shit, shit, shit, shit," he said. "This is a nuclear bomb." He and Stirling released clips of the video to the media and uploaded it to YouTube.

Soon, several newspapers picked up the story of Dubai's runaway princess. Sheikh Mohammed gave no comment, but the campaigners received word of Jauhiainen and Jaubert. Nostromo had been escorted to the U.A.E., where the pair were interrogated for more than a week. After the video was published, they were released, and made their way to London, where they held a press conference alongside Stirling and Haigh. "I am here speaking

about my friend, because we have to get her freed," Jauhainen told a room full of journalists. "The international community must take action."

Haigh's seafront cottage became a command center for the campaign to free Latifa. The group reported her abduction to the United Nations. Then they contacted the BBC and began making a documentary about the escape. It aired in December, 2018, coinciding with Latifa's thirty-third birthday. Finally, the Dubai government released a response, saying that Latifa had not tried to escape, but had been kidnapped by Jaubert. "Her Highness Sheikha Latifa is now safe in Dubai," it said. "She and her family are looking forward to celebrating her birthday today, in privacy and peace."

In fact, Latifa had passed her birthday in captivity. After disappearing overboard on Nostromo, she had been dragged onto an Indian naval boat, then aboard a helicopter and onto a private jet. She was given tranquilizers twice, she recalled in an account written in detention, but the drugs seemed to produce no effect. When an Emirati lieutenant tried to pull her off the helicopter, she sank her teeth into his arm. Only after a third dose did she feel herself losing consciousness.

"I want them to be embarrassed that it took the navy, several warships, armed commandos, 3 tranquilizer injections and an hour long struggle to put an unarmed pint-sized woman on a jet," Latifa wrote. She regained consciousness in Dubai. "I remember tears just streaming down my face," she wrote. "It was the worst feeling in the world. To be back in the hell hole after being so close to freedom."

Latifa was taken to a desert prison named Al Awir and placed in a cell with blacked-out windows. At first her jailers were callous, but, once her video testimony was released, they began pleading with her to recant. For a while, they served her food on gilded plates. "They are extremely ridiculous," she wrote.

As the news of her capture spread, Latifa came under increasing pressure to help quash concerns about her safety. After the BBC aired an interview with Jauhainen, in May, two policewomen arrived with a fresh outfit for her, and took her to the Zabeel Club to meet Sheikh Mohammed. Her eyes were swollen with tears, and her father told her to wash her face. "I hope you can

see that you are valuable to us," she remembered him telling her. He instructed an attendant to take a photograph, but Latifa hung her head. "Why aren't you smiling?" he asked. When she didn't reply, she said, her father stalked out, and she was taken back to prison.

Later that month, Latifa was moved to a villa of her own. When she arrived, she noted "the unnaturally high walls and cameras," and found that all the windows were barred shut. Five policemen patrolled the exterior, and two policewomen were stationed in the house. Inside, she found Caroline Faraj, the editor-in-chief of CNN Arabic. Faraj asked Latifa to pose for a photograph and to appear in a video. "Let the world know you are alive," she said. Latifa refused, saying that she was being held prisoner. Faraj went on to publish a story which led with a statement from the family that Latifa was being "cared for at home" but made no mention of their own encounter. (CNN maintains that Faraj was told the meeting was off the record.)

For six months, Latifa had no visitors. In September, she staged a twenty-day hunger strike, but it drew no response. Finally, on December 6th, she heard a knock on her bedroom door. It was Princess Haya, Sheikh Mohammed's youngest wife, laden with gifts. Latifa was pale and looked "vulnerable," Haya later said. "She opened the door, looked at me, embraced me, and burst into tears." A week later, Haya reappeared and invited her to lunch the following day. Latifa understood that if she "behaved well" she would be freed.

Haya picked her up the next afternoon and took her to a gated palace. Inside, Latifa was introduced to Mary Robinson, the former U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights and the ex-President of Ireland. Without telling Latifa, Princess Haya, herself a former U.N. Goodwill Ambassador, had invited Robinson to assess her condition.

Haya had brought along her own eleven-year-old daughter, Jalila, and pointed out that she and Latifa shared a love of adventure sports. "It must be the Al Maktoum gene," she joked. Jalila took Latifa outside, to a kennel full of small dogs, and they petted the animals through the bars while Haya and Robinson watched from a distance.

Over lunch, Jalila was asked what she wanted to be when she grew up, Latifa wrote, but “nobody spoke to me privately or asked me about my situation.” She volunteered that she had always wanted to study medicine but had not been allowed to attend medical school, or to leave the country since she was fourteen. Robinson “seemed uninterested,” Latifa wrote; “she just chimed in and shared her own stories.” After the meal, Latifa was asked to pose for photographs. At first she declined, but, she said, Haya told her, “It’s a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.” She assented, making sure that she didn’t smile, because she “knew it would be used for propaganda.”

Soon afterward, the Emirati government sent the photographs to the U.N., showing Latifa sitting next to Robinson, looking dazed and pale in a dark hoodie, citing them as proof that Latifa was “receiving the necessary care and support.” Robinson told the BBC at the time that Latifa was a “vulnerable” woman, who had become embroiled in a plan involving “a very big demand note for three hundred million dollars.” She said that Latifa was “troubled” and had “made a video that she now regrets.” When Latifa heard of Robinson’s account of the meeting, she was flattened. “Stayed in bed for a day in tears,” she wrote. “Felt so used.” (Years later, Robinson said in an interview that she had been “horribly tricked” into believing that Latifa had bipolar disorder, and hadn’t asked about her circumstances because “I really didn’t want to talk to her and increase the trauma over a nice lunch.”) Haya made gestures at conciliation: she sent over gift baskets—jewelry, clothes, art supplies, books—and she visited again. But Latifa received her frostily, and she stopped coming.

The Lamorna Cove campaigners were outraged by Robinson’s intervention. The tension grew when Haigh accused Jaubert of attempting to sell the jewelry Latifa had entrusted to him. Jaubert and his wife had discussed the sale of the set—comprising nine hundred and fifty round, marquise, and pear-cut diamonds—in a series of e-mails with potential buyers from Craigslist. “I sold the necklace already, I have the ring, the earrings, and the bracelet,” his wife wrote in one.

Haigh and Jauhainen severed ties with Jaubert, but Stirling took his side. She accused Haigh of “complete slander and harassment.” Jaubert maintains that Latifa gave him the jewelry as part of his payment, and that most of it was stolen by the commandos who stormed Nostromo. He denies selling the

items, saying that he listed them on Craigslist only to gauge the extent of his losses.

Haigh and Jauhainen split into one camp, Stirling and Jaubert into another. In the spring of 2019, with the team splintering, Jauhainen returned to her parents' flower farm for a break. Then, late one night, her phone lit up with messages from a new accomplice of Latifa's. "Hi ms.tiina i hope u respond," the person wrote. "im scared to help ms.latifa but shes very kind to me."

The accomplice asked Jauhainen questions to check her identity before sending her a photograph: a handwritten note from Latifa, with a graphic account of her abduction. Over the next four weeks, Latifa wrote dozens more letters to Jauhainen and Haigh, chronicling her experience. "I will not allow someone to erase almost half a decade of torture and imprisonment," she wrote. "They attack me with lies, I will defend myself with truths."

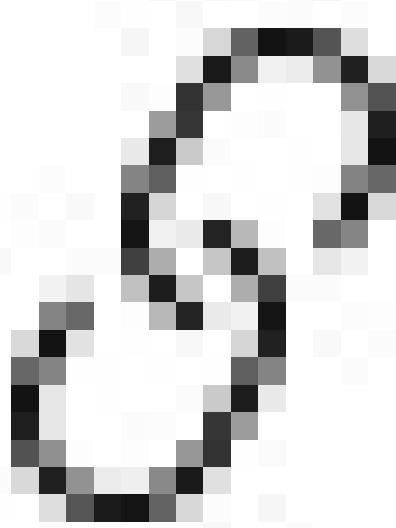
From the angle of the sunrise, she had worked out the position of the U.K., and sometimes she drew comfort from knowing her supporters were there. She reminisced about asking Jauhainen to sleep out under the stars with her on board Nostromo. "We should do that in friendlier waters in a nice clean boat," she wrote.

By April, the campaigners had managed to smuggle a cell phone into the villa. Latifa kept it hidden on her person, and locked herself in the bathroom with the water running to obscure her voice. They exchanged thousands of WhatsApp messages, and Latifa recorded dozens of voice notes documenting her ordeal. She also filmed a series of videos, to be released if they lost contact.



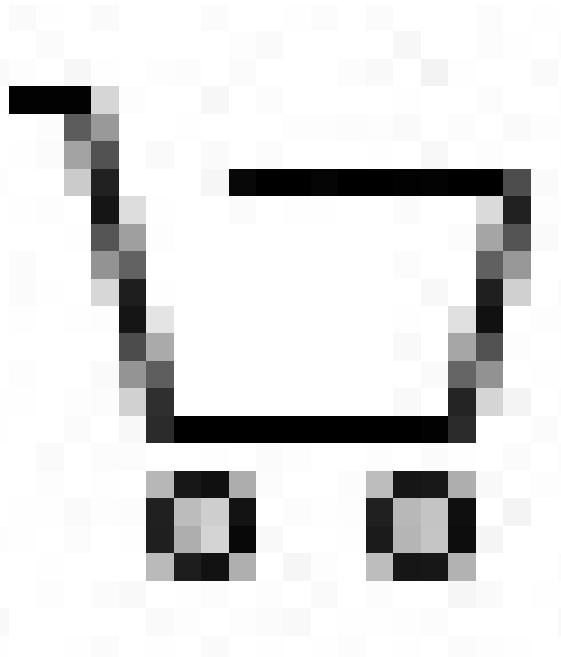
Cartoon by Ellis Rosen

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Their group chat filled with memes, travel plans, and discussions about movies, books, and music. Latifa daydreamed about visiting Hawaii, where she had heard there were four hundred different kinds of mangoes and “fruits that taste like chocolate pudding and vanilla ice cream.” Haigh supplied her with a Netflix log-in. She loved horror films, and once spooked herself badly enough that she had to sleep with the lights on for several nights. When he sent pictures of sunsets over the sea at Lamorna, she was so transfixed that she imagined buying the whole cove.

Haigh battled insomnia, and often sat awake through the small hours exchanging messages with Latifa. “It was all about keeping her mind occupied and giving her hope,” he told me. He bought chicken eggs and hatched them in an incubator, sending her updates on their progress—“like having a Tamagotchi,” he said. She was so delighted that he kept going, ending up with more than forty chickens, ducks, and peacocks, which he promised to keep for her until she was free. Through an intermediary, she sent him a hairless, green-eyed sphynx cat. The cat—named Sheikha, but affectionately known as Alien—became a mascot, a “mini Latifa,” Haigh said.

By now, Latifa was steering the campaign from behind the scenes. She reviewed filings to the U.N., designed logos, and dreamed up increasingly

bold strategies. She was, Haigh told me, “bloody bossy.” In June, Latifa seized upon a new hope. When Sheikh Mohammed flew to the U.K. to attend Ascot, he was photographed with the Queen and Prince William—but, for the first time in many years, Princess Haya was not on his arm. Reports began to spread that the ruler’s youngest wife had left him. If Haya was no longer under Sheikh Mohammed’s control, Latifa reasoned, she could confirm that her stepdaughter was being held against her will: “She has seen it with her own eyes.”

By the time her absence was noted at Ascot, Princess Haya had been a fugitive for two months. In April, 2019, after her husband discovered that she was having an affair with her bodyguard, she fled to London, settling with her two children in a neo-Georgian mansion on Kensington Palace Gardens. That July, she launched a legal campaign against Sheikh Mohammed, seeking court protection for herself and her children.

In court, she cited the abuse of Shamsa and Latifa as evidence of the threat the Sheikh posed. Haya said that she had initially believed her husband’s assurances that Latifa had been rescued from an extortion attempt. But, when she became inquisitive after visiting Latifa, he told her to “stop interfering.” The Sheikh began publishing poems containing thinly veiled references to Haya. “My spirit is cured of you, girl,” one verse ran. “When your face appears, no pleasure I feel.” Menacing notes were left around her palace: “We will take your son—your daughter is ours—your life is over.” More than once, she went to bed and found a pistol on her pillow.

In March, one of Sheikh Mohammed’s helicopters landed outside her palace, and the pilot declared he had orders to take her to the Al Awir prison. Her seven-year-old son clung to her leg in terror; if he hadn’t, she believed, she would have been dragged away. Even in London, she remained afraid. The Sheikh had published more threatening poems about her, including one titled “You Lived and Died,” and had told her that she and her children would “never be safe in England.”

The High Court responded by making her children wards of the court, barring their removal from the country, and instigating a fact-finding process to test Haya’s claims. Family proceedings in Britain are generally heard in

private, so Haya's allegations were sealed from public view, but her lawyers now had a pretext to call Shamsa and Latifa to testify in a British court.

Latifa sent a voice message to Haigh and Jauhiainen soon afterward, sounding panicked. "My father wants to see me," she said. In subsequent messages, she described being taken to Sheikh Mohammed's office in the desert, where he met her in a drawing room and announced that Shamsa was now free. When he left the room, Shamsa entered. She was hard to recognize, Latifa said: bright and energetic, full of praise for their father and Allah. Shamsa said that Sheikh Mohammed had given her a cell phone and told her she was free to travel—but now all she wanted to do was stay home and worship.

Latifa was flummoxed, but she allowed her older sister to hug her. She described her capture aboard *Nostromo* and began to cry. Shamsa warned that the room was likely bugged. "Just be careful, be respectful," she whispered.

But Latifa had lost patience. "You have ten seconds," she shouted at Shamsa. "Tell me what you want! Because I went to prison so many times for you. I almost died for you."

Shamsa seemed stricken. "I'm so confused," she said. "I feel like I want to escape and then I want to stay."

When Sheikh Mohammed came back in, he told Latifa that she was "precious" and that he "wanted to start a new page." Three days later, she and Shamsa were again brought before their father. This time, he asked them to confirm to lawyers that they did not want to travel to England to give evidence. Then he left, and in came Mohammed Al Shaibani, who had become the director of the Dubai Ruler's Court. Latifa said that he spent four hours urging her and Shamsa to rebuff the summons: "Tell them it's a family matter and we're solving it within the family."

Shamsa's demeanor was dramatically changed since their previous meeting. She sobbed, and told Al Shaibani, "Whatever happens to me, I don't care, but I will not hurt my sister. So whatever my sister wants I will do." Latifa, thinking back on the brutality of Shamsa's confinement, regretted shouting

at her. But she told Al Shaibani that she would not coöperate while being held incommunicado. Later, back in her villa, she heard that Shamsa's phone had been taken away.

Sheikh Mohammed sent a statement to the High Court, saying that he had offered his daughters a choice about whether to testify. "Both Shamsa and Latifa were adamant that they did not want to do this," he wrote. He denied abducting either woman. "To this day I consider that Latifa's return to Dubai was a rescue mission." In support of his case, he filed a statement from their older sister, Maitha, a Tae Kwon Do athlete who was among the first Emirati women to compete in the Olympics. "My sisters Shamsa and Latifa are not imprisoned in Dubai," she wrote. "Shamsa lives with our mother and me. Latifa lives in her own private residence because that is her choice, which has been accommodated. Shamsa and I regularly spend time with Latifa."

Back in her villa, Latifa came under renewed pressure to make it appear that she was free. Guards offered to take her out shopping for books, so that she could be photographed. It was an agonizing offer to refuse. "I crave fresh air and sunlight," she wrote. But she knew that if she coöperated she would risk scuttling Haya's case.

In February, 2020, Sheikh Mohammed opened the Global Women's Forum Dubai with a promise that his nation would "lead the world" in "women's growth and advancement." Three thousand participants from more than eighty countries assembled to hear speakers including Ivanka Trump, who praised Sheikh Mohammed's "steadfast commitment" to women's advancement, and Britain's former Prime Minister Theresa May, who accepted a fee of a hundred and fifteen thousand pounds to speak about gender equality. "It's a circus," Latifa texted Haigh. The government rolled out a new law, enabling women to obtain restraining orders against domestic abusers—though it stopped short of criminalizing marital rape and preserved male guardians' right to discipline their female charges.

As Dubai's ruler greeted dignitaries at the forum, his private behavior was under scrutiny in London's High Court. Jauhiainen had testified during closed hearings about Latifa's violent abduction. Beck, the police inspector, had described how his investigation into Shamsa's disappearance was shuttered. "This unresolved incident has remained a mystery and a source of

frustration to me for eighteen years,” he said. In the absence of direct testimony from Latifa, the judge had accepted her escape video as witness evidence, noting that her account had a “strong ring of truth about it.” Haya’s statements about the conditions of Latifa’s “jail villa” were also accepted. (Princess Haya declined to comment for this article.)

In March, the court published a detailed finding of fact, noting that Sheikh Mohammed had used the “very substantial powers at his disposal to achieve his particular aims”: kidnapping and imprisoning his daughters, and subjecting Haya to “a campaign of fear and intimidation.” Sheikh Mohammed argued that the findings were one-sided, because his position as a head of state had prevented him from participating in the fact-finding process. The judge dismissed this as “at least disingenuous,” noting that the Sheikh had filed two witness statements.

For Latifa, the judgment was a vindication. And yet she seemed underwhelmed when Haigh delivered the news. “It’s massively good for you,” he told her. “Judge found you and Shamsa were kidnapped.”

“ok,” she replied. “i hope it gets me out . . . lets see.” She seemed distracted, and told him her foot hurt.

It seemed her nerve was cracking. “I’m in a perpetual nightmare,” she wrote. The guards wouldn’t even let her open the window, she said; she felt she was dying a “very slow death” by suffocation. Then she reported that she was being visited by a psychiatrist, who appeared alongside her father’s security officials to pressure her to comply with his wishes.

Sheikh Mohammed had also been trying a gentler appeal. One day, a package had arrived at the villa: a copy of his memoir, inscribed by “your father who always loves you.” Latifa broke down. “Maybe the war is finally over,” she allowed herself to think. Haigh said that Latifa began telling him that she was worried about her father’s health: “He’s an old man, I should look after him.” She fretted that revealing his abuses was a betrayal. “It was like Stockholm syndrome,” Haigh told me.

Latifa said that she had offered a deal to one of her father’s security officials: if she was released, “I will live my life normally and quietly and the

campaign will stop.” But a week went by and she got no response. “I honestly feel so tired and hopeless,” she wrote. Eventually, one of her guards told her that she must stay in captivity for another year, and gave her a stopwatch to measure the time.

Latifa was distraught, and terrified of “losing contact and being in the dark.” In June, her phone started to malfunction. She had read about Pegasus, the Israeli hacking tool that allows governments to extract data from a target’s device remotely. “I just panicked,” she wrote. “Was literally shaking.”

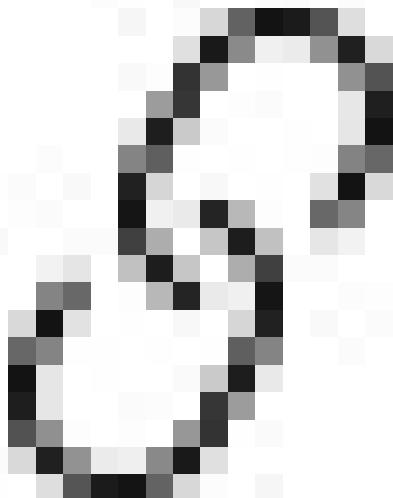
Haigh was alarmed. “She really is struggling,” he wrote to a lawyer involved in the case. “I’m increasingly worried she will give up.” Latifa feared the consequences of releasing more evidence about her father’s actions. In mid-July, she texted Haigh that she wanted to move on, “even if I spend rest of my life in dxb.”

“Her bravery was going down, down, down,” Haigh told me. A few days later she sent a more resolute message. “I won’t believe I’m free until I’m on UK soil,” she wrote, on July 21, 2020. But, after that day, he never heard from her again.



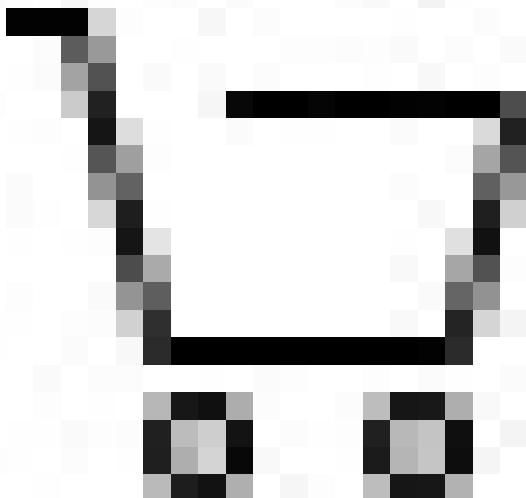
“I hate waking up just to get sucked back into yesterday’s open tabs.”
Cartoon by William Haefeli

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For months, Haigh kept writing to Latifa, but received no reply. “Alien and I miss you,” he wrote, early the following year. “We are all trying our hardest and we haven’t given up. I hope one day somehow you will see this.”

After the WhatsApp channel went silent, Jauhiainen joined Haigh in Lamorna Cove to figure out what to do with the video evidence Latifa had recorded. “No matter what please remember that I will never give up or surrender,” she had told them the previous year. “So let’s agree you’ll continue to assume I’m alive and being imprisoned against my will.” Yet, in the final months before she lost contact, she had resisted any further publicity.

Haigh was adamant. “They’ve either killed her or she’s drugged up somewhere and suffering,” he said. “We need to do something big and dramatic that would get the world’s attention.” Seven months after losing contact, they sent transcripts of Latifa’s videos to the U.N., and authorized the BBC to air them.

The footage of Latifa, whispering into the camera as she crouched against the bathroom wall, was watched around the world. “I’m a hostage. And this villa has been converted into a jail,” she said. The U.N. called on the U.A.E. to prove that Latifa was alive. The British government finally broke its silence; Boris Johnson, the Prime Minister, and Dominic Raab, the Foreign Secretary, expressed concern about her safety.

The pressure on Sheikh Mohammed intensified in May, 2021, when the High Court published a further finding: Haya’s phone, and those of her lawyers, security guards, and an assistant, had been hacked with Pegasus, and Sheikh Mohammed, “above any other person in the world,” was the likely culprit. Haigh found that his phone had also been hacked, and Latifa’s number appeared on a leaked list of apparent Pegasus targets. (Sheikh Mohammed has denied involvement in any hacks, and the makers of the software dispute the list.) The court ultimately ordered Sheikh Mohammed to pay Haya more than five hundred and fifty million pounds, reputedly the largest divorce settlement in British history, and barred him from seeing their children, finding that he had used his “immense power” to subject Haya to an “exorbitant degree” of abuse.

That year, news broke that the Queen had cancelled Sheikh Mohammed’s invitation to join her in the Royal Box at Ascot. Finally, the political mood seemed to be turning. Haigh and Jauhiainen seized the moment to file an application to the British government to freeze the Sheikh’s U.K. assets and

impose travel sanctions over his “cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment” of Latifa.

Then, on May 20th, a British teacher in Dubai named Sioned Taylor posted a picture on Instagram, with the caption “Lovely evening.” It showed three women at a table in a deserted mall. Next to Taylor, hunched forward, blank-faced, and dressed in black, was Latifa.

Haigh’s first impulse was relief. At least, he thought, “she’s alive, and she’s got a little bit of freedom.” Yet this looked like exactly the sort of staged photograph Latifa had always resisted. Jauhiainen knew Taylor: she had been one of a few women approved to spend time with Latifa after her first imprisonment. Latifa’s face in the picture was inscrutable.

The following day, the Lamorna Cove campaigners received the first of a series of letters from Niri Shan, a partner at a global law firm named Taylor Wessing, ordering them to stop advocating for Latifa. Shan said Latifa had informed him that “she now wants to live a normal, private life to the fullest extent possible.” She had been distressed by the publication of her videos, Shan said, and did not want “any further publicity.” Haigh and Jauhiainen were asked to sign an agreement not to speak publicly about Latifa, and to delete the evidence she had shared. Haigh refused to comply, unless the firm could prove that Latifa was not acting under duress. “I know it’s not just her behind these letters,” Haigh told me. “It’s Daddy.” (Shan declined to comment.)

The next day, Sioned Taylor posted another photograph of Latifa, sitting at a waterfront restaurant in Dubai, smiling tightly at the camera. “Lovely food at Bice Mare with Latifa earlier,” she wrote. The following month came a picture of Taylor and Latifa, who was dressed in baggy sweatpants and a crumpled tie-dyed shirt, apparently at the Madrid airport. Shortly after, the law firm Taylor Wessing issued a statement in Latifa’s name. “I recently visited 3 European countries on holiday with my friend. I asked her to post a few photos online to prove to campaigners that I can travel where I want,” it said. “I hope now that I can live my life in peace.”

Around the same time, the campaigners suffered another reversal. They had been aided by a cousin of Latifa’s, Marcus Essabri, who had broken ties with

the royal family and was living in the English cathedral city of Gloucester, working as a barber and running a falafel joint. But in August, after signing the agreement offered by Taylor Wessing, he was invited to meet Latifa in Iceland, along with Taylor and Shan. “I had an emotional reunion with my cousin,” he wrote afterward on Twitter. “It was reassuring to see her so happy.”

Jauhiainen was incensed. “So she can just live her quiet life and this never happened?” she said. “Excuse me. This did happen—and I was kidnapped as well.” But she and Haigh agreed that it was untenable to continue advocating for Latifa’s release. “Marcus has met her, we’re getting letters from lawyers saying stop, and she’s popping up around the world—and yet we’re going to carry on a campaign saying free her? It just looks ridiculous,” Haigh told me. “It was clear to me that she had done a deal. She was breaking.” Reluctantly, he and Jauhiainen announced that their campaign was over.

One morning last October, Haigh met me at Cornwall’s Newquay airport and drove me down to Lamorna. At his cottage, he led me to his study, where a small, salt-smeared window overlooked the sea. A bare light bulb shone over shelves of neatly labelled evidence files from the campaign. Alien, the sphynx cat, wound herself around our ankles as we talked.

Haigh logged in to his computer and scrolled through the messages he had saved from Latifa’s secret phone, in files with code names such as “Cinnamon Bun Recipes” and “Custard Donut.” He and Jauhiainen had dedicated more than three years to Latifa’s cause, and he felt furious that Dubai was erasing their work. “They want to reinvent history,” he said. “And they’re doing it.”

The photographs of Latifa seemed to ease any reputational troubles Sheikh Mohammed might have faced. The head of the U.A.E.’s interior ministry was appointed president of Interpol. The Biden Administration approved a multi-billion-dollar arms deal and pushed ahead with a hundred-billion-dollar clean-energy collaboration, declaring the U.A.E. an “essential partner of the United States.” World leaders poured into the Dubai Expo last spring, and the emirate was selected as the host for the *COP28* climate-change summit.

Last year, the U.N. revealed an unexpected development: Latifa had met one of Mary Robinson's successors, the former Chilean President Michelle Bachelet, in Paris. "Latifa conveyed to the High Commissioner that she was well & expressed her wish for respect for her privacy," the U.N. Human Rights account posted on Twitter. A picture was released of Latifa standing beside Bachelet outside a Paris Métro station. Haigh felt relieved, he told me; if Bachelet was involved, then perhaps he could lay Latifa's case to rest.

But he kept asking himself: if Latifa was truly at liberty, why hadn't she sent him or Jauhiainen so much as a single text? She had insisted that if they ever lost contact "just be sure I'm imprisoned and waiting." The cognitive dissonance was exhausting, and Latifa's absence left "a great hole," Haigh told me. He missed her late-night companionship, and the sense of purpose he drew from fighting on her side. "It's like someone's died," he said. "And I'm literally sitting at the end of the earth, looking at the sea."

I met Jauhiainen a month later in a bright café in South London, close to the house where she was staying with a friend. She, too, had been struggling to reorient herself since losing contact with Latifa. She couldn't go back to Dubai, and Finland was no longer home. "There's no closure whatsoever," she told me. Soon after we met, she bought a one-way ticket to Thailand, intending to stay footloose until she figured out what to do next.

In April, I wrote to Latifa, urging her to speak with me. I received a letter from a law firm in London, refusing that request. That same day, a new account appeared on Instagram in the name of Latifa Al Maktoum. "I was recently made aware of media inquiries for a piece which casts doubt on my freedom," the account posted, alongside a picture of Latifa in Austria, posing outside the Swarovski Crystal Worlds park in a puffer coat and snow boots. "I can understand it from the outside perspective of seeing someone so outspoken fall off the grid and have others speak on her behalf, especially after everything that has happened which appears to make me look like I'm being controlled. I am totally free and living an independent life."

A nurse who served for two years on Shamsa's team of minders told me that Latifa is living in her own home and drives herself around Dubai, without wearing the abaya. "I think she negotiated something and she's now managing her own life, within agreeable boundaries," she said. Those

boundaries, she surmised, included “keeping the family business private.” (The nurse, like many others I spoke with, said she had “no idea” what had happened to Shamsa.) She considered Latifa “a brilliant woman,” but suggested that she had brought her troubles upon herself. “In any family, if you break the rules of your culture, it’s not going to be a great experience,” she said.

Yet for years Latifa had refused to contemplate that her campaign could end this way. “There will never be a conclusion where ‘Latifa is happily with her UAE family’ *NEVER*,” she wrote soon after making contact with Haigh and Jauhiainen from her villa. “I want to live, exist and die as a fully emancipated person. My soul will be happy with that. I need that. It’s my destiny and the only conclusion I’ll accept.” ♦

By Ted Chiang

By Robyn Weintraub

By Isaac Chotiner

By Will Nediger

Above & Beyond

- [The Heavenly Collections of Karl Lagerfeld](#)

The Heavenly Collections of Karl Lagerfeld

At the Met's Costume Institute, "Karl Lagerfeld: A Line of Beauty" exhibits garments from the designer's seven-decade career.



Karl Lagerfeld, who died in 2019, once said, "I am very much down to earth. Just not this earth." During his seven-decade career, Lagerfeld designed heavenly collections for Balmain, Chloé, Fendi, Patou, his eponymous label, and, perhaps most famously, for Chanel, whose Fall/Winter 2014-15 haute-couture runway featured the opulent coat pictured here. Starting May 5, it joins some hundred and fifty garments on view in the exhibition "**Karl Lagerfeld: A Line of Beauty**," at the Met's Costume Institute.

By Ted Chiang

By Robyn Weintraub

By Isaac Chotiner

By Will Nediger

Annals of Rock and Roll

- [The Sad Dads of the National](#)

The Sad Dads of the National

For two decades, the band has written music about the kind of sadness that feels quotidian and incremental—the slow accumulation of ordinary losses.

By [Amanda Petrusich](#)



Last fall, the National débuted a new piece of merchandise: a black zippered sweatshirt featuring the words “*SAD DADS*” in block letters. The band—which formed in 1999, in Brooklyn—was lampooning its reputation as a font of midlife ennui, the sort of rudderless melancholy that takes hold when a person realizes that the dusty hallmarks of American happiness (marriage, children, a job in an office) aren’t a guarantee against despair. For more than two decades, this has been the National’s grist: not the major devastations but the strange little ache that feels like a precondition to being human. No amount of Transcendental Meditation, Pilates, turmeric, rose quartz, direct sunlight, jogging, oat milk, sleep hygiene, or psychoanalysis can fully alleviate that ambient sadness. Part of it is surely existential—our lives are temporary and inscrutable; death is compulsory and forever—but another part feels more quotidian and incremental, the slow accumulation of ordinary losses. Maybe there’s a person you once loved but lost touch with. A friend who moved to a new town. An apple tree that stood outside your bedroom window, levelled to make way for broadband cable. An old dog. A

former colleague. We are always losing, or leaving, or being left, in ways both minor and vast. “The grief it gets me, the weird goodbyes,” Matt Berninger, the band’s vocalist, sings on “Weird Goodbyes,” a recent song featuring Justin Vernon, of Bon Iver. Berninger steels himself to confront the next loss: “Memorize the bathwater, memorize the air / There’ll come a time I’ll wanna know I was here.”

This month, the National will release its ninth album, “First Two Pages of Frankenstein.” Like each of the band’s previous records, it contains pathos and beauty. The National is made up of two sets of brothers—the multi-instrumentalists Aaron and Bryce Dessner, who are twins, and Scott and Bryan Devendorf, on bass and drums, respectively—along with Berninger, whose own brother, the filmmaker Tom Berninger, has become the group’s default documentarian. (In 2013, Tom released a poignant feature, “Mistaken for Strangers,” about his time on tour with the band; it opened the Tribeca Film Festival that year, with an introduction by Robert De Niro.) The group coalesced in a large, unheated industrial space on the oily banks of Brooklyn’s Gowanus Canal, but its members were brought up around Cincinnati, and have known one another since they were young. Aaron, Bryce, and Bryan began making music together as teen-agers. “We’d set up and basically play instrumental versions of the Grateful Dead,” Bryan told me. “It was, like, ‘Eyes of the World’ for half an hour.” Berninger and Scott, who are a few years older, met in the University of Cincinnati’s graphic-design program. Eventually, Scott, Bryan, Aaron, and Berninger moved to New York City and found desk jobs in design and publishing, while Bryce enrolled in the graduate program at the Yale School of Music. They began playing together at Berninger’s loft, on Third and Bond Streets, then a dicey, barren corner of Brooklyn. “There was a pack of dogs that was always around,” Bryan said. “People would abandon cars and burn them on the street.” Scott and Berninger chose the band’s name mostly for its meaninglessness. “We were trying to name it nothing,” Scott said, laughing. A thread of Midwestern humility—a kind of gentle self-abnegation—still runs through the National’s work.

In post-9/11 New York, bands with an assured sense of style (the Strokes, Interpol, the Yeah Yeah Yeahs) were being heralded as the second coming of downtown rock and roll. The National’s presence was more studious. The band members dressed as though they were fluent in Adobe Illustrator. In

“Meet Me in the Bathroom,” Lizzy Goodman’s chronicle of the era, Berninger tells a story about how Julian Casablancas, the Strokes’ seductively disaffected singer, nearly stole his date with a single glance. “We were watching these cool bands that were way better than us at the Mercury Lounge, and, literally, people were throwing undergarments,” Bryan recalled. “We were so awkward.” For a long time, the National felt like a secret shared among friends. But gradually Berninger—tall, slender, bearded—developed into a magnetic front man. Onstage, his vibe was gloomy, but also vaguely debauched. He told me, “We were already in love with the songs that we were writing. We just wanted to have other people hear them.” By 2007, when the band released “Boxer,” its fourth LP, it was selling out multi-night stints at the Bowery Ballroom. The following August, Barack Obama put out a campaign video featuring an instrumental version of “Fake Empire,” the album’s dynamic, urging opening track.

The band members are now all in their late forties to early fifties. Their songwriting process starts with melodic sketches by the Dessners; Berninger writes the lyrics, with critical input from his wife, Carin Besser, who edited fiction at *The New Yorker* from 1999 to 2009. In the past decade and a half, the band has found unexpected purchase on the *Billboard* charts, with its last four records débutting in the top five. More recently, Aaron has become a sought-after pop producer, collaborating with Taylor Swift on her blockbuster albums “folklore,” “evermore,” and a deluxe version of “Midnights,” and writing with Gracie Abrams, Girl in Red, and Ed Sheeran. Yet it’s Berninger’s voice, a lonesome baritone, that defines the band’s sound. His lyrics often involve water (swimming pools, the sea, a forty-five-minute shower) and tend to express a sense of fitful alienation. On “Mistaken for Strangers,” from 2007, Berninger sings of feeling unknowable and estranged, disillusioned by what he calls the “unmagnificent lives of adults”:

You get mistaken for strangers by your own friends
When you pass them at night
Under the silvery, silvery Citibank lights.

The feeling Berninger is describing here—the feeling that, to some extent, he is always describing—is a soft, amorphous grief. He recognizes it everywhere. “I live in a city sorrow built / It’s in my honey, it’s in my milk,”

he sings on “Sorrow,” a track from “High Violet” (2010). Much like his songwriting heroes Leonard Cohen, Nick Cave, and Tom Waits, Berninger understands that true misery can also be kind of funny. In collaboration with the artist Ragnar Kjartansson, the National once performed “Sorrow” for six consecutive hours, or approximately a hundred and eight times, at *MoMA PS1*, in Queens; the band later released the performance on nine clear vinyl records, titling the set “A Lot of Sorrow.” Berninger also knows how to write a sly, lusty quatrain—on “Karen,” from 2005, he sings, “It’s a common fetish / For a doting man / To ballerina on the coffee table / Cock in hand”—though the National lyric that makes me laugh the most is hardly a joke at all. “It’s a Hollywood summer,” Berninger sings on “Conversation 16,” a sombre, whirling track from “High Violet.” “You’d never believe the shitty thoughts I think.”

“Matt is very childlike in a way that I love, and yet so mature and transcendent,” the singer Phoebe Bridgers told me recently. Bridgers sings on two tracks on the band’s new album. In early 2020, she and Berninger performed a duet called “Walking on a String” at Carnegie Hall. Before the show, Bridgers was talking with the musician Conor Oberst, who fronts Bright Eyes. “Conor asked me, ‘Do you think I’m a stunted youth?’ And I was, like, ‘Well, absolutely, but I don’t think that’s necessarily bad,’ ” Bridgers said. Then she walked backstage, and found that Berninger had taken a friend’s beard and draped it over his own lip, so that it looked like he had a mustache. “At Carnegie Hall,” she added. “In a suit.”

In 2014, Berninger and Besser moved to Los Angeles with their four-year-old daughter, Isla, and bought a bungalow in Venice, not far from the ocean. Tom came along, too, and started working out of a guesthouse in the back yard. The three of them were developing a television series based loosely on Tom’s film about the National, but fictionalized. “The pitch was a show not unlike ‘The Monkees,’ but more modern,” Berninger said. “A real, honest look at the music industry.” Berninger put together a band and called it Das Apes. He wrote new songs, some of which ended up on his first solo record, “Serpentine Prison” (2020). They filmed a pilot, scouted locations, took meetings with HBO. In the end, they spent nearly a decade working on the show. “It was this endless circle of excitement and failure, excitement and failure,” Tom told me. Berninger said, “We were sober about the chances of actually getting a TV show. But it felt like we got pretty close.”

Finally, in the spring of 2021, they gave up. “There was real, genuine heartbreak,” Berninger said. “A lot of it was connected to my brother. I felt responsible for pulling him along on a long climb toward something that wasn’t going to work out.” Berninger also felt relief. “I went through a phase where I hibernated,” he said. “I was working on a lot of National songs. But then I slowed down. Then I froze.” The pandemic had halted the live-music industry (in the spring and summer of 2020, the National cancelled an entire thirty-nine-date tour), and it seemed like a good time for the band to start working on a new record. Bryce and Aaron were sending ideas. Berninger was stalling. “For six months or so, I was, like, ‘Yeah, it’s going great! Slow cookin’, everything’s awesome, going great,’ ” Berninger said. “But, in reality, nothing. Nothing at all. I couldn’t do it at all. I went into a kind of panic.” At first, he thought it was a run-of-the-mill writer’s block. “Then I thought, O.K., this is a depression,” he said. “You’ll just deal with it like a flu. I tried a lot of things. Therapy, some antidepressants, exercise. I got totally sober. But that didn’t help, either.” For close to a year, Berninger couldn’t write or sing. “My voice didn’t work,” he said. “I’ve never been a trained singer, but this was like I had no air.”

In some ways, Berninger’s paralysis felt inevitable. “He was never a natural performer,” Aaron said. “None of us were—none of us *are*, really. But he had to bear the brunt of that. He’s not hiding behind an instrument. I think sometimes we underestimated what that must have felt like, or what it did to him.” When I asked Besser if she felt that the depression was causing the block, or that the block was causing the depression, she thought about it for a moment. “The body got taken down,” she said. “It very much looked like something physical came and was hovering for a while. It was such a physical illness. But he had already been dealing with anxiety, with panic, so it did feel . . . not inevitable, maybe, but it was part of a longer process.” Berninger is hesitant to gripe about the psychic perils of his work, which, from afar, can sound like perks—the adulation of a heaving crowd, travel, celebrity fans, cool suits—but, after two decades, he was spent. “I’d been in a manic phase for a long time,” he said. “I could never totally wind down.”

In April, 2022, the National gathered at Long Pond, Aaron’s studio outside Hudson, New York, with the hope of finally recording new songs. The band’s songwriting process has always been marked by brotherly tension and perfectionism. “People throw punches that usually don’t hurt, but you

occasionally catch one that's not so nice," Bryce told me. But this time it felt like more was at stake. Berninger wasn't doing well. "He hit a really real, very dark, very bleak spot," Tom said. Berninger said that he was "close to nonverbal" during this phase: "The guys were watching the World Cup—I was watching a ball bounce around. I couldn't be interested in anything." Performing was excruciating. He recalled, "I was able to sort of mumble and free-associate some things, and Aaron would try to encourage me—'That's great! Let's make a song out of it!' And I would say, 'There's no song there.' " At one point, Tom urged his brother to think of his pain as creative fodder. "I said, 'Matt, use this feeling and write about it,' " Tom told me. "He just looks at me with, like, anger in his eyes. 'What do you think I've been fucking doing for the past twenty years? All I've been writing about is depression.' "

For a moment, it seemed as though the National might break up. Eight albums, world tours, twenty-odd years together—it had been a good run. "It's never lost on me that I get to be a wizard of the black magic that's music," Berninger told me. "I get to make these spells that make people cry, that make me cry. But to suddenly feel like that weird gift you had that enabled you to put little bits of words together and put them to a melody, or whatever songwriting is, this thing that you've built a whole life out of . . ." He paused. "The sparkles weren't coming from my fingertips." The focus of the Long Pond sessions shifted. Bryce told me, "I definitely thought it was ending. It wasn't about pushing Matt to finish this record so we could get back on tour and earn some money. I was actually surprised to find out how much I love him. I always have."

The band still had a four-month summer tour scheduled, beginning that May. "I had to pull it together," Berninger said. "The first three shows, I could barely look at the audience. Making eye contact with people is always dangerous for me, especially in the middle of a song. My brain disconnects and misfires. That's usually why I keep my eyes closed." During guitar solos, he'd be grateful for the chance to turn around and stare at the floor. "I'd be, like, 'O.K., there's about a minute more of this song, and then six more songs after that, and then we'll do the encore—just get through it.' I hated myself for that. I hated myself for taking those moments for granted. Who gets to have that moment? And you were inside your head the whole two hours, torturing yourself?"

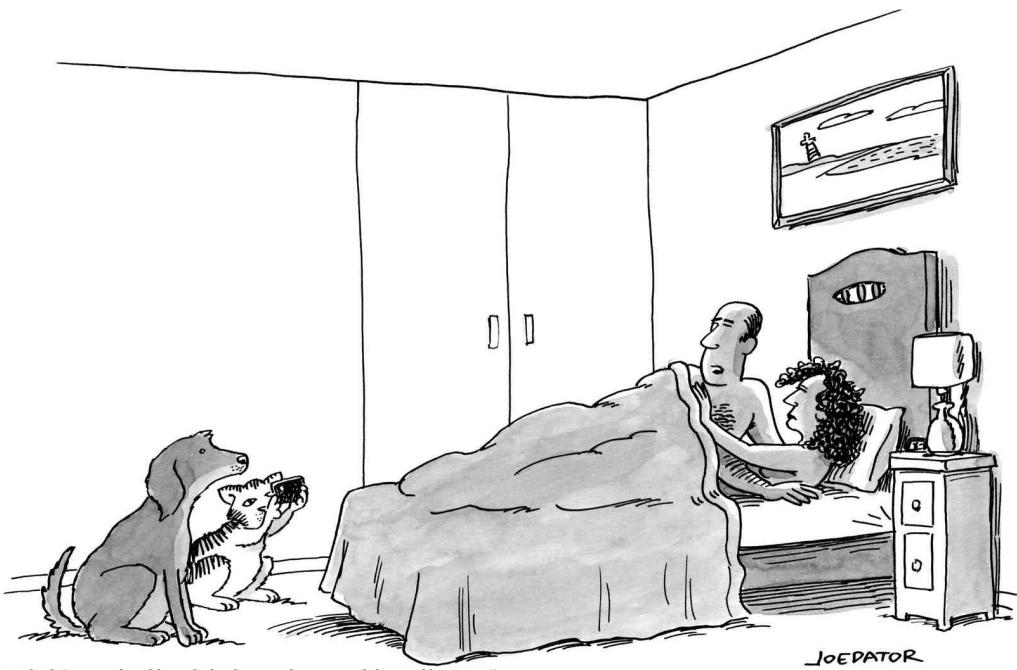
Yet, as the tour went on, Berninger started to feel a little freer, more awake. “It was still a pretty slow, slow buck,” he said. “I wasn’t suddenly, like, ‘Oh, good, I’m back.’ Being with the band was a major part of getting me through it. But, mostly, I think it was time.” The first thing he managed to write was “Once Upon a Poolside,” which opens the new album. As in many of Berninger’s songs, he worries about the future. “I love songs that look over the edge and describe the fall,” he said. “Fear of my marriage falling apart is my worst fear ever. The band falling apart is my second biggest.” The first verse is a tense evocation:

Don’t make this any harder
Everybody’s waiting
Walk-on’s almost over
Teenagers on ice.

One day, Berninger pulled a copy of “Frankenstein” from his bookshelf, hoping that Mary Shelley’s language might untangle something in him. “I started looking for words,” he said. “I’ll do that when I write—just any words. ‘Tranquelize’ popped up: ‘tranquilized oceans,’ ‘poles.’ ” That led Berninger to write “Your Mind Is Not Your Friend,” which contains a haunting verse that drew, in part, from the first two pages of “Frankenstein”:

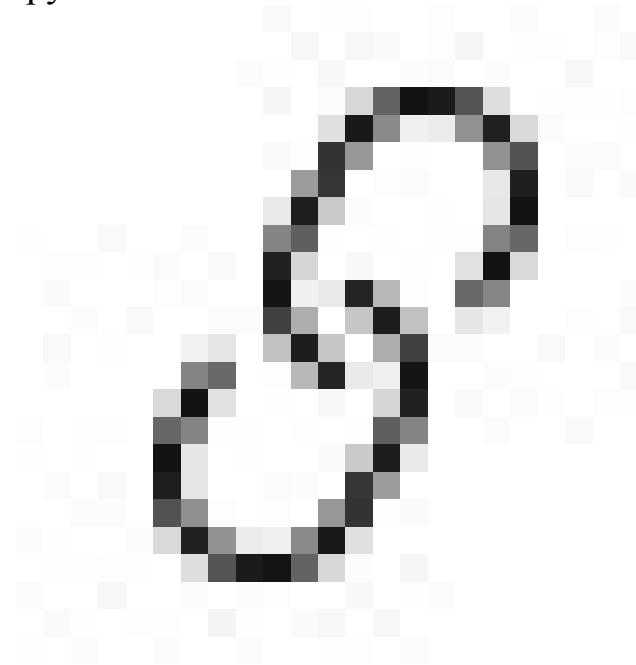
Tranquelize the ocean
Between the poles
You’re crawling under rocks
And climbing into holes.

“I tricked myself into writing about my depression, because the album was couched in this cool title, this other character, this unlovable creature,” Berninger said. “There are no actual ‘Frankenstein’ references on the record. But I thought, That’s a good little mask, a costume I can get into.” Eventually, Berninger had enough material for a new record. Then he had more than enough. “He showed up,” Aaron said. “Really present, and also really quiet, like the storm had passed and he was waking up from it. And then he became prolific.” He added, “To hear a great National album come out of that was so gratifying. Like, Oh, we didn’t just wreck on the road.”



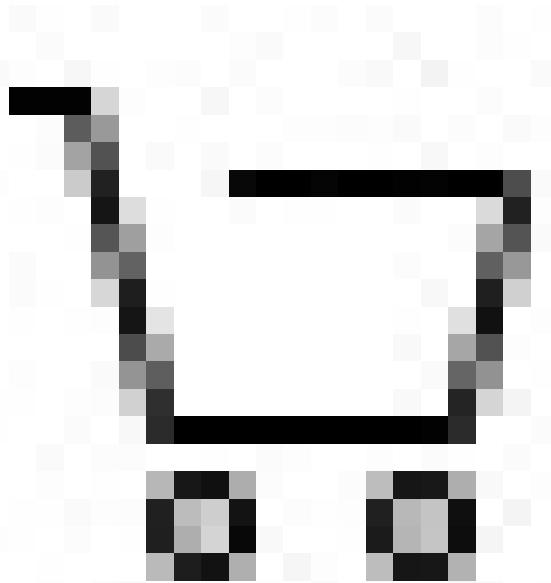
"I don't think I'm comfortable with the dog watching us and the cat filming us."
Cartoon by Joe Dator

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When Berninger and I first started talking, he was still a little uneasy with the terminology: writer's block, mental illness, a funk, a bummer, a really bad time, his "year of thinking darkly." One afternoon, we walked around Kingston, New York, looking for a spot to get a drink. In conversation, Berninger is open and self-effacing. He jokingly suggested that perhaps it was still possible to tell everyone that the word "depression"—which pops up in some of the press materials for the album—was a typo. "What actually happened is that I fell into a deep *diarrhea*," he said, taking a drag from an American Spirit.

This past March, the band gathered at Long Pond to rehearse for an appearance on the "Tonight Show" and for an intimate gig at the Bearsville Theatre, a small venue in the Catskills. I added my boots to a mound of muddied shoes at the studio door. In late winter, the Hudson River Valley is grim terrain—filthy snowbanks, spindly trees, deep puddles—yet it somehow felt true to the National's gestalt to launch an album during the bleakest time of year. The feeling inside was homey: bowls of almonds, cans of seltzer, fresh macaroons from a bakery in Hudson. Someone was brewing coffee in a moka pot. A picture window in the back of the studio looked out on a meadow scattered with Adirondack chairs. "It isn't wall-to-wall recording equipment or guitars," Jonathan Low, one of the band's engineers,

told me. “When you first walk in, you’re immediately drawn to the connection to the outdoors.”

Two of Aaron’s young children, Mimi and Robin, darted around. Bryan, wearing sunglasses and chewing on a toothpick, settled into the drum room, which was sectioned off by sheets of soundproof glass. “It’s like I’m in an aquarium!” he said to Robin, who giggled. Bryan’s drumming—studied, precise, but still deeply human—is central to the National’s uneasy sound. (In an interview with *Modern Drummer*, Scott once described his brother’s style as “machine organic.”) During rehearsal, the band members communicate with a clipped, knowing rapport. They ran through “Tropic Morning News,” a new song about passively consuming an endlessly regenerating stream of bad news on one’s phone. It contains hints of foreboding. “I was suffering more than I let on,” Berninger sang. His voice sounded almost cheerful.

The next day, backstage at the “Tonight Show,” the band was relaxed. (“It’s embarrassing, but you can always ask to do it again,” Aaron said.) Berninger sometimes speaks or shouts a lyric rather than singing it, and, while rehearsing on set, he chanted through a couplet toward the end of “Tropic Morning News,” holding up a finger as if scolding someone for speaking out of turn: “I would love to have nothing to do with it / I would like to move on and be through with it.” Berninger’s phrasing is idiosyncratic; it’s rare that he does what you think he’s going to do. “Matt basically never sings the implied melody,” Aaron said. Their performance that night was elegant and jittery.

The following morning, the band arrived in Bearsville for the show. Tom was gliding around setting up cameras. During the sound check, when it came time for “Send for Me,” the final track on “First Two Pages of Frankenstein,” Bryce listened from the floor. At the end of the song, Benjamin Lanz and Kyle Resnick, multi-instrumentalists who tour with the band, played a loose, cascading outro on trombone and trumpet. “It’s like an Italian funeral,” Bryce said approvingly. “Send for Me” might be Berninger’s most plainly earnest song. It is a promise of eternal solidarity, an offer to help someone through all the awkward and devastating moments that constitute a life. When Berninger wrote it, he was thinking of his

daughter, but it also feels like an offer to the band's fans. When you are feeling overpowered by melancholy, put your headphones on:

If you're ever in a gift shop dying inside
Filling up with tears
Cause you thought of somebody you loved
You haven't seen in years
Send for me whenever, wherever
Send for me, I'll come and get you.

In the past, Berninger has been known to drink an entire bottle of wine onstage, but lately he is taking more nights off from alcohol. Backstage, he declined when offered tequila. He said, of performing, "I think I enjoy it more when I'm a little bit drunk. But it's good to just let the music itself be enough." Upstairs, fans were filing in. Tickets were hard to come by (these days, the National is far more likely to play a sold-out arena than a five-hundred-capacity theatre in the mountains), and most of them had gone to friends, family, and members of the band's fan club. "People don't talk during our shows," he said. "People get shushed. There's nobody in the back screaming for Jack-and-Cokes." The audience tends to fixate on Berninger, with an intensity that can resemble obeisance, or even ecstasy. National shows are hushed, until the moment when they feel like a bloodletting. The band frequently encores with "Mr. November," a song from "Alligator" (2005). It features a feral chorus. "I won't fuck us over, I'm Mr. November!" Berninger screams, crawling through the crowd on the floor, fans pawing at his back, everyone looking deranged.

Though the National is often thought of as a magnet for fortysomething dudes in cool sneakers and Warby Parkers—sad dads—there were at least as many young women at the Bearsville show. When I asked Phoebe Bridgers about the band's reputation for giving voice to a certain strain of middle-aged male angst, she said, "Something middle-aged men and teen-age girls have in common is the act of finding yourself, and being kind of self-conscious. Maybe some beliefs that you've held on to for a long time are finally being shed. The teen-age girl in me is obsessed with the National, and feels very spoken to and seen by them, maybe for the exact same reasons that they speak to middle-aged men."

The National has a handful of songs—“Squalor Victoria,” “Sea of Love”—that come alive onstage. “Eucalyptus,” a new single, feels bigger and more forceful in concert. The lyrics address the material fallout of a breakup; Berninger frets about the future of a couple’s shared possessions while periodically interjecting the sorts of forlorn questions (“What if we moved back to New York?”) we tend to ask when we’re clinging to something that’s slipping farther out of reach. It is an archetypal National song, full of despondency and hyperspecific life-style references. In the aftermath of a breakup, how do you reckon with the ceiling fans, the undeveloped film, the houseplants, the records? “What about the Mountain Valley Spring? / What about the ornaments? / What if I reinvented again? / What about the moondrop light?” Berninger wonders. In Bearsville, he became animated by anguish during the chorus: “I don’t care / I don’t want it / It wouldn’t be fair / It’d be so alone, without you there.” Then he turned a lyric that, on paper, feels meek and defeated into a punch line: “If I miss it, I’ll visit!” From the audience, I felt whatever it is a person feels during a National show: happy, sad, weird, alone, cradled, there.

Ten years ago, Bryce bought a small, circa-1842 farmhouse in upstate New York. When I visited, early on a Sunday morning, the musician Sufjan Stevens was sitting in the kitchen, getting ready to walk his dog. “I took some incense,” he called back as he left. Stevens and Bryce are close; in 2019, Stevens built a studio nearby, and he now lives in the Catskills full time. They met in Kensington, Brooklyn, in the early two-thousands. Stevens was a fan of Bryce’s avant-garde quartet, Clogs, and didn’t know that Bryce was also in a rock band. “When he told me, I was, like, Ugh, that’s not my flavor,” Stevens said, laughing. “But over the years I’ve come to love and admire and marvel at it. At the center, lyrically, is this really dark world of trauma and confusion and self-loathing.” That world, Stevens said, is distinguished by Berninger’s specificity: “He’s writing about a conflict in the moment, as it’s happening, and names and items and objects and places are being dropped. It’s almost like a regional drama that takes place in his head.”

Earlier in the day, Stevens and Bryce had FaceTimed with the Dessners’ older sister, Jessica, who lives in Italy and is undergoing treatment for breast cancer. Distance was in the air. These days, each member of the National has settled in a different place. Bryan moved back to Cincinnati. Scott went to

Long Island; Aaron is upstate. Berninger and Besser are in the midst of moving back East, to Connecticut. Bryce has lived mostly in France since 2016. (His wife, the singer Pauline de Lassus Saint-Geniès, was born in Paris; they have a young son, Octave.) “Maybe that’s a theme of what’s been going on in my life in general,” Bryce said, handing me a mug of coffee. “Letting go of the past and being with each other where we are now. We all lived in Brooklyn together, we were always together. It was kind of a dream. Then, suddenly, we were just spread to the wind. We’re not in each other’s lives in the same way that we used to be.”

Lately, with the band more dispersed, side projects have picked up. Outside of the National, Bryce is a celebrated composer, having collaborated with Philip Glass, Steve Reich, and Ryuichi Sakamoto. In 2015, he wrote a portion of the Golden Globe-nominated score for Alejandro González Iñárritu’s “The Revenant.” Iñárritu is also a fan of the National. “They do it without trying too hard,” he told me. “As with humidity, there is a moment when you are really wet without noticing.” In 2019, Bryce composed an anxious, probing piece called “Impermanence” for the Australian String Quartet and the Sydney Dance Company. “It’s about the fragility of life,” he said. “The things we think are always going to be there. I’ve always held people really closely. I think my brother does, too. It’s partly a twin thing. I remember I used to cry myself to sleep thinking about the day that he would die.” That insistence on magnifying the humanity of an experience is perhaps what unites the National’s discography, even at its most conceptual. “There’s a heartbeat in there,” Bryce said.

Though it is easy to find the emotional content in Berninger’s lyrics, there is a softer current of mournfulness in the Dessners’ melodies, rhythms, and structures. “I’m glad you hear that,” Aaron told me. “I learned to make music when I was a teen-ager, grappling with anxiety and depression. That’s common in teen-agers, but for me at the time it felt really severe—it was like getting hit by a truck.” He paused. “Someone once asked me, To what degree does the work contain your emotions? And I guess it’s a hundred per cent.” Low, the engineer, told me, “There are times when we’re at the mastering stage and half of the elements in a song get muted or a completely different version ends up on the album. Aaron has really honed his instincts to maximize the emotional message of the song.” This past winter, Aaron began writing and producing for Ed Sheeran’s upcoming sixth album, “-”

(pronounced “subtract”). Sheeran described the record as a document of his spiral through fear, depression, and anxiety. “Writing with Aaron, I found myself having lines drawn out of me by the music,” he said. “I barely thought about them—they just happened.”

Aaron’s capacity to infuse his melodies with feeling is what led to his first collaboration with Taylor Swift, who texted him in the spring of 2020 to ask if he wanted to try writing together. Swift was a fan of the National—“Taylor can sing any National song word for word, pretty much,” Aaron said—and sensed something narrative in Aaron’s production. “She felt like it was telling her things—she was hearing stories in it,” he said. “That was how we clicked.” She asked if he would share some of his unreleased instrumental work. “I had a folder of stuff that I had been working on, because I was going to open for Bon Iver by myself in Europe in the spring of 2020, which of course got cancelled. So I just sent her the folder. And at 2 a.m. that night she sang ‘Cardigan’”—a still, contemplative song she eventually included on “folklore.” “It felt like a lightning bolt hit the house.”

I asked Berninger if watching Aaron’s first album with Swift dominate the charts (and win a Grammy for Album of the Year) had been in any way disorienting. From the outside, at least, the timing looked nearly cruel—coinciding, as it did, with Berninger’s depression. He told me, “When I wasn’t writing, I was just glad that Aaron was keeping us in the Zeitgeist.” Swift sings on “The Alcott,” a plaintive ballad on “First Two Pages of Frankenstein.” She and Berninger trade lines on the chorus, a wary couple trying to figure out whether they made a mistake by ending things. The woman in the song—who sits in a bar, writing in a notebook—is based on Besser. “Taylor inhabited that character,” Berninger said. “She’s always been really interested in how Carin and I write together.” Swift has collaborated on songs with her former partner, the actor Joe Alwyn, and asked Berninger and Besser what the experience was like for them. The advice they often give is to be careful but to stay true: the disaffection and self-loathing and pettiness—it all has to be in there.

“My love for the National stems from the lyricism and the soundscapes the band creates to perfectly complement them,” Swift told me recently. “There are so many lines in their songs that are disturbingly, courageously truthful. I’ll always marvel at how their lyrics have the ability to express such stark

darkness and wistful romanticism at the same time. There's also such a synergy to the deadpan spoken-word quality of Matt's vocals and the vistas the band is creating around him. That entire verse in 'I Need My Girl' where he's talking about her losing her shit, driving the car into the garden and then apologizing to the vines. It really sums up what sets them apart. They set an entire scene."

It feels worth saying that during the time I spent with the National I was sad. I had recently and suddenly become a young widow, and I was raising a small child alone. I'd always responded to the band's nervous articulations of heartbreak and yearning, but now they felt heavier, truer, and more comforting. Sadness can sometimes feel like an aesthetic choice, fodder for memes and T-shirts that say things like "Too Bad So Sad" or "Just Another Worst Day of My Life." Compounding pessimism can feel like the only way to express compassion, especially online. That's not the kind of sad I was. The National's music speaks to a more intimate, nonperformative sorrow. "There's so much wreckage in life," Aaron told me. "The band has lost different people. At times, we've lost each other."

In the end, Berninger found that the only thing that helped his depression was patience. There were moments when he wondered if he should keep at it—if art even meant anything, if it could ever make anyone feel better. "If I'm here now feeling this, I don't know if it's done me any good," he remembered thinking. "I feel disconnected from all my friends, I feel disconnected from everything, I don't feel like I've learned anything, I don't feel like I'm necessarily a kinder, wiser person. Maybe the constant self-reflection, the trying to make something beautiful out of all the fear and the desire and the love, maybe if I hadn't always been making so much of it then I wouldn't be sucked down into it. Maybe I've created this weird person that I am." Yet spend a few minutes in the crowd at a National show and it becomes obvious that the band's music can bring about a kind of catharsis. It opens up space for mourning—both the big losses and the tiny, mundane, endless ones.

"First Two Pages of Frankenstein" feels like a distillation of the National's ethos. Aaron points to "New Order T-Shirt," a song about trying to hold on to the past yet somehow transcend it. "The whole DNA of the National is contained there," he said. "That idea—I keep what I can of you / Split

second glimpses and snapshots and sounds . . . I carry you around like drugs in my pocket'—is exactly how I feel about the grief of life. The way you can connect deeply with people. But you can't always hold on." ♦

An earlier version of this article misstated the familial relationship of the Dessner brothers.

By The New Yorker

By James Lasdun

By Nathan Heller

By Cal Newport

At the Museums

- Skating the Gnarliest Ramp of Them All: The Guggenheim

Skating the Gnarliest Ramp of Them All: The Guggenheim

The six-story spiral tempted would-be shredders for six decades, until the museum finally allowed the skateboarder Alexis Sablone in for a night.

By [Cole Louison](#)



At any given time, the Guggenheim may host Kandinskys, Picassos, Pollocks, Mondrians, or af Klints, but the first thing that any visitor who isn't too boring to admit it thinks about is the ramp, and how much fun it would be to roll down. Frank Lloyd Wright imagined the museum's six-story helix as "a curving wave that never breaks." The building opened in 1959, the same year that the Roller Derby Skate Board débuted. And yet, for the next six decades, perhaps owing to a sense of decorum, or to a competent security crew, no one skated down the ramp.

"A ramp like that—it's breathtaking," the professional skateboarder Alexis Sablone said the other evening. She was standing on the museum's ground floor, a board at her hip. Converse, one of Sablone's sponsors, had persuaded the Guggenheim to allow the company to shoot a film, promoting Sablone's signature shoe, using the ramp. The talks took nearly a year;

Sablone was kept in the dark. “They surprised me,” she said. “I thought they were going to walk me into Times Square and unveil a billboard.” She looked around, dropped her board, and popped an awkward ollie.

Sablone grew up in New England, where she skated parking lots and garages. As a teen-ager, she starred in “Wonderful, Horrible, Life,” a gritty skate film shot on handheld cameras around Boston, where skateboarding is banned on public property. She is now thirty-six, with short black hair, and lives in Crown Heights. In addition to skating (she placed fourth in the street classification at the Tokyo Olympics), she’s an artist and a designer, with a master’s in architecture from M.I.T.; she recently made a 3-D model of the Guggenheim on her computer. “A spiral is hard to describe,” she said. “The rise and run. A lot harder than a stair.”

The plan was to shoot Sablone in black-and-white sailing down the ramp. “The building is a simple idea,” the director Jeremy Elkin, who wore an orange shirt and a black cap, said. “The piece has to reflect that. That ethos.”

Workers were humping several trucks’ worth of gear up the ramp: lights, tripods, sandbags, Spidergrips, an Arri Alexa camera, an Easyrig that looked like a mechanical giraffe. The walls were bare; the art works had been stored in crates on the ground floor. The oculus was dark. Sablone warmed up, landing a few kickflips. She slipped while doing a Nollieheel, landing on her butt, then lay back, looking up. Far above, a camera peered over the railing. Elkin’s radio crackled. “O.K.!” he said. “Let’s go!”

At around 11 P.M., Sablone rode the elevator to the top floor (Wright didn’t want visitors to walk up) for a test shot, a simple left-to-right roll through the frame. The shot looked nice—a series of black, white, and gray horizontal curves, from which Sablone emerged like a fin—but there were issues. Sablone didn’t want to look down. “It would make me dizzy,” she said. “The only flat surface is the ground, so you have no reference points for where you are in space.” She’d also discovered that the ramp was coated in a layer of what she likened to “Masonite dust,” which stuck to her wheels. The skating was fast; the ramp was surprisingly steep. “The amount of curvature, the only thing you can compare it to is a parking garage, honestly,” she said. During the test shot, she’d almost rammed a protrusion.

“I don’t want to be the first skateboarder to skate the ramp *and* the first skateboarder to break the museum,” she said.

Elkin repositioned the crew and made a new plan. Sablone would start at the top and roll down to the next floor for a full orbit, but stop at the balcony. Then the production would move down a floor and start again.

Sablone bounded back up and retook her starting place. Elkin called, “Action!” Sablone stepped on her board and started rolling. The rotunda filled with a humming buzz that grew louder as she picked up speed. She leaned like a surfer.

Elkins got the shot, and the crew trudged down the ramp to repeat the drill. They wrapped at around 7 A.M., as the oculus was filling with light. Sablone, damp with sweat, was limping slightly. “I grew up skating in the nineties,” she said, smiling. “I never, ever would expect to be here.” ♦

By The New Yorker

By James Lasdun

By Nathan Heller

By Cal Newport

Books

- [The Making of Jackie Kennedy](#)
- [A Fire Started in Waco. Thirty Years Later, It's Still Burning](#)
- [Briefly Noted](#)

The Making of Jackie Kennedy

As a student in Paris and a photographer at the Washington Times-Herald, the future First Lady worked behind the lens to bring her own ideas into focus.

By [Thomas Mallon](#)



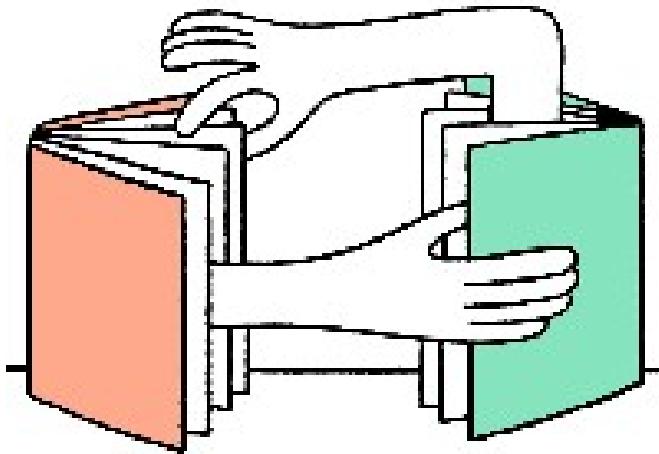
Less than a decade before she became the world's most photographed woman, Jacqueline Bouvier regularly worked behind a camera for the Washington *Times-Herald*, soliciting opinions from the capital's ordinary residents and taking their pictures. "[Camera Girl](#)," Carl Sferrazza Anthony's new biography of the young Jackie, illuminates this portion of her life; the chapter titled "Inauguration" does not take a reader to the snowy, ask-not-what, pillbox-hatted noontime of January 20, 1961, but to the day, eight years earlier, when Dwight Eisenhower assumed the Presidency. That afternoon, Jackie was on assignment for the paper, writing a feature about the people who had turned out for Ike's parade. That night, she attended an inaugural ball as a guest of the new Massachusetts senator [John F. Kennedy](#).

The real business of her evening was conducted during a cocktail party at Kennedy's house. The senator's friend Lem Billings told Miss Bouvier that anyone who married Jack would "have to be very understanding" about how

he “had been around an awful lot” and “known many, many girls.” However delicately put, the message was as clear as a declaration that the United States intended to remain in Berlin: Kennedy’s bride should expect him to continue cultivating and maintaining a vast array of female alliances.

The Best Books We Read This Week

Read our reviews of notable new fiction and nonfiction, updated every Wednesday.



“Camera Girl” (Gallery) makes plain that the young Jackie was clever and educable, a woman who preferred her own curricula—books, socializing, and travel—to anything imposed by the schools that she attended. Two years at Vassar, in Poughkeepsie, left her unimpressed. Anthony offers some shaky evidence that she may have been expelled for breaking curfew, but the likelier explanation for her departure was that she’d spent her junior year at the Sorbonne, through a Smith College study-abroad program, without Vassar’s permission.

It was in postwar Paris, Anthony writes, that Jackie perfected a knowledge of “how to be ‘on,’ to make an intentional impression, to invent herself into a character.” She acquired a small Leica camera and brought it on her travels

throughout France, subordinating schooling to adventure, though she managed to do fine at both. On June 9, 1950, she wrote to her mother:

I've had three of my four exams already and all went quite well. My international relations one was on the opposing policies of Austria-Hungary and Russia in the Balkans from 1900-1914. The night before I got in from . . . the biggest ball of the season in Paris in this beautiful old 17th century house on the Ille-St.-Louis . . . I got in at 6 a.m. and had the exam from 8:30 a.m. till noon, then went out to lunch . . . quite a day, but I knew all about the Balkans!

No wonder she didn't want to go back to Poughkeepsie. Her mother didn't want her to, either, but only out of bitter opposition to Jackie's father, who craved her return. Janet Norton Lee and John (Black Jack) Bouvier had been divorced for a decade, and Jackie was an asset that they continually contested. Janet, living outside New York, worried that Jackie would fall into Black Jack's Manhattan orbit after graduating from Vassar; he had invited Jackie to live with him and promised her a job on Wall Street. When his daughter left the school, Bouvier was "crushed," unaware that in this instance Jackie welcomed her mother's manipulation. His relatives believed that the defeat accelerated his drinking and self-isolation, though he had been in decline, financially and otherwise, since the mid-nineteen-thirties, when his brand of venturesome stock-brokering was reined in by the man Franklin Roosevelt appointed to be the first S.E.C. chair, Joseph P. Kennedy.



Jackie photographs a woman feeding goldfish in a rooftop pond above the offices of the *Times-Herald*, in 1952. Photograph from Bettmann / Getty

Janet, however, was unyielding. Jackie, accustomed from an early age to her mother's rages, once pronounced her to be scarier than Stalin. Janet never stopped phonying up her Irish ancestry into something more Waspish and aristocratic. (Jackie was never so flagrant, but when fame arrived she clearly didn't mind the American public believing that she was more than one-eighth French.) Janet eventually found stability in her union to the quiet and very wealthy Hugh Auchincloss, and she urged each of her daughters to focus on making a prosperous marriage, even if it was as dull as her own. When Jack Kennedy came along, Janet did not like his line of work, preferring Jackie's first fiancé, a young Wall Streeter named John Husted, until she found out how little money of his own Husted had to manage.

After coming home from France in the late summer of 1950, Jackie again fell under Janet's control. She decided to complete her undergraduate degree as a French-literature major at George Washington University, then an unexceptional, racially segregated school, much overshadowed by Georgetown. Many G.W. students were commuters, but Jackie was the only one who made the daily trip from Merrywood, an estate across the Potomac which Hugh Auchincloss had purchased in 1930. G.W., now more residential, has a Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis dormitory on I Street, with a bas-relief of young Jackie on a plaque by the front entrance.

From 1950 to 1951, she was serious about her studies, but not enough absorbed by life at the school to have her yearbook picture taken; one finds no trace of her in the 1951 *Cherry Tree*. Two years after Jackie's graduation, Joseph P. Kennedy's publicist included the Sorbonne but not G.W. in a press release announcing Miss Bouvier's engagement to his son. The desired effect was of a balanced marital ticket: an old Continental family, the Bouviers, soldering its quiet sort of glamour to the Kennedys' arriviste kind.

During her year at G.W., Jackie set her heart on winning *Vogue*'s Prix de Paris contest, which promised six months of training in the magazine's New York offices and a return to Paris, this time as a junior editor. Anthony gives a detailed account of the rigorous application process—round after round of writing essays and critiquing layouts—and he establishes the zealous flair of Jackie's approach. "I could be a sort of Overall Art Director of the Twentieth Century," she wrote to the judges, "watching everything from a chair hanging in space." The biographer forgives his subject a bit of résumé finagling and a couple of small lies deployed in order to secure a deadline extension.

Jackie won the contest, went up to Manhattan, and was photographed for the magazine by Richard Routledge. (His picture is the basis for that G.W. bas-relief.) But, in the end, she turned down the prize. Janet, who wanted to prevent the proximity to Black Jack that would come with those six months in New York, insisted. Jackie sent her mother a dead snake inside a hatbox, but she knuckled under all the same.

In October, 1951, Jackie got a job at the Washington *Times-Herald*, after Auchincloss asked the columnist Arthur Krock to put in a good word for his stepdaughter. Krock had been instrumental, years before, in getting the paper to hire Jack Kennedy's wartime girlfriend Inga Arvad, and also his favorite sister, Kathleen (Kick) Kennedy. Anthony goes so far as to say, not implausibly, that Jackie's working at the *Times-Herald* "would inevitably evoke memories of the two women who had meant more to Kennedy than any others—a significant factor in Jack Kennedy's early perception of her." Again, Jackie's commute began from Merrywood, which—Anthony doesn't mention—was built, in 1919, for Newbold Noyes, Sr., a co-owner of the venerable Washington *Evening Star*, one of the *Times-Herald*'s competitors.

Frank Waldrop, the editor who hired Jackie, later recalled, “I’d seen her type. Little society girls with dreams of writing the great American novel, who drop it the minute they find the great American husband.” Yes and no. Though Anthony doesn’t depict it, mid-nineteen-fifties Washington was a lively place for aspiring newswomen eager to buck the prejudices and the odds. Selwa (Lucky) Roosevelt, who had been Jackie’s classmate at Vassar, was married to Theodore Roosevelt’s grandson Archie, a C.I.A. agent, when she began writing a well-connected column for the *Star* called “Diplomatically Speaking.” In her memoirs, she writes, “Until then, society reporters simply described the food, flowers, decor, clothes, and entertainment, and gave a complete list of guests. They did not look for the political or international implications of who was there and who wasn’t, who spoke to whom and who didn’t.” Nancy Dickerson, a young CBS radio and television producer before she became a famous on-air correspondent, made both a notable career and—from the viewpoint of someone like Janet Auchincloss—a financially enviable marriage. In 1964, she and her husband, a businessman, bought Merrywood. When it came to literary talent and professional longevity, the most distinguished of the era’s women journalists was the resolutely single Mary McGrory, who—except for the composition of a few political profiles—spent years on the *Star*’s book-review desk before being allowed to write sharp, stylish commentary about the Senate during the Army-McCarthy hearings, in 1954.

Seeking the same sort of break during her early days at the *Times-Herald*, Jackie chased after Princess Elizabeth, hoping to produce a feature when the future monarch came to Washington. She was unsuccessful, but the princess’s visit brought an unexpected opportunity. Waldrop assigned Jackie to the rotating, uncredited “Inquiring Photographer” slot, and she decided to ask six of the paper’s photographers, “Is Princess Elizabeth as pretty as her picture?” The column was soon hers, with a byline, and renamed “Inquiring Camera Girl.” Her twenty-month run with it is the charming and surprisingly informative heart of Anthony’s book.

Jackie took thumbnail pictures of her subjects with a big, heavy Speed Graflex, which she learned to use at the Capitol School of Photography. “Published six days a week,” Anthony explains, “the column averaged 144 individual interviews monthly—a total of nearly 2,600 people by the time she left the job.” Jackie occasionally persuaded celebrities and personal

acquaintances—even John Husted and “Mummy”—to take a crack at answering the queries she invented for the column. They ranged from the silly (“Why do you think so many people crack corny jokes in elevators?”) to the semi-profound (“What are people most living for?”) and the oddly prescient (“Are women’s clubs right in demanding Marilyn Monroe be less suggestive?”). She sought respondents across class and racial lines, and when she wasn’t asking about things in the news (Christine Jorgensen’s gender-transition surgery) she sometimes posed questions that were on her own mind.



As the “Inquiring Camera Girl,” Jackie interviewed nearly twenty-six hundred people from November, 1951, to June, 1953. Photograph courtesy John F. Kennedy Presidential Library

Anthony does nice work, without fetching too far, when he ties the column’s subject matter to Jackie’s biographical time line. Around the time of Husted’s proposal, she asked interviewees, “Should a girl pass up sound matrimonial prospects to wait for her ideal man?” Later on, when things got more serious with Kennedy, her questions followed suit: “Can you give me any reason why a contented bachelor should get married?” and “The Irish author, Sean O’Faolain, claims that the Irish are deficient in the art of love. Do you agree?” As she experienced a bit of Kennedy’s 1952 Senate campaign, she asked, “Should a candidate’s wife campaign with her husband?” Her low moods and her frustrations with Waldrop were occasional subtexts; Anthony notes that the editor “threatened to fire her

when she asked pedestrians what local newspaper they liked best and printed responses that chose the competition.”

There was wit to what she did, and it earned her the chance to write bigger pieces, illustrated with her own ink sketches, not only on Eisenhower’s inaugural but also on Princess Elizabeth’s coronation. In June, 1953, Kennedy sent a telegram to his fiancée in London—“*ARTICLES EXCELLENT—BUT YOU ARE MISSED*”—his “second and final courtship ‘love letter,’ ” according to Anthony.

The political calculations that went into his family’s approach to the marriage can make the Windsors’ vetting of Lady Diana Spencer seem quick and humane. Anthony writes that Gore Vidal—another Auchincloss stepchild, from an earlier marriage—remembered Jackie saying that Jack and Joe and Bobby “spoke of me as if I weren’t a person, just a thing, just a sort of asset, like Rhode Island.” But Jackie wanted what she knew she was getting into. Anthony astutely conveys the couple’s “mutual ambition” and shared emotional reticence: “Jackie was similarly unwilling to fully express her feelings, making them a comfortable match.” Kennedy blamed his chilly mother for his own “inability to easily express emotion,” a deprivation to which his bride could relate. Both had also grown up with fierce but feeling fathers. Jackie liked Joe from the start, and she knew exactly how to relate to the old shark—“You ought to write a series of grandfather stories for children, like, *The Duck with Moxie*”—a skill that excited envy in her future sisters-in-law.

Anthony has made a career of First Ladies, with writings ranging from the anecdotal to the deeply researched; [his lengthy, surprising biography of Florence Harding](#) appeared in 1998. With Jackie, he tries to avoid hagiography, but, more than a bit smitten, he sometimes fails, as when he mistakes a little mastery of conventional wisdom for “a deep discernment about the creative process.” He displays a desire to make the most—which is to say, too much—of a research report that Jackie prepared for Kennedy in 1953 on the French war in Indochina, presenting it as the cornerstone of a great moral partnership, whereas Jackie herself remembered it mostly as a tedious exercise in translation. Nonetheless, Anthony likes to believe that, as she worked, “in her imagination . . . Jackie was in the streets of Saigon and the rice fields near Hanoi.”

The title “Camera Girl,” drawn from her column’s rubric, implies the importance of images to Anthony’s book. He starts with a chapter about how, in mid-1949, “employing their enmity to her advantage,” Jackie extracted from each of her parents more than the amount of money she needed to buy the camera she wanted to take to France. Though Anthony places a lot of emphasis on this “little Leica,” he includes, among the dozens of photographs in the book, very few images that Jackie might have taken with it.

It is reasonable for the author to resist lunging too frequently into the future, but readers will inevitably project themselves forward into the next phases of Jackie’s life, when she became almost subordinate to the representations made of her by others: the photographs of Jacques Lowe; the 8-mm. frames of Abraham Zapruder; the silk screens by [Warhol](#); the shots by [the paparazzo Ron Galella](#), her tormentor on the streets of Manhattan. Galella died last year, but his Web site still carries an account of how he took “the most purchased, most recognized, most talked about, most significant photo [he] ever captured,” the one he called “Windblown Jackie,” in October, 1971. He was in a taxi at the corner of Madison and Ninetieth, and Jackie turned to face him in response to the driver’s honking. “It’s a superior picture,” Galella wrote, “like DaVinci’s most famous painting, the *Mona Lisa*.” When Galella kept at it, a “furious Jackie” asked him, “Are you pleased with yourself?”

She can be forgiven for forgetting a time when she was the hunter and not the game. Frank Waldrop put her on probation for ambush-interviewing two of President-elect Eisenhower’s young nieces on their way home from school. That happened a few years after a museum guard chased her out of a gallery at the Louvre when he saw her taking pictures of “DaVinci’s most famous painting.” Jackie wished, Anthony says, “to disprove the popular myth that the eyes of the *Mona Lisa* were always gazing directly back at the person looking at her.” The angry guard asked, “Who do you think you are?” She didn’t yet know, but she was steadily moving toward an answer. ♦

By Janet Malcolm

By Robert A. Caro

By Patrick Radden Keefe

By Philip Gourevitch

By [Daniel Immerwahr](#)

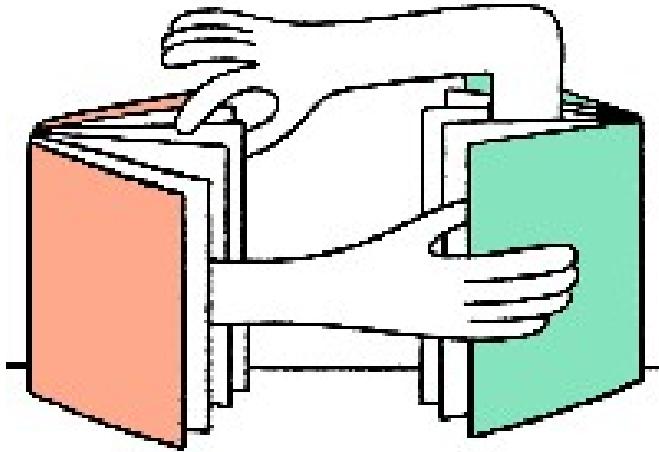
On March 25th, at the first big rally of his current electoral campaign, Donald Trump explained his role in history. In 2016, he told the crowd of supporters, he'd been their "voice." Now it was different. "I am your warrior, I am your justice," he announced. "I am your retribution."

Those words, ominous enough on their own, seemed more so in light of the locale. Trump hadn't wanted to speak in "one of those fifty-fifty areas," he explained, but somewhere his support was "close to a hundred per cent." He chose Waco, Texas, best known for a fifty-one-day standoff outside the city in 1993, between a religious sect called the Branch Davidians and the Department of Justice. The date of Trump's speech put it during the siege's thirtieth anniversary.

The siege, which culminated in a fire in the Branch Davidian complex, killed four federal agents and eighty-two Branch Davidians, including their leader, David Koresh. Given Koresh's messianic tendencies and end-times prophecies, many shrugged this off as just deserts for the zealots from "Wacko, Texas," as Jay Leno joked at the time.

The Best Books We Read This Week

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Yet for others the siege was a sickening display of state power. Waco helped kick the militia movement into high gear. Timothy McVeigh's biographers Lou Michel and Dan Herbeck said that it was the largest "turning point in his life," provoking him to bomb a federal building in Oklahoma City on April 19, 1995—the second anniversary of the Waco fire. A young [Alex Jones](#) became obsessed with Waco; it led him to start his Web site Infowars.

Waco helped McVeigh, the militias, and Jones see the state as a violent enemy of the people. That view, once marginal, has elbowed its way to the mainstream—it is now Trump's, too. Where better to insist that the "weaponization of our justice system" is the "central issue of our time," as Trump did in his Waco speech, than near the place where an F.B.I. raid resulted in dozens of deaths, including those of more than twenty children?

The ashes of Waco are still blowing around. This year has already seen the release of two television series, Netflix's "Waco: American Apocalypse" and Showtime's "Waco: The Aftermath," and two substantial books, Jeff Guinn's "[Waco](#)" (Simon & Schuster) and Kevin Cook's excellent "[Waco Rising](#)" (Holt). In 2003, on the tenth anniversary, infantry divisions were in Iraq, and Waco was fading from view. Yet now, on the thirtieth anniversary, private militias roam widely, and Waco feels like yesterday.

For someone who claimed to be the Lamb of God—prophesied in the Book of Revelation to open the scroll’s seven seals and initiate the apocalypse—David Koresh had a wobbly start. He was originally named Vernon Wayne Howell, or, as his schoolmates called him, Mister Retardo. Cook notes that Koresh failed first grade twice, was shunted into special education, and dropped out of ninth grade with a grade-point average he described as “you don’t want to know.”

At eighteen, Koresh got his first girlfriend, a sixteen-year-old he referred to as “jailbait,” pregnant. He was elated (“Me, Mister Retardo—going to have a baby!”), then crushed when she had an abortion. Her father kicked him out of their house, and his church, the Seventh-day Adventists, “disfellowshipped” him for seducing another girl, a church elder’s fifteen-year-old daughter.

Koresh’s fortunes changed at around twenty-one, when he found a home among the Branch Davidians at their Waco commune, Mount Carmel. The Branch Davidians were a small offshoot of the Seventh-day Adventists, dedicated to intense Bible study, who shared the Adventist belief in Jesus Christ’s imminent return. Koresh secured his place among them by his impressive scriptural fluency and by having an affair with their leader, Lois Roden, then in her sixties. At twenty-four, he abandoned Roden and married a fourteen-year-old church member, Rachel Jones—a union that was, because her parents consented, legal in Texas.

Koresh turned out to be exceptionally good at talking people into things. Talking the Branch Davidians into accepting his leadership. Talking them into believing that he was the Lamb. Talking his teen-age wife and her parents into letting him take Rachel’s twelve-year-old sister, Michele, as an additional wife. Talking Mount Carmel’s men into celibacy, and talking its women and girls into bearing as many as seventeen of his children.

There was another thing Koresh talked his followers into. In 1992, a box being delivered to a Davidian-owned business broke open. Dozens of grenade casings spilled out.

Purchasing empty grenade shells, it should be said, isn’t a crime. But it smelled enough like one to prompt a months-long investigation by the

Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms. A.T.F. agents concluded that Mount Carmel possessed a formidable arsenal and applied for a search warrant.

Cook observes that the assembled evidence fell far short of showing that Mount Carmel must urgently be stormed. The Branch Davidians spoke of an impending apocalypse, yes, but they'd been talking that way for decades. Mount Carmel had existed in various forms since the nineteen-thirties; it posed no obvious threat to outsiders.

What's more, the Branch Davidians had an explanation for their arsenal, as the A.T.F. knew. To make money, they sold weapons at gun shows, along with military rations, gas masks, ammo vests, and hunting jackets, onto which they sewed dummy grenades. Their wares included automatic weapons. These weren't illegal, but the A.T.F., in its search-warrant petition, cited "circumstantial evidence" that the Branch Davidians were "converting semi-automatic weapons to fully automatic without having paid the proper fees."

"It may be true that we stepped over the borderline of certain regulations," Koresh allowed. In truth, Koresh's foot was far over the line. We now have copious evidence of his having sex with underage children, including congressional testimony from a girl Koresh molested, with her mother's acquiescence, when she was ten. Yet the authorities struggled to show this at the time. Child-protective services had visited Mount Carmel without finding cause for action.

Nevertheless, the A.T.F. got its warrant and, fatefully, decided on a "dynamic entry." Rather than arresting Koresh outside Mount Carmel—as they could easily have done, since Koresh came and went freely—or even announcing their approach, federal agents staged a raid. To prepare, they trained with Green Berets at a nearby military base. They arrived at Mount Carmel on February 28, 1993, seventy-six of them, with combat gear, submachine guns, sniper rifles, and concussion grenades.

They would need it all. Whoever shot first, Mount Carmel became a battleground; one agent recalled that the gunfire was so clamorous that he couldn't hear his own pistol. Four A.T.F. agents and six Branch Davidians

died in this shoot-out. Yet Koresh, shot twice, still lived, and Mount Carmel, riddled with bullet holes, remained unbreached.

As the raid stretched into a siege, the F.B.I. took command and deployed an élite tactical unit, the Hostage Rescue Team. But who were the hostages? The Branch Davidians lived at Mount Carmel, and they seemed uninterested in leaving their home to place themselves or their children in state custody. They'd long expected to die for their faith. And, until their Saviour collected their souls, they had large stores of military-style rations.

Outside a cordon surrounding Mount Carmel, onlookers gathered and vendors sold merch. One T-shirt, treating "Waco" as an acronym, summed up matters well: "We Ain't Comin Out."

It could have been the slogan for the decade. A surprising number of memorable nineties headlines involved armed confrontations between civilians and the authorities. In 1992, in reaction to the police beating of an unarmed Black man, Rodney King—and to years of aggressive policing—Los Angeles broke out into five days of violence that killed sixty-three people. Later that year, a siege and a shoot-out at a white supremacist's cabin in Ruby Ridge, Idaho, left three dead. Then came Waco (1993), McVeigh's Oklahoma City bombing (1995), and the Unabomber's arrest (1996). In 1999, two teen-agers in Columbine, Colorado, seeking to top McVeigh's body count, waged war on their own high school. The next year, dozens of armed federal agents stormed a house in Miami to seize a six-year-old, Elián González.

What caused this? Two scholars of nineties violence, the historian Kathleen Belew and the sociologist Stuart A. Wright, point to militarization, not just of law enforcement but of civilians, too. After the Vietnam War, the weapons and tactics of war flowed into domestic life. In her book "[Bring the War Home](#)," Belew describes political violence in the U.S. as the "catastrophic ricochet" of fighting abroad.

By the nineties, those ricochets were constant. The end of the Cold War relieved the country of a long-standing foe, but it didn't bring peace. Rather, there was what the historian Michael Sherry, in "[The Punitive Turn in American Life](#)," calls a "hydraulic relationship" between war-fighting and

crime-fighting: the fewer enemies the United States found beyond its borders, the more it found within them. The Cold War's conclusion had brought "unrivalled peace" to the world, President [Bill Clinton](#) crowed, yet to the United States it also brought amped-up wars on crime and drugs. Sherry notes the débuts, in 1989 and 1990, respectively, of "Cops" and "Law & Order," wildly popular television shows about arresting and incarcerating people.

Locking people up was nothing new. But, by the nineties, the line that the United States had long drawn between its police and its military was badly blurred. Police departments relied increasingly on units, such as *SWAT* teams, that used military weapons, vehicles, equipment, outfits, and tactics.

Such units are "paramilitary" because normally, by law, the actual military can't be used for domestic policing. Nevertheless, the late Cold War introduced significant loopholes into that law, especially where drugs were concerned. (It was by claiming, implausibly, that Koresh might be operating a meth lab that the A.T.F. secured military support and helicopters for its disastrous raid on Mount Carmel.) And arms-makers, desperate for customers after the Cold War's end, found other ways to push military or "dual-use" hardware onto law enforcement. Local police chiefs were offered tanks and grenade launchers.

Civilians could get much of what they wanted, too. The Firearm Owners' Protection Act of 1986 rolled back gun regulations and permitted unlicensed "hobbyists" to sell weapons at gun shows. Between 1987 and 1993, firearms sales from manufacturers nearly doubled. By 1995, there were more than a hundred shows around the country each weekend.

The Branch Davidians worked the gun-show circuit hard. Gun owners' fears that Clinton would ban assault-weapon sales (which he did, sort of, in 1994) created a frantic, lucrative market. The more law enforcement armed itself, the more nervous civilians followed suit, and so it went, back and forth. Stuart Wright, in his 2007 book, "[Patriots, Politics, and the Oklahoma City Bombing](#)," calls this the "threat spiral."

Gun advocates warned of a tyrannical state using black helicopters to subdue the populace, thus turning "black helicopters" into shorthand for unhinged

paranoia. But it's not paranoia if they really are out to get you, and the helicopters, at least, were real—some flew over Waco. Sherry writes that, by the eighties, the wall separating the police from the military had already crumbled to the point where helicopters were “swooping down on alleged California pot growers,” some “blaring Wagner’s ‘Ride of the Valkyries.’”

David Koresh was not the first Koresh. Around the turn of the twentieth century, another prophet took the name Koresh, claimed to be the Lamb, and led a sexually scandalous commune, Jeff Guinn points out. Theologically, the two Koreshes were similar, but their fates diverged sharply. When tensions between the first Koreshans and the authorities came to a head, in 1906, the result was a brawl that broke the prophet’s eyeglasses. In 1993, Cook tells us, the forces that the F.B.I. amassed at Waco included sixteen tanks, among them two sixty-eight-ton Abrams tanks—the Pentagon’s largest. The Branch Davidians could communicate with the press only by hanging bedsheets with messages written on them out of windows. One read “*Rodney King We Understand.*”

Timothy McVeigh, devouring the news from Florida, drove to Waco. Half a dozen federal agents briefly stopped him outside Mount Carmel, and McVeigh later remembered thinking that he could have killed them all with a grenade. Nevertheless, he limited himself to selling threat-spirally bumper stickers (“*Fear the government that fears your gun*”) and left after a few days.

Koresh, meanwhile, exuded confidence. “You’re the Goliath, and we’re David,” he told a negotiator. Of course, whereas the Biblical David had a sling and five smooth stones, the modern Davidians had a .50-calibre sniper rifle that could shoot chunks off car engines. They also had automatic weapons and more than a million rounds of ammunition. They unfurled another bedsheets: “*Flames await.*”

How to proceed against a heavily armed apocalyptic commune containing dozens of children? The F.B.I. hoped to smoke the Branch Davidians out with tear gas. But, predictably, Koresh’s followers had gas masks, and they’d sealed off their complex. To make an opening, tanks rammed Mount Carmel. Then, live on television, it burst into flames.

Who set the fire remains a contentious matter. Mount Carmel was a jerry-built mess of plywood, “a tinderbox on its best day,” Cook writes. And April 19th—when the Branch Davidians had plugged the windows with mattresses and hay bales to keep gas out, and tanks were punching down walls to get it in—was not its best day. Although the F.B.I.’s actions easily could have sparked a fire, surveillance recordings and survivor testimonies suggest that some Branch Davidians sought to speed the end along by arson. Tellingly, many died not from burns but from gunshots, killed by their own hands or by fellow commune members. Someone shot Koresh in the forehead.

Federal agents had arrived at Mount Carmel with a search warrant. They left, fifty-one days later, with a pile of charred corpses. Feds and Branch Davidians had together turned “cops and robbers” into Armageddon, with opposing armies arrayed on a field of battle.

Timothy McVeigh had sought to join that battle. He’d been changing his car’s oil for his return to Waco, aiming vaguely to “go down there and do something,” when the fire erupted. The tragedy consumed his thoughts. He handed out pamphlets and sold spliced-together videos at gun shows which he claimed proved the government’s perfidy. “Tim, why are you always focussing on Waco?” his father asked. For McVeigh, Waco was the “straw that broke the back of Lady Liberty,” the “first blood of war.”

A white supremacist with a grievance against the government was not a new phenomenon. When McVeigh bombed the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building, in Oklahoma City, at the age of twenty-six, he wore a T-shirt featuring the words of John Wilkes Booth: *“Sic semper tyrannis.”* The reference was apt. When Booth was twenty-six, he’d also committed a spectacular act of anti-government violence in the name of white power.

But if McVeigh was an old type he was also the product of the new militarization. McVeigh grew up near a military base, and he was gun-obsessed from childhood. He joined the Army, where he remembered being made to scream “Blood makes the grass grow! Kill! Kill! Kill!” twenty times a day during training until his “throat was raw.” In the Gulf War, he killed two Iraqis and won a Bronze Star.

McVeigh quit the Army, yet he never fully accepted civilian life. His Army friends remained his most important contacts; he'd met Terry Nichols, his collaborator in the bombing, on his first day of basic training. He made other contacts at gun shows. He attended roughly eighty, where he distributed cards with the address of an F.B.I. sharpshooter who'd killed a woman at Ruby Ridge (and who'd been at Waco), hoping to spur an assassination. He also sold flares and flare launchers, for use, he suggested, against the "A.T.F. bastards" in helicopters.

Booth, McVeigh's model, had brandished a knife and assassinated Abraham Lincoln with a derringer, a one-shot lady's pistol. McVeigh, in contrast, was a walking armory. On the day of the bombing, he carried a Glock .45 with a Black Talon "cop killer" bullet in the chamber, plus a fully loaded ammunition magazine. The seven-thousand-pound bomb McVeigh built was a homemade device—barrels of fertilizer soaked in racing fuel—but it wasn't an amateur job. With tactical acumen, McVeigh arranged the barrels as a "shaped charge" to point the blast toward the building.

The Oklahoma City bombing, which McVeigh called his "retaliatory strike" against an "increasingly militaristic and violent" state, damaged three hundred and twenty-four buildings and wounded more than five hundred people. It killed a hundred and sixty-eight, more than the number of Americans killed in combat in the Gulf War.

The journalist Jeffrey Toobin covered McVeigh's trial for ABC News, and [for this publication](#), too. At the time, Toobin saw McVeigh as a deranged criminal. But Toobin has since concluded that he'd "failed to understand" McVeigh's place "in the broader slipstream of American history." His probing new book, "[Homegrown](#)" (Simon & Schuster), takes another look.

In Toobin's view, it wasn't just militarism that made McVeigh—it was Republicanism. McVeigh's politics congealed at a time when Representative Newt Gingrich and the broadcaster Rush Limbaugh, champions of "an ascendant right-wing authoritarianism," were injecting a new "rhetorical violence" into politics, Toobin writes. They compared the Clinton Administration to the Third Reich, whispered of dark conspiracies, and proposed rebellion. For McVeigh, who "took Limbaugh both seriously and

literally,” the way to “push the Republican revolution one step further” was to bomb a federal building.

But, if McVeigh followed the Republicans, he also walked less travelled paths. Both Kathleen Belew and Stuart Wright (who consulted for McVeigh’s defense) stress McVeigh’s place in the white-power movement. Rather than an impressionable Republican who listened to too much Limbaugh, they argue, McVeigh is better understood as a soldier in an organized paramilitary campaign against the United States.

That campaign proceeded in secret. Belew and Wright emphasize its strategy of “leaderless resistance”: instead of building a hierarchical organization with a large membership, white-power activists developed disconnected cells of militants. To synchronize without communicating, those cells relied on shared playbooks, including, notably, a 1978 novel by William Pierce, “*The Turner Diaries*,” which describes an apocalyptic race war. The book’s hero detonates a fertilizer bomb in a truck at a federal building, just as McVeigh did. McVeigh bought boxes of “*The Turner Diaries*” to distribute at gun shows, and he took a photocopied page from the book to the bombing.

Was McVeigh coördinating with others? He had written to his sister of being in a “Special Forces Group involved in criminal activity.” Unquestionably, he’d had contact with the white supremacists of Elohim City, a compound in Oklahoma. This matters because, in the eighties, terrorists connected to Elohim City had pursued, as their “ultimate goal,” the “bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City,” according to the former white-power leader Kerry Noble. An A.T.F. informant at Elohim City recalled talk of a “racial holy war” to be launched on April 19, 1995, with bombings of federal buildings in Oklahoma City or Texas. (Showtime’s “Waco: The Aftermath” makes much of Elohim City.)

McVeigh’s lawyer, seeking to blur his client’s culpability, pointed to Elohim City. The prosecution, led by Merrick Garland in the Justice Department, homed in on McVeigh and Nichols as the sole perpetrators. Garland’s focussed strategy worked, in that McVeigh was convicted and executed. (Nichols is serving a hundred and sixty-one consecutive life sentences.) Yet even Toobin, who dismisses the Elohim City connection as a conspiracy

theory, faults Garland for having presented an overly narrow, “dangerously misleading” version of events.

Before his execution, McVeigh was incarcerated in a Colorado supermax prison, where he befriended both Ted Kaczynski, known as the Unabomber, and Ramzi Ahmed Yousef, the Al Qaeda-tied terrorist who’d attacked the World Trade Center in 1993. At the time, the media portrayed McVeigh as a crazed loner, like Kaczynski. In hindsight, though, he seems more like Yousef: a soldier in an invisible army. Yousef, for his part, said that he’d never met anyone with “so similar a personality to my own.”

There is a long history of law enforcement besieging and attacking U.S. communities. In 1973, federal agents had a months-long standoff, with gunfire, against Native activists at Wounded Knee (itself the famous site of an 1890 Army massacre). In 1985, police bombed the Black commune *MOVE* in Philadelphia, sparking a fire that burned sixty-one homes and caused eleven deaths.

The siege in Waco, however, killed white people. Russell Means, an Oglala Lakota activist who’d been at the Wounded Knee standoff, wrote a blues, “Waco: The White Man’s Wounded Knee,” welcoming whites to the Indigenous experience: “Soldiers burning babies is nothing new. / It happened to us, now it’s happening to you.”

Now it’s happening to you. The Branch Davidians were actually multiracial, but they were white enough for their plight to set alarms ringing. The anthropologist Susan Lepselter, who studied U.F.O. believers in the nineties, found that, for many, Waco had “crystallized” their distrustful world view. After the event, the leader of the Heaven’s Gate movement advised his U.F.O.-believing followers to arm themselves in preparation for a lethal raid by “the authorities.” When it didn’t come, the group, in 1997, sought death another way: via mass suicide.

Two years later, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, inspired by McVeigh, attacked their high school in Columbine, Colorado. They set April 19, 1999 —the sixth anniversary of the Waco fire and the fourth of McVeigh’s bombing—as “Judgment Day.” (Trouble securing ammunition pushed it back to April 20th.) They nearly succeeded in their aim to kill more people

than McVeigh did. Though they're remembered as school shooters, Harris and Klebold also planted enormous bombs, which, had they detonated, "would have killed five hundred people," Dave Cullen writes in his 2009 book, "[Columbine](#)."

Waco was especially meaningful to the paramilitary movement. Between 1993 and 1995, more than eight hundred militias and Patriot groups formed. These groups, important vehicles for white power, differed from the mixed-race and Israel-sympathizing Branch Davidians. Still, Waco (along with Ruby Ridge) was their rallying cry, incorporated into calls for a race war and for attacks on the state. An undercover agent working among them recalled, "There was hardly one militia member I met who *didn't* mention Waco as his awakening."

Alex Jones was nineteen during the Waco siege. As Cook explains, he was haunted by the event, and raised funds to rebuild the Branch Davidians' church. In his twenties, Jones hosted a popular talk-radio show in Austin, yet his Waco monomania got it cancelled. So, in 1999, he launched Infowars, an outlet all his own.

At first, Jones's ravings seemed harmless. "He was this hyper guy that we'd all kind of make fun of," the Austin director Richard Linklater, who cast Jones in his films "Waking Life" and "A Scanner Darkly," recalled. But Jones collected a fervid fan base, including, notably, President Trump. "It is surreal," Jones reflected, "to talk about issues here on air and word-for-word hear Trump say it two days later."

Jones helped arrange the rally at the Ellipse on January 6, 2021. Directly afterward, [insurgents attacked the U.S. Capitol](#)—an act that also takes place in "The Turner Diaries." January 6th was Waco in reverse; this time, civilians stormed the federal government's stronghold.

Merrick Garland, now the Attorney General, is overseeing the January 6th investigation—"one of the largest, most complex, and most resource-intensive investigations in our history," he has said. Still, it's hard to imagine that this will extinguish the flames. With social media, violent rhetoric spreads more easily than ever. Toobin observes that McVeigh—travelling the gun-show circuit, haltingly making friends—"had an analog radicalization."

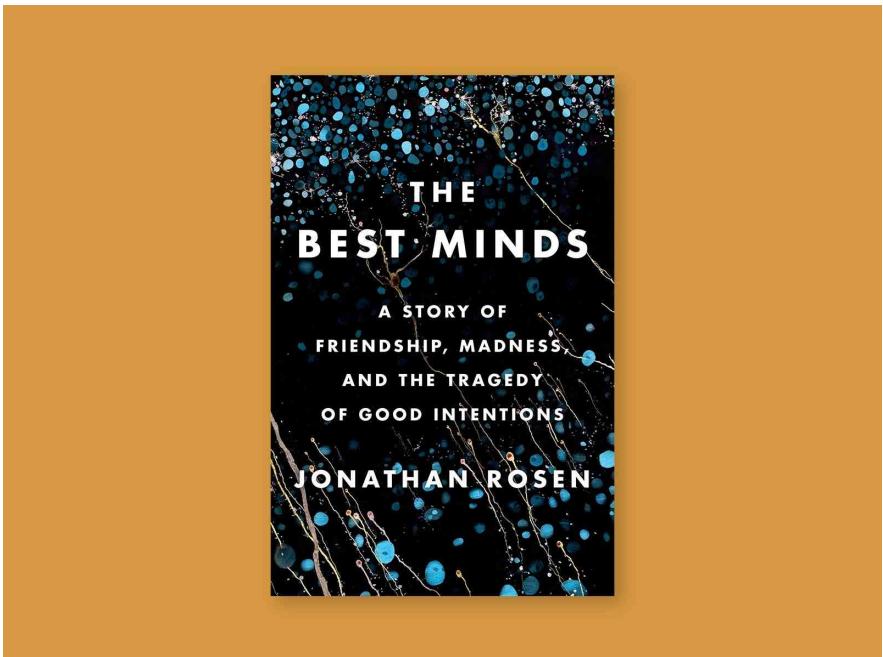
His counterparts today undergo “digital radicalization,” which, Toobin warns, is “much faster and more efficient.”

And so Waco still matters; it’s history in the present tense. Charles Pace, the pastor of the church that Alex Jones helped rebuild there, considers Trump the “battering ram that God is using to bring down the Deep State of Babylon.” Trump sees himself similarly. At Waco, he warned that the “biggest threat” to the country was “high-level politicians” in both parties. The 2024 election will be the “final battle,” Trump promised. “That’s gonna be the big one.” ♦

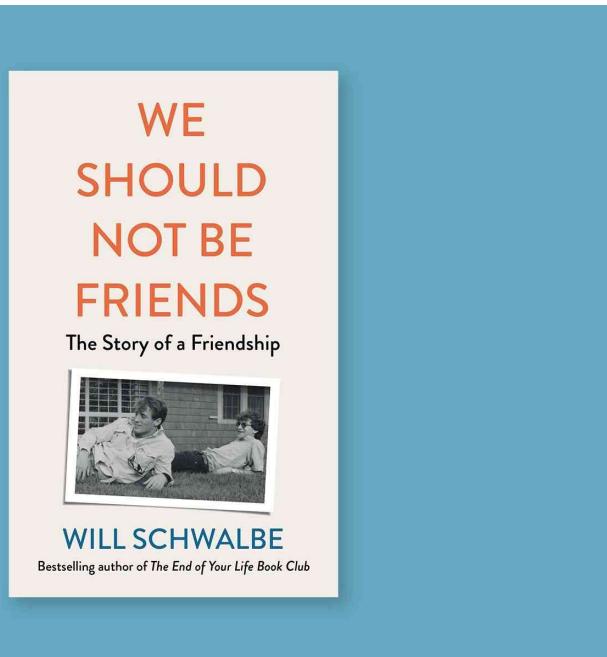
By Rachel Monroe

By Rachel Louise Snyder

By Sue Halpern



The Best Minds, by *Jonathan Rosen* (Penguin Press). This engrossing memoir centers on the author's childhood friend Michael Laudor, who developed schizophrenia and, in his thirties, committed a horrific murder. The pair, both Jewish faculty brats with literary dreams, grew up on the same street in New York's suburbs—parallels that haunt Rosen as Laudor's brilliance edges into paranoia. Rosen thoughtfully interweaves this story with an account of changing attitudes toward mental illness. Laudor, before his crime, had become a poster boy for a Foucault-influenced intellectual culture that saw psychosis as a metaphor for liberation. Meanwhile, as Rosen notes, institutions for treating the mentally ill were being dismantled with no provision of adequate replacements.



We Should Not Be Friends, by *Will Schwalbe* (*Knopf*). When Schwalbe, an unathletic theatre kid who spent his free time at Yale volunteering for an AIDS hotline, met Maxey, a fellow-senior and a celebrated wrestler intent on becoming a Navy *SEAL*, he never imagined that they'd be compatible. This delicate memoir tracks their intermittent friendship, from initiation into one of Yale's secret societies to thirty-five-year college reunion. Gradual revelations from parts of Maxey's life which Schwalbe missed make for an unexpected page-turner that may inspire readers to reach out to old friends. Schwalbe overcomes the perspectival limitations of memoir-writing by allowing himself access to his friend's thoughts, notably in rhapsodic contemplations of the sea surrounding the Bahamian island where Maxey ultimately finds purpose.

The Best Books of 2023



Read our reviews of the year's notable new fiction and nonfiction.



Romantic Comedy, by *Curtis Sittenfeld* (Random House). Flirting with the tropes of its namesake genre, this playful novel follows Sally, a writer on an “S.N.L.”-like show called “Night Owls,” who falls in love with one of its guest hosts. Their relationship develops via e-mail in the post-grocery-

wiping, pre-vaccine days of *Covid-19*. When Sally decides to visit her beloved in L.A., their time together in his Topanga mansion requires her to navigate incredulity, insecurity, and an offer that she feels is an “affront to my independence.” The novel is preoccupied with the instinctual nature of self-sabotage, and with the fulfillment that can come from defying ingrained impulses.



[**Künstlers in Paradise**](#), by *Cathleen Schine* (*Henry Holt*). Julian, a directionless young New Yorker, ventures west, to Venice Beach, to help care for his zesty ninety-three-year-old grandmother. When the pandemic descends, he finds himself sequestered indefinitely with her, as she recounts memories of her Anschluss-ruptured Vienna childhood and her family’s subsequent immigration to Hollywood, where she came to know legends including Arthur Schoenberg and Greta Garbo. The novel emphasizes echoes across history but explores intergenerational gaps, too, and—despite handling such weighty subject matter as survivor’s guilt, sexual repression, and the ongoing traumas of racial and religious persecution—maintains a remarkable lightness of tone and of characterization.

By Ted Chiang

By Robyn Weintraub

By Isaac Chotiner

By Will Nediger

Comment

- [Tucker Carlson and the Right](#)

Tucker Carlson and the Right

The big question for the G.O.P. during the Biden era is whether the legacy of Carlson's culture wars adds up to a viable platform for a major political party.

By [Benjamin Wallace-Wells](#)



When [Tucker Carlson](#) was fired from Fox News last week—so suddenly that he reportedly learned about it only ten minutes before the world did—the most acute notes of regret came from young conservative intellectuals who had seen his nightly hour of programming as an interesting, and perhaps essential, experiment in what right-wing populism could be. “The Tucker Realignment,” Ross Douthat called that experiment, in the *Times*, adding that young conservatives “increasingly start out where Carlson ended up—in a posture of reflexive distrust, where if an important American institution takes a position, the place to be is probably on the other side.” Part of what was appealing about Carlson’s point of view to thinkers on the right was that, in his curiosity about fringe ideas and his occasional highlighting of antiwar ([Ukraine](#)) and anti-corporate ([Silicon Valley](#)) themes, he was testing out a form of conservative populism that did not hinge on Donald Trump personally. Michael Brendan Dougherty, of National Review Online, wrote, “Since January 2016, Tucker Carlson has consistently and relentlessly

advanced one thesis about American politics: ‘This isn’t about Donald Trump, but our corrupt liberal elite.’”

Ever since Trump lost first the political initiative, in the twists of a [COVID](#) crisis that he could never get ahead of, and then the Presidency, to [Joe Biden](#), Carlson’s programs have been where the right’s future was incubated. They could be racist (stoking fears about the “great replacement”), bizarre (proposing that men tan their testicles as a solution for apparently declining levels of testosterone), and fixated on liberal power in a way that could be hard for an unindoctrinated viewer to follow. But Carlson was smart enough to identify ideas that could travel.

Both the movement against the teaching of critical race theory and the right-wing interest in Viktor Orbán’s Hungary blossomed on Carlson’s show. J. D. Vance rode regular appearances on it to a seat in the U.S. Senate. After Senator Ted Cruz called the January 6th insurrection a “violent terrorist attack,” Carlson forced him to walk back that comment. Carlson grilled Governor Greg Abbott, of Texas, about why he hadn’t called up more National Guard soldiers to the border, and Abbott did so. The host also suggested that, if people who live in places like Martha’s Vineyard were so keen on diversity, someone should send undocumented immigrants there. Not long afterward, Governor [Ron DeSantis](#), of Florida, took him up on it.

What these initiatives shared was not just a political orientation but an apocalyptic sensibility—Carlson once called abortion “human sacrifice”—and a foxhole atmosphere in which the future of conservative politics depended on relentless resistance. Conservative politicians across the country adopted them in arguing against public-health authorities, rights for trans people, teaching about race and gender in schools, and “woke capitalism.” DeSantis, Trump’s main opponent as the conservative standard-bearer, has spent much of the past year attacking Disney, one of the largest private employers in Florida, which, under pressure from its employees, had protested the state’s “Don’t Say Gay” law; the anti-Disney campaign escalated when Carlson said that the corporation was acting like a “sex offender.”

The big question for the G.O.P. during the Biden era is whether all this adds up to a viable platform for a major political party. How many people are

there, really, who see the world the way Carlson does? His audience—about three million viewers—was formidable by the standards of cable news. But mainstream advertisers largely avoided the show; commercial breaks involved a heavy dose of MyPillow.com. When Rupert Murdoch, Fox's corporate chairman, decided to fire Carlson, he did so without any public explanation.

Murdoch is Murdoch, and his reasons were widely speculated upon: maybe it was a consequence of Fox's settlement in the [Dominion defamation suit](#); or of the discovery of private messages in which Carlson used what the *Times* reported as “highly offensive and crude” terms; or of a couple of lawsuits from a former producer for Carlson, who has accused him, his executive producer, and the network of creating a misogynistic and antisemitic work environment (which Fox denies). Maybe the thought of paying a person twenty million dollars a year to rage against élites had run its course. Or maybe Murdoch, who is ninety-two, and reportedly recently broke off an engagement to a conservative radio host who referred to Carlson as a “messenger from God,” was just sick of hearing about the guy.

Carlson himself released a cheerful two-minute video on Wednesday, in which he made no direct reference to his exit but said that he has come to notice how “unbelievably stupid” most debates on television are, and how the “undeniably big topics, the ones that will define our future, get virtually no discussion at all.” (He mentioned war, civil liberties, emerging science, demographic change, and corporate power.) He added, “This moment is too inherently ridiculous to continue, and so it won’t.”

You could take that as a commentary on the state of our society. But it also parses pretty well as an observation about Carlson's own central role at Fox News, where he arrived after losing shows on CNN and MSNBC, and where he rose through the ranks in part because other Fox News grandes kept losing their jobs, some over sexual-misconduct claims. After the Trump earthquake, Republican politicians still needed ideas, but, in truth, the ones they took from Carlson mostly required only that they intensify positions they already held. It reflects both on Carlson and on the G.O.P. that his occasional rants against corporations, say, have not had much impact on the Party's policies. But when he showed Republicans places where they might

weaponize a more aggressive social traditionalism and nativism, and how they might make use of distrust, they paid close attention.

Still, if culture-war maximalism is Carlson's political legacy, its future isn't looking too bright at the moment. It did not produce a red wave in last year's midterm elections. The Supreme Court's Dobbs decision and ensuing attempts by extreme conservatives to ban abortion are serving to further isolate Republicans on social issues. DeSantis has lost polling ground to Trump, and his own donors have been complaining about him to reporters. The conservative movement will be less interesting without Carlson in its most prominent media seat, but in the end he didn't shift the movement very far. Conservatism for now comes in just two slightly different variations. There is Trumpism with Trump, and there is Trumpism without him. ♦

By Ted Chiang

By Robyn Weintraub

By Isaac Chotiner

By Will Nediger

Crossword

- [The Crossword: Thursday, April 27, 2023](#)

By [Patrick Berry](#)

By Erik Agard

By Anna Shechtman

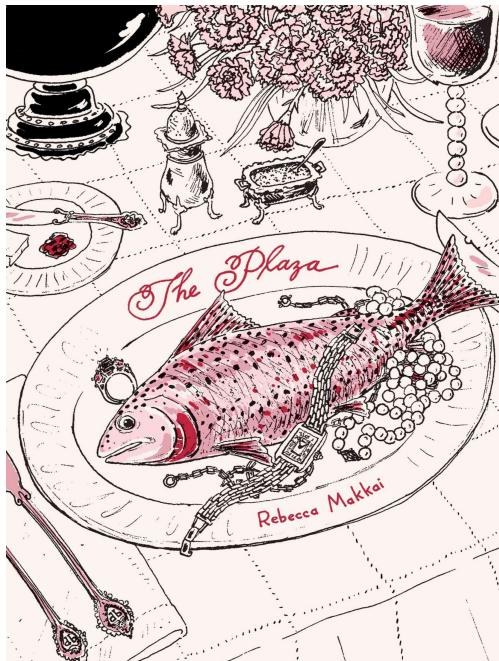
By Alex Baia

Fiction

- “[The Plaza,” by Rebecca Makkai](#)

The Plaza

By [Rebecca Makkai](#)



Listen to this story

Rebecca Makkai reads.

In both 1946 and 1947, Margie Bixby was crowned Trout Queen of the Upper Delaware River, an honor she lost in 1948 only because it wouldn't

do for the daughter of the newspaper editor—the editor of the paper that sponsored the pageant—to win three times. Still, she was the undisputed local beauty, a striking girl with a stronger resemblance to the Modiglianis in the library art books than to a dish-soap model. She wasn't even blond, to the annoyance of those who hopefully lemonged their hair each summer. She had hair like her late mother's, like dark water you could drown in.

But by twenty-three she'd been noticed with only one boy. Vincent had returned from the European theatre with rashes all over his body, been sent to a sanatorium in Albany, and hadn't been seen in Stickney since. Rumor had it that the syphilis had collapsed his nose. Another rumor was that Margie and Vincent wrote every day, still in love but destined, like Abelard and Heloise, for a life of longing correspondence. The bit about the nose: unfortunately correct. But they wrote only once a week, and while Margie relayed the town's gossip, even jokingly began her letters "Dearest Abelard," they'd never been in love—just fast friends since age five, when they'd built a circus for worms in Vincent's back-yard mud. Margie had worn his class ring on a necklace to save him from whispers that he was *inverted* and wouldn't look twice at a woman—again, true—their couplehood convincing enough that everyone believed he'd caught his disease from a French whore, not from a fellow-soldier.

Still, when Alistair Baldwell rolled into town in the summer of '48 with five old Yale friends, having been assured that catching trout in Stickney, New York, was like scooping manna from Heaven, there was a beguiling air of tragedy around the hotel waitress. Inquiring about her—he asked the front-desk girl, who was bucktoothed enough that she couldn't be offended by his preference for Margie—Alistair learned that she'd lost her only love. This was the challenge he needed, the romantic aura that would justify his stooping to seduce a girl in a stained apron. By dinner the second night, Alistair had informed his friends that they were welcome to all the trout in the river; he was there to catch the Trout Queen.

[Rebecca Makkai on serious parody.](#)

Alistair wasn't Margie's first hotel-guest dalliance. It was too easy: the small restaurant and bar right downstairs from the guest rooms, the men who'd never return, the tips they'd leave when they thought they had a chance. But

Alistair was the first who dripped wealth. She'd learned to recognize an expensive watch. She'd also learned to sniff out which in a pack of men was the one they all aimed to impress—and she'd never seen men so quick to laugh at a friend's jokes. To be clear: Margie didn't seek out rich men. Rather, she understood that these were the ones to avoid, men who'd likely be selfish and incautious lovers. Alistair, though, loped along with his head down, as if embarrassed by his handsomeness. A devious left-side smile, sandy hair that stuck out like straw. She had to stop herself from smoothing it down.

On the fourth night, his friends retired early—perhaps at his direction—and left him at the bar. Margie made him a dry Martini and asked, with a straight face, if he wanted olives in it or trout. When he caught on that she was joking, he laughed and wiped his brow.

He said, "I like a girl who's smarter than me."

Up in his room that night, he rubbed a finger under her chin. They sat by the window, drinking water. He'd already kissed her, and they'd danced as he sang "Peg o' My Heart." He'd run his hands up her back under her blouse, but hadn't suggested the bed. She wasn't about to, either; he seemed to believe her more innocent than she was. He said now, "But you don't go by Peg. And you're not a good Margie, either. Why not Margaret?" This struck her, for some reason, as an entirely logical suggestion.

By the time he left Stickney, Alistair was Ally to her, and Margie was Margaret to him. She sneaked out of work the last night to walk with him in the back garden. He said, "If you find yourself in the city, you'll look me up."

Margaret confessed that she'd never been to the city. Not *the* city. Only Binghamton and Albany. She didn't add that whatever money her father made, and whatever she herself contributed, her brothers quickly drank.

Podcast: The Writer's Voice

[Listen to Rebecca Makkai read "The Plaza."](#)

“Then you must come,” he said. “I’ll put you up at the Plaza. I’ll feed you oysters and champagne.”

They’d made love three times by then, and the fact that he still saw her as worthy of champagne was a gift. In the dark at the edge of the woods, he told her things he’d seen in the Pacific, how he’d watched his ship—the U.S.S. Yorktown—go down with the body of his best friend on board. His voice shook; his hands shook. She felt herself hypnotized, heavy-tongued—a charmed snake.

•

That was July; in August he wrote and included his return address, a suite on Third Avenue. He said it again: “Should you find yourself in the city . . .” So, two weeks later, when her friend Walene quit the front desk and announced that she was taking the bus to visit her aunt in Manhattan, Margaret said she’d join her. She told her father she’d stay with Walene but told Walene no such thing.

The ride took five hours, and the bus station was even grimier than the bus. She needed a shower, but settled on patting herself with water in the rest room. She found her way to Third Avenue, a longer street than she could have dreamed. She spent half her remaining cash on a taxi so that she wouldn’t have to figure out the city buses. The buildings were so tall it hurt her neck.

She’d sent him a postcard, but only two days earlier; she’d likely arrived first. It crossed her mind, as she entered the lobby of a stalwart office building, that he might look at her blankly. That with her hair up like this, with her tired face and travelling bag, she might have to remind him, awkwardly, who she was.

The Baldwell Organization, it turned out, occupied the entire top five floors—and she hadn’t memorized the suite number. She chose the lowest of the floors, figuring that there might be a receptionist there. And indeed there was, a young, pencil-nosed woman who asked if she meant Mr. Baldwell, Jr., or Mr. Baldwell, Sr.

“Junior,” Margaret managed, and then, more confidently, “Alistair.”

The receptionist scanned her as though she’d figured her all out, and picked up the phone. Margaret wondered then if she hadn’t been taken for a ride, if Ally didn’t have women come looking for him every week. He swooped into the room not a minute later, though, and picked Margaret up, swung her around. He introduced her to the receptionist as “a dear friend” and grinned so broadly that Margaret worried it was an act. He said, “Let’s get you some lunch!” and scooted her back out into the heat and grime.

At lunch, in a back booth of an impossibly labyrinthine restaurant, she asked what the Baldwell Organization did. “It’s elaborate and boring,” he said. “Mostly, we own and manage properties.”

“Buildings?”

He nodded. “Including the one we’re in right now!” he said, as if it had just occurred to him. “But what I do personally, I invest some of our money.” He explained, over gin rickeys and bacon sandwiches, that he bought dying companies and squeezed out their last juice. He seemed eager for her to understand, anxious to impress.

At the end of lunch she confessed that she had nowhere to stay, and he wagged a finger. “I don’t forget a promise!”

The Plaza: regal bannisters, fairy-tale chandeliers, potted palms, columns, so many stairs, so much wrought iron, arched ceilings like a church. Even the floor was ornate. She’d never felt so underdressed in her life, so aware of her lousy posture and scuffed shoes, so sure she’d be shown a back exit. At the desk, Ally asked for someone by name, and out came a man in a pressed uniform who was “very pleased to see Mr. Baldwell” and promised to “take proper care of the lady.”

“I’ll, of course, part ways here,” Ally said, and then, leaning in for a kiss on the cheek, quietly added, “I’ll come by this evening.”

•

She barely left the Plaza that week. They ate in the Oak Room; they ordered up. One night, he took her to a play called “Sundown Beach,” at the Belasco Theatre, and she could hardly focus on the show for staring at the audience and wondering if she was sitting properly. But, other than that, it was as if she lived at the hotel. He told her to charge what she needed. She hadn’t brought enough clothes in her small bag, and he had to assure her several times that, yes, he meant dresses, too—the concierge could fetch anything. She appreciated not being handed cash, like a woman of ill repute. Each day, she grew more confident at speaking to Lionel, the friendliest concierge, and saying things like “We’ll put it on the room.” She asked Lionel to find five dresses in a size 2. She tried them on, and although all five fit her—whatever Lionel had sent to Bergdorf’s had a good eye—she felt it would be unseemly to keep more than three.

She watched the way the hotel guests walked, the way the women pinned their shoulders back. She mimicked it in the mirror, practiced it in the lobby. To every uniformed employee she encountered, she barely managed not to say, “I work in a hotel myself!”

She wrote to her father and to Vincent (“Dearest Abelard”) and told both of them how, from her window, she could see kites being flown in the Park. Walene’s aunt surely lived nowhere near Central Park, but what did her father know of the city?

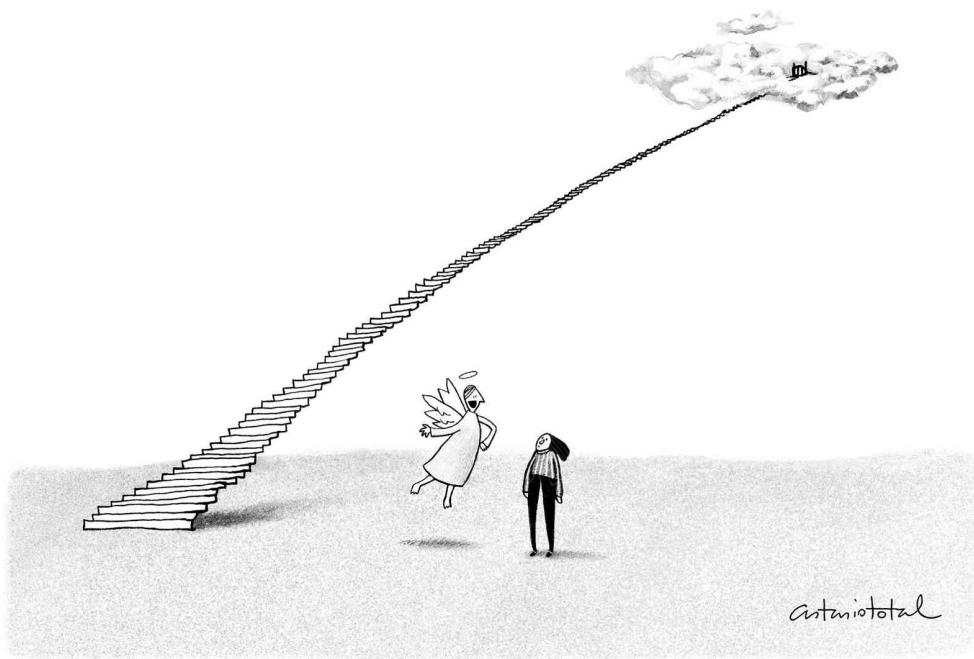
Ally came by at six each night. He never stayed over.

She did wonder if he was married. One morning, she called the Baldwell Organization and told the receptionist, “I have a delivery for Mrs. Alistair Baldwell.”

“You mean Mr. Alistair Baldwell?”

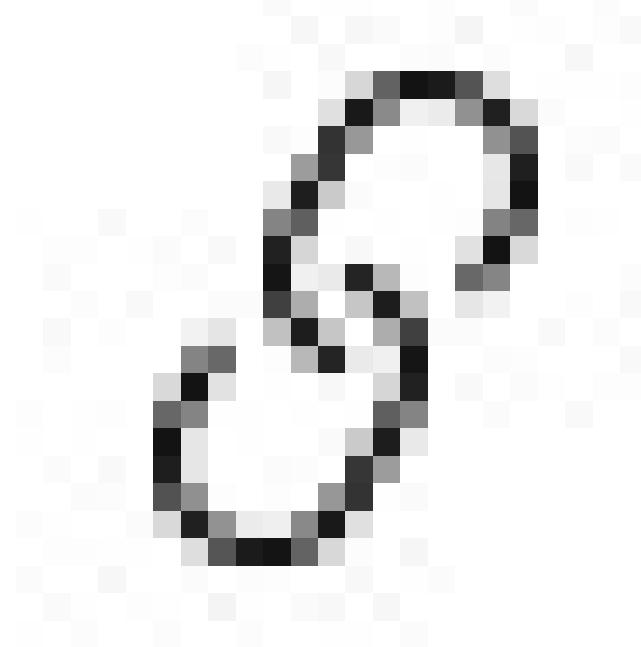
“Well, it’s a lady’s coat.”

“Perhaps Mrs. Cecil Baldwell? Junior isn’t married.”



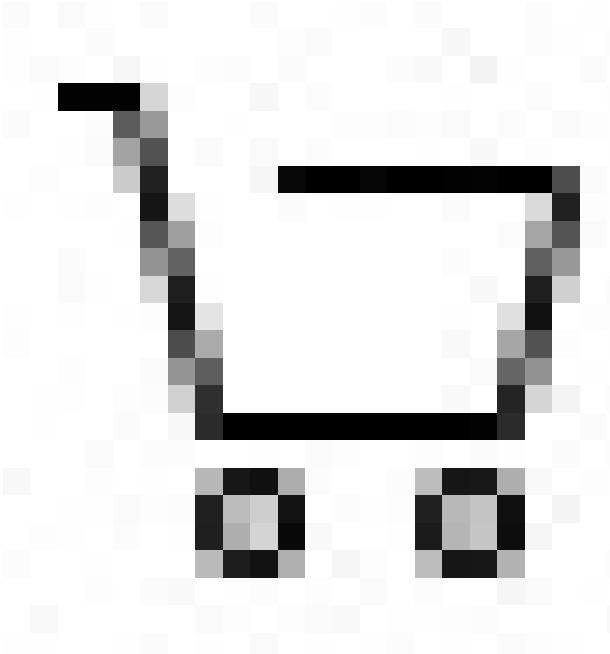
"The reward is Heaven and a set of well-toned glutes."
Cartoon by Juan Astasio

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Shop



“I’ll check my papers,” Margaret said, and hung up.

Did she imagine he’d marry her? Not really. Stranger things had happened. But she knew enough to assume that Baldwells married leggy girls from Wellesley, not hotel waitresses with drunk brothers.

So at the end of the week, when no proposal or desperate vows of love had been offered (“I’m terribly smitten with you” was what he said), she told him that she’d worry her family if she stayed longer, and packed her bag, now stuffed with three extra dresses. He’d given her a simple gold bracelet, and she had the program from the show. He looked at her with beagle-puppy eyes and said he hoped she’d return.

•

Back in Stickney: Hotel guests who smelled like river water. Men who’d been drinking on boats all day and wanted to keep going. Children with ketchup faces, flinging fried trout on the floor.

A letter from Vincent. “My problem,” he wrote, “is that I’m the wrong shape for the world. The best you can do is figure out what the world wants, and become it. How did I fail so spectacularly?”

Margaret was tired from her trip, and then she was tired from work, and then she began to worry that her tiredness wasn't the regular kind. Dr. Pomeroy confirmed her suspicions and kindly told her that, since it was early, he could send her to a friend in Binghamton who dealt with this all the time. She shouldn't wait, he said. She asked if a week would be all right. He nodded. "But no longer."

A week, though, was time to get to New York and see how Ally felt. And, if he wouldn't marry her, there were surely helpful doctors in the city, and shouldn't he be the one to pay? She worried he'd think that she had meant to do this, had set out to trap him. But what did she want with a baby? She watched a mother carry a screaming one out of the restaurant, its vile diaper sagging. Before she left, she wrote to Vincent, asking what she should do. She told him that if he wrote back within the week he should address his letter care of the Plaza.

Ally wasn't expecting her this time, either; she'd caught the first bus she could. When she appeared at the reception desk, the girl looked annoyed. "He's at lunch," she said. "Where should he find you?" Margaret said she'd wait right there, and she did, feeling dizzy even on the sofa.

He didn't seem thrilled, didn't swing her around. She told him, quietly, that they needed to talk, and a curtain of understanding descended his face. He took her to the same restaurant, the same back booth.

He said, "We'll set you up." She assumed he meant with a doctor, but then he said, "I'll get you an apartment. A nanny, even. A night nurse."

"I don't understand." He'd said nothing about marriage, or himself, or the two of them. "It sounds as if you're suggesting I raise a child alone. As an unwed woman." Surely he could see that she was about to cry. "That's not something I'd consider."

"But you don't mean to —" He waved off an encroaching waiter. "I couldn't stand that. You know, I'm Catholic." She hadn't known, actually. The only Catholics in Stickney were Irish.

“The proper thing to do, in this situation, would be to propose. But I suppose you’re already engaged.”

“Oh—Lord, no,” he said. “I thought I made it clear that I’m enamored of you. I’m sorry I’m not more demonstrative. But no, I can’t—” Now he looked for the waiter, desperate for rescue. Margaret stood to leave.

“Wait,” he said. “Wait. Wait.” He didn’t rise, just picked up his fork and stared at it disconsolately until she sat back down. “When I was fifteen, I was kidnapped. Believe it or not. For ransom. It was terrible, they—I wasn’t tied up, it wasn’t like everyone pictures, but they kicked me around. It was the day after my fifteenth birthday. They got me right outside school.” He paused too long, and Margaret didn’t dare breathe out. “They returned me a week later. Twenty thousand dollars. They’d threatened my mother. My being taken, it nearly killed her. What I’ve always—I told myself long ago that I’d never put anyone in that position. Marrying into my family is marrying a nightmare. Even without the threats.” He reached his hand across the table, and she took it. It felt like a Hollywood film: this place, his faltering voice, this story. What was her role? Not the heroine, not the bride.

She wanted to move on to what this all meant, but he looked so much like a child right then, the scared boy showing through the layers of businessman, naval officer, man about town. She asked how they’d got him in the car (at gunpoint), whether it had made the papers (yes), what his parents had gone through (hell).

He said, “I’ve lived my life trying not to fall for anyone, and then I met you.”

“It’s still so early,” she said. “Sometimes these things simply work themselves out.” With medicinal help, she thought, but didn’t say. “And we can marry and never have children. I won’t mind any threats. I’m not some delicate flower.”

“Listen,” he said. “We’ll marry in secret. I’ll get a priest—he can come to the Plaza. We already have an apartment there. And I’ll keep my place, but I’ll be there all the time. You’ll have everything you want. The baby will have everything. The best schools in the city. And, in a few years, when my

old man retires, when the business is mine, I'll set things up so we can move far away. We'll find some little town in France. You told me French was your best subject."

She said, "I couldn't imagine what to tell my father." Not that her father had really even noticed her absence her first trip here. She'd left enough stew in the icebox, which was all he cared about.

"It'd be two or three years at most. If you did away with . . . I couldn't see past it. We couldn't be together." He tore off the very edge of the thick paper menu and folded the scrap into a tight circle. He held it out: a ring. "We'll go to Tiffany's," he said. "Or—better, you go, and tell me what you like and I'll bring it tonight. Anything. The biggest stone they have."

She'd read a story, once, about a boy proposing with a piece of twine, and she'd always believed it the most romantic thing. Well, she could have it both ways: this paper ring and the shattered boy who held it, plus the diamond ring and the millionaire who'd buy it. It was better than any alternative. She'd tell her father that she'd found secretarial work; she'd figure the rest out later. She accepted the paper ring.

•

He set her up on the nineteenth floor, in an apartment that had been owned for years by the Baldwell Organization. It was already furnished, with settees and rugs she was afraid of staining.

Ally had two big men carry everything out of one of the bedrooms—everything except a little oak coatrack she liked—and told her that she could decorate it for the baby however she wished. She was to go to Bergdorf's and make a list, then hand it to the concierge, who'd get it all delivered and assembled. "Even wallpaper," he said, and she said, "Let's see first if it's a boy or a girl." But she couldn't think of the thing growing inside her as anything other than *it*, a parasite tying her to this world.

A wonderful world! Three bedrooms and four other rooms besides! Boxes every day—presents from Ally or things she'd ordered. Towels as soft as

rabbit fur. The tiniest clothes for the baby. Dresses for herself, with room for a belly.

One dress she ordered was simple white lace. On a Thursday afternoon, Ally came in a suit and tie, accompanied by a priest with four distinct strips of blond hair covering a bald spot. Ally had pulled in, as witnesses, two bemused busboys who'd now be late for work downstairs. Ally and Margaret held hands as the priest performed a terribly quick ceremony and produced a sheet of paper to sign.

Margaret said, "Don't we also need a license? Don't you need my birth certificate?"

The priest looked to Ally as if he had the answer. Ally said, "There are work-arounds. We've taken care of it."

Ally nestled a gold band next to her diamond-and-emerald engagement ring. He couldn't wear one himself, of course.

Margaret changed into a green silk nipped-waist dress that soon wouldn't fit, and they went dancing in the Persian Room. Ally stayed the night, but warned her that he could do so only once or twice a week.

On her fifth day in the apartment, a knock on her door. A uniformed employee held a silver tray with an envelope from Vincent's address, but not in his handwriting. Vincent, the letter said, had taken his own life last month. The writer, a nurse from the sanatorium, thought she'd want to know. The nurse gave no indication of having opened Margaret's note, but must have, in order to know to reach her here. Not that it mattered. It wouldn't even matter if this woman wrote to everyone in Stickney about the baby. She lived here now. And Vincent—poor, sweet Vincent—was, what, in the clouds? She wept until she forgot why she was weeping, and then she remembered and started again. She drew a bath in the enormous tub. She sank into the hot water and smoked.

•

She slept very little and cried all the time, and her face bloated with the rest of her. In November, Ally went to London on business. He came back with ruby earrings she'd have no place to wear. The end of the year was terribly busy, and he couldn't come by every single day, but he told her that she should go to museums and the theatre. "Lionel can get any tickets you like," he said.

At Christmas, she almost missed home. Her brothers would be making a drunken mess, but at least she wouldn't be alone, which she was on Christmas itself—Ally came by on the twenty-third and then spent all of the twenty-sixth with her, presenting her with a duck-shaped rattle for the baby, a crocodile-skin Hermès bag for her.

Just before the holiday, it had occurred to Margaret that she had no cash for tipping the maids or the room-service boys. Even back in Stickney, people gave something extra on Christmas. She figured, on the twenty-sixth, Ally in a good mood as they drank wine by the fire, that it wasn't too late to ask. She suggested a bank account, one she could write checks from. That scared him; their names couldn't be linked that way. "But you can charge whatever you want to the hotel," he said. "I've explained."

"Lionel can't run out and fetch me an ice cream," she said. "It'd melt before he got back."

Ally agreed to leave a hundred dollars a month for small expenses. "Ice-cream money," he said. "We'll have a baby made of ice cream."

The hundred wasn't enough for all the staff who'd helped her and had been so kind, so discreet. So she hatched a plan and asked Lionel to send someone to Bergdorf's for ten different silver spoons, each with a separate receipt. She said, "I'll try them out and see what to order a set of."

Once she had all ten spoons, she handed each one out, with its receipt. One for the day maid, one for Peter in the elevator, one for the boy who brought breakfast. "Take it right back to the store," she said. "If they won't give you cash, get something you like."

•

Margaret grew enormous. The Oak Room staff had a betting pool as to when she'd burst. Ally stopped by less often, just twice a week now, always with some excuse for his absence, always with a present. They weren't sleeping together anymore; she couldn't stand him seeing her this way. She'd grown comfortable dining solo in the Oak Room, especially now that no one could assume that she was there to pick up men. The irony: she hadn't wanted a baby, she'd wanted Ally, his company, the way he made her feel important. And here she was alone, with nothing but a giant belly and the sea monster trying to crack her ribs from within.

In April, Ally left for two weeks in Toronto. The doctor had told Margaret to walk for exercise, within reason, so one day she walked all the way down to Madison Square Park and, when her ankles had swollen so much that she couldn't take another step, went into a tea shop to sit in the window and watch the children heading home from school, women with prams, workers carrying a crate. Then: Ally, walking and laughing with two other men. Dressed for work. She wondered if he'd returned early—but he'd left, or said he was leaving, only two days back. She waited a minute, wondering where all her blood had gone, all her air. Then she walked home, her head full of bees.

The next morning, she called his office and said she was Miss Blankenship, from the Plaza's billing office. He took the call. She said, "You're not in Canada."

"Oh," he said. "Oh, Lord. Margaret, you didn't get my note?"

"Your note."

"My girl left it at the desk. The trip got pushed to Friday. I was hoping to stop by tonight. Can we do that? Can I take you out?"

She wanted to believe him but didn't want to be a fool. It occurred to her, though, that there was no real difference; her actions would be the same regardless. She wasn't about to break things off and be left pawning jewelry. She recalled how Vincent had wished he could fit himself to the shape of the world. Well, she could fit herself to the shape of this marriage. So she met Ally for dinner, holding two opposing thoughts: he was a cad or worse, and

he loved her absolutely. “Next time you’re at the library,” he said, “find an atlas and pick the town where we’ll live.” He smiled with his eyes, his dimples. His hands were dry and warm.

•

Her older brother, Milton, wrote that their father had cancer. Well, “canser” was what he wrote. Milton wasn’t dumb; he just didn’t care to be smart. Wouldn’t she come home, Milton asked. If she wasn’t making money, she ought to come, and if she was making money she ought to send it, now that Pop couldn’t work and Milton, a roofer, was working fewer hours so that he could look after him. Their little brother, Eugene, was “useless,” which meant even drunker than Milton. Eugene’s only work was for Pop at the paper, turning in an alleged humor piece once a week.

She considered it. Or, at least, she considered a sort of parachute, what she’d do if everything fell apart here. She’d show up in Stickney with her baby and her ring. She’d say that her husband was abroad, something about the Marshall Plan. Then she’d get a telegram that he’d died. She’d wear black.

She didn’t have a helpful amount of cash to send, but she charged nothing for two weeks and then ordered up a Piaget watch from Saks and sent it to Milton with a note telling him to pawn it. The odds that he’d spend the money on whiskey-and-sodas at the hotel bar were high.

•

In May, days before the baby was due, Ally had a service send three nannies for her to interview. Margaret found them all intimidating, and simply went with the most experienced—a brawny British woman named Mrs. Webb, who wore bone hairpins and a corset. The woman unpacked her sparse belongings in one afternoon.

It was Mrs. Webb who coached Margaret through the start of labor, then stayed by her hospital bed. Ally, who couldn’t be seen in the fathers’ waiting room, visited once they were home, the baby red and squalling. He held her as if she might explode. Margaret had gone ahead and named her, a name that meant something to her though not to Ally. “It’s a bit old-fashioned,” he

said. She did not mention, because he hadn't asked, that she'd given the baby his last name on the birth certificate. She'd put the father down messily as "Alfred Baldwell"—something she imagined could be amended later, written off as a clerical mistake.

The baby was forever hungry, forever screaming. Margaret tried nursing, but, despite Mrs. Webb's corrections, the baby didn't latch. This felt like a profound failure, but also a relief; Margaret could sleep through the night while Mrs. Webb offered a bottle.

The infrequency of Ally's visits began to embarrass her, as she wondered what Mrs. Webb thought. But Mrs. Webb said next to nothing about it. Once, when Ally had stayed only ten minutes and Margaret was unhideably teary, Mrs. Webb patted her knee. "When a baby begins smiling," Mrs. Webb said, "a father sits up and takes notice."

It was true. His visits didn't increase, but he seemed in the baby's thrall, as he'd once been in Margaret's.

The baby grew fast, but instead of growing cuter she grew only louder. Her hair came in, as strawlike as her father's. "Behold," Margaret said to Ally, "your untamable mane." Rashes on the baby's cheeks made her look angry. When Margaret held her, she cried for Mrs. Webb.

Margaret wrote letters to Vincent that she would send by burning in the fireplace. "Dearest Abelard," she wrote. "Can you believe I've brought another soul onto this wretched planet?"

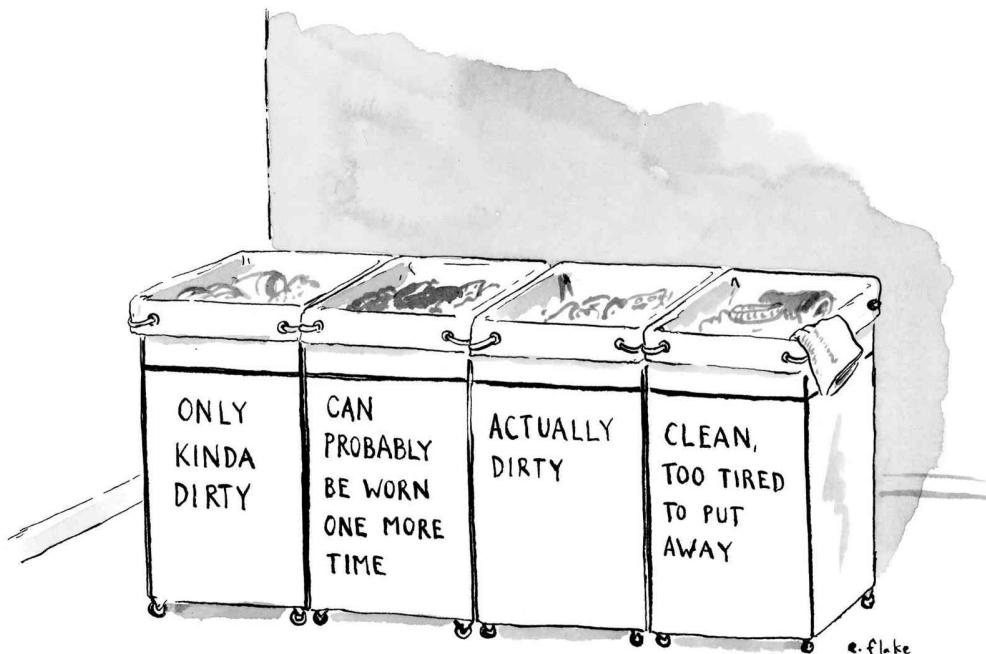
She wrote letters to Milton, and he wrote back. Pop was worse. Pop was eating some. Pop was too far gone in the head for it to matter if she came back now, but they sure could use some more money.

The leaves began to turn, and it hit Margaret that she'd been in the city for more than a year. She'd have Mrs. Webb rock the baby to sleep and settle her in the pram, and then she'd push the pram to the Park. Mothering the child properly, even if the child wasn't awake to notice. She never remembered to bring bread for the ducks, but she'd watch others feed them.

Her eye was caught one day by a pallid man and a girl he was trying to impress, one too young for him. He threw bread and attempted to skip stones, and the girl laughed indulgently. Slick strips of blond hair covered the man's bald spot. Margaret registered as if through thick water: this was the man who'd married her to Ally. He'd worn a priest's collar then, was in a blue sweater now. Surely priests changed clothes, but the way this man tickled his companion until she shrieked—this was no priest. Maybe a Yale friend of Ally's. Or some unemployed actor. She strode with the pram right up to the couple. The man looked blank and then, suddenly, horrified.

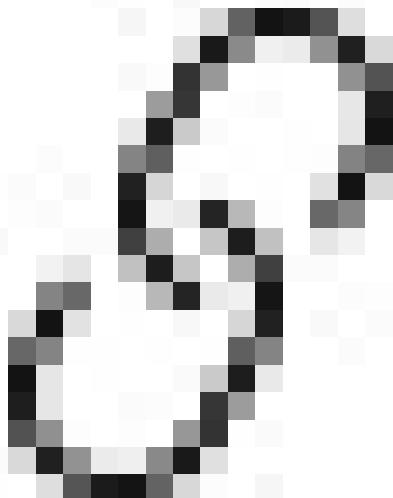
Margaret said, "What kind of ducks are those?"

"Mallards," the girl said. "Aren't they, Billy?"



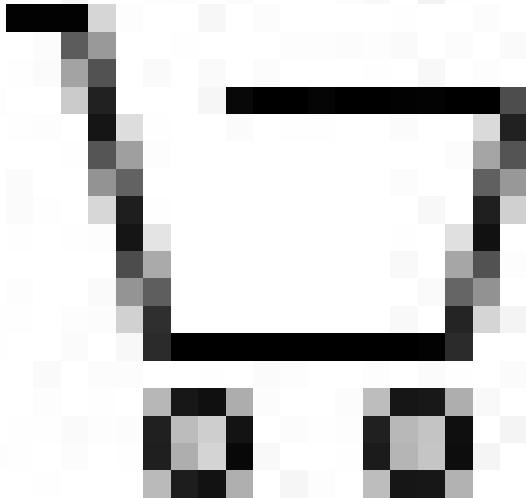
Cartoon by Emily Flake

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Shop



The man seemed choked. She was sure now, up close; she recognized his bulbous earlobes. He said, "I suppose."

Margaret said, "I haven't seen you since you left the priesthood."

The girl turned to him, baffled, and, when he didn't stammer some surprisingly reasonable explanation, Margaret continued down the path. He was welcome to tell his girlfriend that this woman was clearly insane.

•

All she had to do with Ally was play happy, but any illusions that he'd whisk her off to France had evaporated. At least he was still beautiful. And what other option did she have? She wasn't a fool if she could fool him back.

She'd previously avoided buying herself very expensive items—a nice coat, yes, but not a diamond bracelet—lest she seem greedy. Now she ordered those things at regular intervals, calculating the pawn value, wondering if she could live off what she owned for five years, ten. Well, it depended what kind of life she needed to buy. It depended if she ever meant to go home and support her brothers and any women unlucky enough to become their brides. That would be expensive in one way. Staying in the city would be expensive in others.

In bed one evening, Ally said, "You know, the purchases do add up. I could write you a budget."

Instead of arguing, she said, "Oh, that would be wonderful!"

He kissed her forehead, satisfied.

•

It occurred to her to ask if the library still had issues of the *Times* from October of 1935, when Ally had been kidnapped. Because perhaps everything he'd ever claimed had been a lie.

He'd said that the kidnapping happened the day after his fifteenth birthday. It took some searching through the already yellowed pages—she realized that she needed the day after the kidnapping—but then look! Just as he'd said! Forced into a gold Buick Phaeton at gunpoint outside Trinity School, twenty-thousand-dollar ransom.

How had she become such an untrusting person? She'd hoarded jewelry for nothing.

She was about to float out of the library when she thought to look for news of Ally's return, a week later. This search took longer, as she didn't have a precise date.

Late that afternoon, she found the strangest headline: "*BALDWELL BOY HOME AFTER KIDNAP HOAX*." She read on, mystified and then devastated and then numb. It seemed that Ally and a friend had staged the whole thing. The family delivered the ransom, care of a hired guard, but Ally's father insisted on watching with binoculars from a car to see it properly collected, and recognized immediately the distinctive gait of Ally's lifelong friend Robert Warner. Cecil Baldwell directed his driver to follow the car, which they eventually ran off the road near the Harlem Meer. Cecil approached the other car himself, finding Warner at the wheel, Alistair crouched in the back. Ally confessed to his part in the scheme, the paper reported, and no charges were filed, the families being friendly.

Margaret asked a librarian to help her find the roster of the U.S.S. Yorktown. The appendix of a book about the Pacific theatre listed the men on board. No Baldwell. Undoubtedly, Ally had sat out the war at some desk in New Jersey.

Why, of all things, was she laughing? A dry laugh, an angry laugh, but a laugh. It was this: With the worst proved—the man was a common liar—she could stop doubting herself.

That night, she dressed in Jacques Fath and went down to the Persian Room at eleven o'clock. She stood at the bar, angled out toward the crowd, as if she'd lost track of a friend. It wasn't thirty seconds before a dapper older man approached, asked if he could help her find the cocktail she'd surely misplaced. Why, here it was, right behind the bar, being mixed this very moment, paid for by him. What was her name? In a vaguely French accent, she introduced herself as Marguerite Abelard. She'd never been to New York and was surprised to find it so lively. Was it always so lively?

•

The days, being empty, sailed emptily by.

There were more men after that first one, men who believed she'd been born in Nice to a distant Vanderbilt cousin, or at least pretended to. Men who couldn't smell the trout in her blood. She was adept at sneaking them upstairs late at night, past Mrs. Webb's closed door, the child's closed door—all those years of practice back in Stickney.

The child was a hellion. Margaret had assumed that Mrs. Webb would put discipline into her, and she certainly tried, but it went right over the child's head. The child learned to walk. She learned to scream actual words. She was suddenly two, and then three. When she didn't get her way, she screamed loud enough that neighbors complained to the management. The child ripped the arms off her expensive baby doll. Her hair was wild, an embarrassment.

A letter from Stickney: Pop had passed. Margaret felt, only now, an urgency to return so that he could meet his granddaughter. Impossible and stupid. With Pop gone, Milton wrote, Eugene no longer had a role at the paper. "I worry for him," he said, as if Milton were in a place to judge. He was playing to her sympathies: he knew that Eugene had been Margaret's first baby. Born when she was two, he'd let her dress him in ridiculous outfits, listened to her songs. His drunkenness hurt her more than Milton's. "If you came back," Milton wrote, "you could keep the house in order so I could work more hours."

Margaret tore the letter to shreds.

•

The child was four. She was five. The child wanted everything pink, pink, pink. She poured water down the mail chute. She tangled a fork in her hair; half an hour's work with mayonnaise to free it. The staff indulged her, giving her sticks of gum, letting her interrupt their work.

Margaret had been just such a child herself, forever talking—but her brothers had kept her busy, and her father had been liberal with the switch. She wasn't about to provide the child with siblings, and the only discipline

Ally exercised was to shake the child off his leg and call for Mrs. Webb to “do something with her.”

The day maid had been at the Plaza for nine years. Margaret began inviting her to sit down for tea, which she wasn’t supposed to do but agreed to occasionally. They talked about her boyfriend and Stalin’s stroke and Richard Burton’s chin. One day, Margaret casually asked, “The woman he put up before me—was she this much trouble?”

“Oh, good Lord,” the maid said. “So much more!”

Margaret thought she might catch herself, retract her words. But she kept talking.

“Of course, she was trouble to him, too. That’s why he had to get her out of New York. She said, Well, he should buy her a house somewhere, and he said, Of course not, you can charge a hotel suite to a company but not some house in the suburbs. His name would be on this woman’s papers and all. Here it’s neat and clean. Baldwell’s the name on the room, and who knows different? So a hotel it had to be, and off to Chicago with her.”

“Was there a child?” Margaret’s voice sounded almost normal.

She shrugged. “She was turning stout when she left, but she ate the sirloin every night, so who’s to say.”

•

This revelation—that she was one of however many duped women—hit harder than Ally’s other lies. She didn’t need to believe in him, but she needed to believe in herself as singular.

That next morning, as if summoned by her despair, a letter arrived in Eugene’s queasy scrawl. It seemed inevitable in retrospect that Milton, both a roofer and a drunk, would fall to his death. Margaret stared out the window at the Park and waited in vain for grief. Eugene wrote, “Milt always said you might come home. You think you might? Then I can get a job.” As if one thing had any bearing on the other. She imagined moving her child into the empty house with Eugene, their makeshift trio living off pawned earrings.

Perhaps Eugene would be the end of her, or perhaps she'd save him. Her baby brother who used to suck her hair. The only person who'd ever needed her.

She called her old boss at the Stickney Inn and persuaded him to give Eugene a job—just a janitorial one for now, but if he worked hard he could be trained as a bellhop. Margaret imagined that he might succeed there. He'd never lost his childhood curls, and out-of-town women might be charmed, might give good tips. "Keep him out of the bar," she told Mr. Gittings.

•

Ally came around every week or two, and she tolerated his lovemaking.

On a Friday night, drunk on gin and angry that she wasn't home when he arrived, angry that she tumbled in after dinner, dressed for someone other than him, he slapped her hard across the face, so hard her lip bled.

She thought, with sad relief, At least he's not one to use fists.

The next day, he sent her roses.

One of the men she'd met in the Persian Room was a Virginia-born lawyer named Stuart, and thank God the night they'd met she hadn't used her silly French accent; that would have been too much to keep up. She continued sleeping with him in exchange for legal advice. The question, she explained, was how many women Ally had stashed around the country, how many children he paid for. If they were legally wed, she'd have some share of his money when he died, or if they divorced. But what were the odds that the paper they'd signed was real?

Stuart narrowed his eyes, hesitated. He said, "Do you imagine he'd even let you go? With his child, and all? Men like this . . ."

And the answer sank down her throat. She felt the walls around her, she imagined the lawyers, the detectives. The very real kidnappings a man like Ally could arrange. How had she ever imagined that she was free to leave?

Stuart suggested she ask Ally to include her and the child in his will.

Ally promised that he already had.

Could she see the will?

Well, no, his attorney was travelling in Rome.

•

Ally bought the child a book of fairy tales, blue leather with gold swirls, rich color illustrations inset. Margaret tried reading to her, but had no patience for her questions, her squirming. So Mrs. Webb read every night instead. From the sitting room, Margaret could hear her low, soothing tone, even if she couldn't make out the words.

The child's voice one night, bright and piping: "But it was *her* castle, too! She could go where she wanted."

Mrs. Webb murmured something—assent, appeasement.

It must have been "Cinderella." And the child, this spawn of Baldwells, didn't care about the true love at the end; she cared only about Cinderella's newfound wealth, her property holdings.

Later that night, Margaret checked on her sleeping child and opened the book to where Mrs. Webb had left a bookmark.

No. Dear God. Not "Cinderella" but "Bluebeard." The story of a woman imprisoned by a man, his money, his violence.

She forced herself to laugh. It was so easy to believe you were living in one fairy tale and find yourself smack in the middle of another.

Here was the illustration of Bluebeard's poor wife. She crept up the stairs in a white gown, looking over her shoulder—candle in one hand, key in the other. Perhaps the artist had made the picture too pretty.

Margaret imagined an artist drawing her own daughter, her hallway rampages, her twenty-story kingdom. She imagined the young girl who might see this picture and believe its implicit lie, think that money could

ever buy freedom for a child born female. Well: Wasn't it, perhaps, better to go through life believing you were Cinderella than knowing you were Bluebeard's daughter?

•

Margaret asked if they could send the child to Trinity School, but Ally looked aghast. "She'd be in danger," he said. "It was right in front of the school that I was taken." Instead, he hired a tutor, a hapless boy who'd been kicked out of Andover and was spending the year with his parents. The tutor couldn't control the child, couldn't even get her to sit. Somehow, the child learned her letters.

•

Eugene lasted six months at the Stickney Inn before he was fired for mistaking the bag room for the rest room and urinating on a hatbox. This she learned from Mr. Gittings, who sent a letter to apologize for letting Eugene go. "He needs a caretaker," he wrote, and she imagined him reading the words aloud to his wife, asking if they sounded tactful.

Even if Ally let her, she could not return to Stickney, not to a place where people thought she deserved no better lot in life than babysitting a drunk. But she loved her brother, and the longer she spent away from his adult incarnation the more she remembered him as the child with ticklish feet.

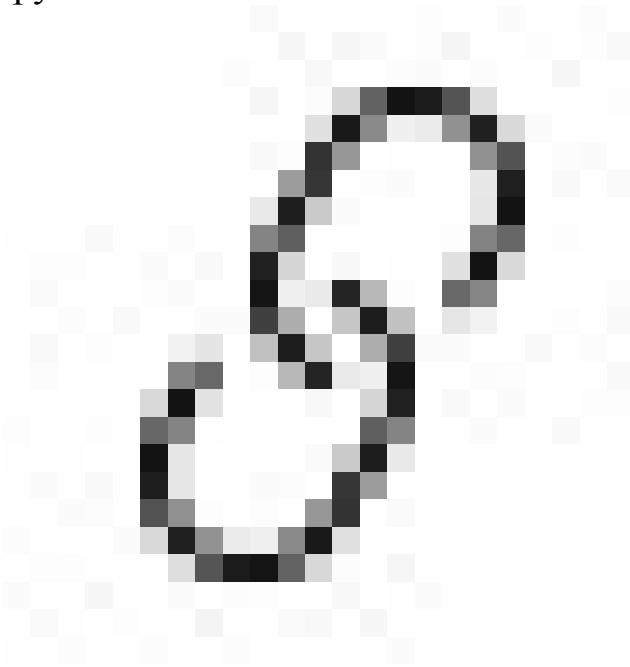
She hit on a solution. She sent him that month's hundred dollars with explicit instructions for taking the bus to the city. She told him that she'd meet him at the Port Authority on September 7th at 6 p.m. "Do not drink this money!" she wrote. "This is your one and only chance." She'd force Ally to give him some job in the mailroom, or she'd tell the Plaza he had bellboy experience.

He wrote back saying that he'd be there. She gave all the liquor in her apartment to the boys in the package room.



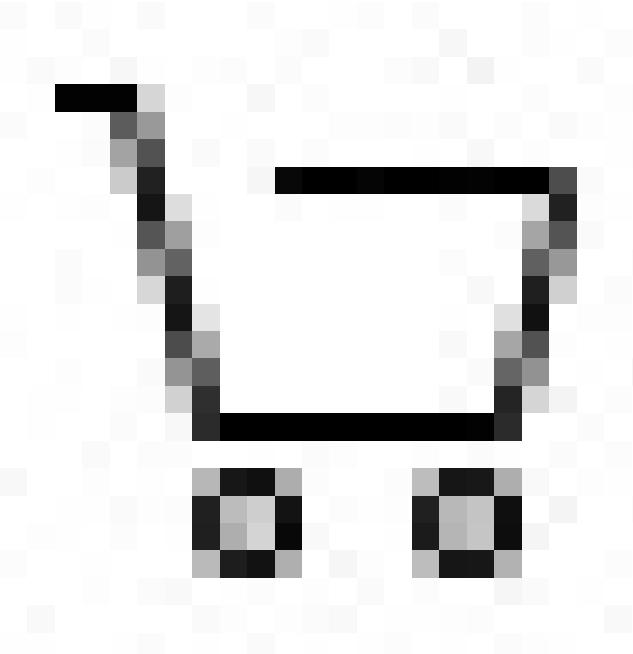
"Here. The one time you don't take your club is the one time you'll need it."
Cartoon by Michael Maslin

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She told herself he might not come. When he didn't, she was still hopeful enough that she went back the next night in case he'd got the day wrong.

She walked all the way home, each clack of her shoes on the sidewalk sealing something up inside her.

Stickney was gone. Her family, gone.

Well, then.

•

Ally returned from two months in Johannesburg, and Margaret asked to meet. He showed up with a stuffed elephant. Stuart rose from the sofa to shake his hand, and Ally looked at him with alarm. "My attorney friend," Margaret said. She said that she'd been worried, had thought about something happening to him in Africa, and wouldn't it be better if absolutely everything were in writing?

From Ally's confounded look, the way he glanced out the window as if for help, Margaret guessed that none of his other supposed wives had pulled something like this.

Ally sat, the elephant on his lap. He said, “Where is she?”

“An interesting question,” Stuart said. “Because if we don’t have your paternity on record, do you have any right to visit?”

Margaret said, “You know, I don’t have to stay here. I could move to Chicago, for instance.” She was standing, the line of her eyes a steel beam down to his. She thought he’d be angry, she thought he might produce his own lawyer from his pocket, but he looked ready to wet the chair.

“This is ridiculous,” he said. “We can work this out. We can make sure you’re happy.”

A year ago, a month ago, she might have folded. But she was done handing out chances to men who drank them up and pissed them out. She said nothing.

“Jesus, sure, fine, I’ll put it in writing,” Ally said. “If that’s what you need.”

Stuart opened his briefcase. He explained that, if the paternity was in writing, a monthly allowance would need to be, as well. “The marriage certificate won’t be necessary,” he said. “But in the absence of a binding will we’ll need to set up a more formal arrangement for monthly funding here at the Plaza, and a trust for the child.”

Ally found his spine and sat up straighter. “I can’t be sending money off to who knows where,” he said. “I’ll support my daughter as long as she stays right here.”

The child in question barrelled in then, having evaded Mrs. Webb, and leaped into her father’s lap like a cannonball. “Is it for me?” she asked, and grabbed the elephant.

Ally said, “What will you name him?”

“Oh, this is a girl,” the child clarified. “She has no tusks. Her name is Emmeline, and she unfortunately has cholera.”

•

The child was six. Without asking, Ally bought her a little dog—an ugly, wrinkly creature. It yipped at all hours, made messes on the floor, needed special medicine. At least, Margaret thought, the child would finally have a friend who didn't work at the Plaza.

Since Ally had signed the papers, he'd put up no pretense of affection toward Margaret, nor she toward him. She wondered if the dog was punishment.

A month later, the child demanded a turtle, of all things, and her father obliged.

She wrote on the walls of her room. In Mrs. Webb's hours off, the child tornadoed the halls. The child, Margaret realized, had never been to a grocery store. She believed in room service as if it were an atmospheric phenomenon.

•

Stuart suggested that they vacation in the South of France, without the child. She could have the concierge procure plane tickets and charge them to the room. Her monthly allowance—less than she'd hoped for, but still significant—could cover the rest.

Stuart was perhaps using her, but at least in this case she was the one with the money. When you had money, people might love you for the wrong reasons, but they still loved you. They didn't pity you, at least.

They spent four weeks in Biarritz, and when they returned she discovered that the child had used up all her lipstick.

She and Stuart travelled to Catalina, Venice, Marrakech. He felt no need to settle down, thank God. She met a viscount and he took her to Rome for a week. When Lionel retired from the concierge desk, she introduced herself to his replacement as the Viscountess Marguerite Abelard, and why wouldn't he believe her? Even the maids and the bellboys who'd been here all along seemed to have forgotten the accent she'd arrived with, the shabby clothes.

•

The child tore at her nails, interrupted hotel weddings, climbed her mother like a leech. She was a torrent of words; she could play any grown man like a fiddle.

Wasn't that all she needed in life? High expectations and a lack of remorse. Astonishment when things didn't go her way. The universe would fall at her feet.

Margaret wrote Vincent a note and burned it: "You'd be amazed. Well, no. You'd be her victim."

She saw the child for a week or two at a time, covered her with kisses. She drank earlier in the day. She found reasons to be across the city or across the world.

But wasn't her work here mostly finished?

She'd done her best. By accident or design, she'd built the girl into the precise monster most capable of surviving this world. ♦

By Deborah Treisman

By Ted Chiang

By Robyn Weintraub

By Isaac Chotiner

Letter from the U.K.

- [The Self-Justifying Philosophy of King Charles](#)

By [Rebecca Mead](#)

When King Charles III was a young prince, in the early nineteen-fifties, he sometimes propelled a ride-on toy around Windsor Castle, one of several royal residences where he spent his childhood. Pedalling furiously, he hardly registered the spectacular works from the Royal Collection on the walls. “It’s just a background,” Charles later recalled. His attention was arrested, however, by one unusual portrait: of King Charles I, displayed in the Queen’s Ballroom. The sensitive and reflective prince, who was born in 1948 and who by the age of seven was being tutored by a governess in the history of the nation—and of his historic family—was fascinated by the painting. “King Charles lived for me in that room in the castle,” he later said.

Titled “[Charles I in Three Positions](#),” and painted in the sixteen-thirties by Van Dyck, the work offers three representations of the elegant monarch: in profile, facing forward, and in three-quarter view. With his long, flowing hair cut fashionably shorter on one side, he is depicted wearing three distinct robes and three ornate lace collars, and he is accessorized with the blue sash of the Order of the Garter, Britain’s oldest chivalric order. The painting was made about a decade after Charles’s accession, in 1625, and was used as a blueprint for a marble bust by Bernini. Charles I—who was devout, reserved, and convinced of his right to absolute power as the head of the Stuart dynasty—was a great patron of the arts. Among other extravagant commissions, he asked [Rubens](#) to decorate the ceiling of the grand Banqueting House, in London’s Palace of Whitehall, with canvases illustrating heavenly approval of James I, his father.

The triple portrait may have commanded the young Prince Charles’s attention because of his royal precursor’s [lurid fate](#): Charles I had the distinction of being the only British king to be tried for treason and executed. He was sentenced to death by a High Court of Justice, set up by a Parliament that he had antagonized by dissolving it repeatedly, which helped bring about devastating years of civil war. On November 18, 1648—nearly three hundred years to the day before the birth of Charles, on November 14th—the King’s opponents argued in the House of Commons that “the Person of the King may and shall be proceeded against in a way of justice for the blood spilt.” After a brief trial, the royal head was publicly severed

from the royal shoulders, on a scaffold outside the Banqueting House. The monarchy was abolished a week later, the office of the king declared by the Commons as “unnecessary, burdensome, and dangerous to the liberty, safety, and public interest of the people of this nation.” The Puritan republic lasted only eleven years, after which Parliament voted to install on the throne Charles II, the licentious eldest surviving son of the deposed king. But the powers of the restored monarchy were more limited, and by the late seventeenth century the Glorious Revolution had affirmed the idea that British kings and queens retain their crowns only by the consent of the people.

Van Dyck’s triple portrait is, on its own terms, irresistibly suggestive of the psychological complexity of its royal subject. The king in profile has a heavy brow: he appears thoughtful, even melancholy. The three-quarter king, who wears a dandyish pearl earring, has a faraway look in his eye, and a faint smile plays at the corner of his mouth. The forward-facing king appears supremely self-assured, even arrogant. For the young Charles, the principal fascination of the triple portrait may well have been in its proto-photographic quality—a high-class mug shot of a king ultimately judged to be a criminal. But the portrait might also have suggested to the Prince—who would already have learned that he was destined to become Britain’s third King Charles—that to be a monarch is to be a divided self, in a role that is sometimes precariously split among the constitutional, the institutional, and the personal. Being a king is not just one thing.

After [Queen Elizabeth II](#) died, at the age of ninety-six, on September 8, 2022, King Charles III delivered a televised speech—his first public address as monarch. His eyes were rheumy and his complexion florid; his hair, thoroughly silver, was brushed as carefully as it had been in 1953 when, as a fidgety four-year-old, he had endured his mother’s almost three-hour-long coronation service, in Westminster Abbey. “Queen Elizabeth’s was a life well lived, a promise with destiny kept,” he said, in a speech that was praised for its emotionality and steadiness. He also proclaimed, “That promise of lifelong service I renew to you all today.”

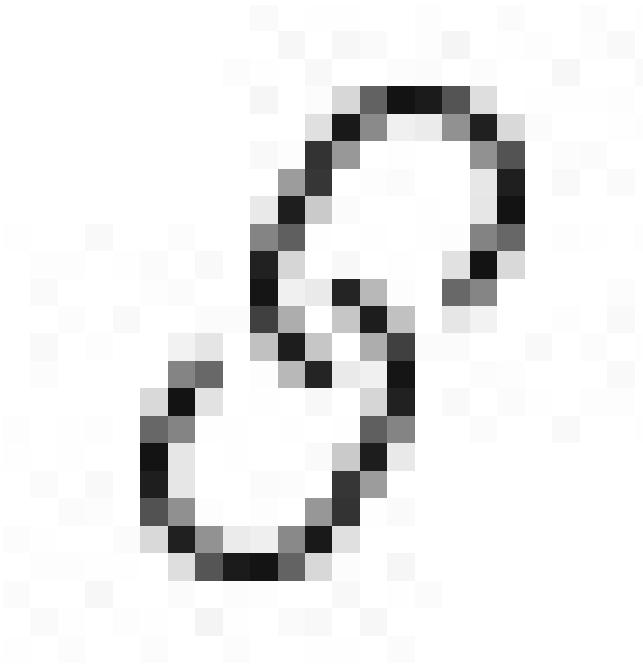
The Queen’s astonishing longevity in the role of monarch—she lasted for seventy years, a full seven years longer than Queen Victoria—has a corollary in Charles’s own, less triumphant statistical attributes. He is the

oldest British monarch to have ascended to the throne, at seventy-three. (His wife, Camilla, who has been given the title of Queen Consort, is a year older.) Charles, whose coronation is scheduled for May 6th, has been the longest-serving Prince of Wales, a title bestowed on him by the Queen when he was an introverted nine-year-old. Already the Duke of Cornwall, a title that he had received upon his mother's accession, he learned of this latest honor while at prep school. Invited to watch the televised announcement in his headmaster's study, Charles was mortified by the congratulations of his fellow-pupils. It was, he later said, the moment when he first saw clearly the "awful truth" of his singular fate.



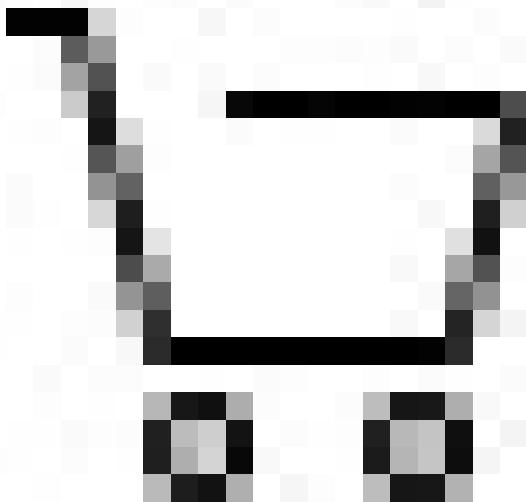
"Attention, passengers, this train will be running express to whichever stop is after yours."
Cartoon by Asher Perlman

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Has it really been so awful? Perhaps. Unlike the former Prime Minister [Boris Johnson](#), Charles didn't dream as a child of being "World King," and he has long made it clear that he considers his birthright a burden. "Nobody knows what utter hell it is to be the Prince of Wales," he has reportedly

complained. Although Charles is literally the most entitled man in the land, a royal can feel like an anachronism, and he apparently feels a kinship with certain other Britons who are marginalized. Paddy Harverson, the Prince's former communications secretary, says that Charles has a particular fondness for the sheep farmers of remote Cumbria, "because they are about the most forgotten community you can find."

Tom Parker Bowles—Charles's godson, and later his stepson—grew up thinking that Charles's name was Sir, because that's all anyone ever called him. Yet Sir suffers from a peculiar aristocratic version of impostor syndrome. He is wise enough to know that, in almost any room he enters other than one occupied by members of his family, he is likely to be the only person present whose power and influence derive entirely from his birth. Indeed, if Charles checked his privilege, there would be nothing left of him —just a crumpled pile of ermine and velvet, and a faint whiff of Eau Sauvage.

Harverson says that Charles's self-consciousness about being a royal drove him to become "the hardest-working man I know," adding, "First thing in the morning, he does his exercises and has his abstemious breakfast, working on his papers over breakfast. Before he goes to bed, any time up to midnight, he'll be doing more work—and all the points in between."

At the beginning, this work was rather nebulous. The position of Prince of Wales has no specified constitutional purpose or duties, as Charles discovered as a young man, when he instructed his staff to research precedents and possibilities, and found no guidance. During his twenties, he spent several years in the Royal Air Force and the Royal Navy. In a speech that he delivered at his alma mater, the University of Cambridge, on the eve of his thirtieth birthday, he admitted, "My great problem in life is that I do not really know what my role in life is." He added, "Somehow I must find one." Charles, who subsequently told an interviewer that it would be "criminally negligent" of him to do nothing, has started more than a dozen charities, including the Prince's Trust, and has served as the patron of scores of others. He has spoken out for decades on causes about which he is passionate, from organic farming and town planning to education and alternative medicine, leveraging his fame in a way that is constitutionally denied to the monarch, who must remain staunchly apolitical. (Luckily for

the Queen, her chief passion was horses.) A few years ago, he urgently summoned the composer Andrew Lloyd Webber to his office to present an idea. “He was worried about . . . the fact that there wasn’t enough access for young people to go and learn how to play the church organ,” Lloyd Webber [told the Washington Post](#). In April, 2021, Charles marked International Organ Day with a message to the Royal College of Organists, urging its members to secure the future viability of what, as he reminded them, Mozart had described as the “King of Instruments.”

Charles could have spent his anticipatory decades like some former heirs to the throne: devoting himself to hunting and wenching. To be fair, he’s done a bit of both. He was an avid foxhunter until the activity was outlawed, in 2005; he characterized it as reflecting “man’s ancient, and, indeed, romantic relationship with dogs and horses.” As for other romantic relationships: long before Prince Harry spilled his guts, in a tell-all memoir, “[Spare](#),” about losing his virginity in a field behind a pub, Charles’s sanctioned biographer, Jonathan Dimbleby, [wrote](#) humidly in 1994 of his subject’s deflowering at Cambridge by an early paramour, described as a “young South American” who had “instructed an innocent Prince in the consummation of physical love.”

But, in general, Charles has conducted his role as monarch-in-waiting with laudable earnestness. One need not go so far as to say that he has the makings of a saint—as the Reverend Harry Williams, a former dean of the chapel at Trinity College, Cambridge, once did—to believe that the country could have done much worse. Kings can be dreadful. Until the birth of Prince William, in 1982, the world was just one helicopter accident or foxhunting tumble away from the prospect of King Andrew I.

People who know Charles sometimes describe him as a cuckoo in the royal nest—someone quite unlike the other members of his family. He inherited neither the stoicism of his mother nor the emotional imperviousness of his father, Prince Philip. Charles was born into a family so formal and hidebound that, when the newly crowned Queen Elizabeth ordained that her children would no longer be expected to bow or curtsey when entering her presence, the move was seen as wildly progressive. Whereas his bold younger sister, Anne, used to march up and down in front of the sentries at Buckingham Palace in order to oblige them to present arms, as if darting

before automatic sliding doors in a hotel lobby, Charles cringed at his own authority. As a young man, he considered himself “a ‘single’ person that prefers to be alone and is happy just with hills or trees as companions.” Later, Charles was indelibly defined in contrast with his first wife, [Princess Diana](#), who was “the great, emotional, open, sensitive one,” as Catherine Mayer, one of Charles’s more subtle recent biographers, [observes](#). “The irony is that he was seen as this stone creature, but in fact he’s far more like her than like other members of his own family, in many ways.”

Charles readily prioritizes intuition over analytic thought, especially if it’s his own intuition that’s being prioritized. “He doesn’t allow debate,” Tom Bower, the author of [a mostly-warts biography](#), says. “It’s his droit du seigneur—he doesn’t like contradiction, whether within his causes or his office.” He’s not exactly an intellectual, but he is a reader, especially of history, and compared with his parents and his siblings he’s a raving brainbox. A first-gen university student who benefitted from a bespoke affirmative-action program—no other first-year student at Trinity College had his own set of rooms, and a detective on hand—Charles is a passionate defender of the cultural canon. He knows by heart long passages of [Shakespeare](#), which, as he told Dimbleby, can “in moments of stress or danger or misery” give “enormous comfort and encouragement.” (It’s not hard to see how certain stylings of the Bard—“This royal throne of Kings, this sceptred isle”—might buck up a demoralized monarch-to-be.)

Like the works of Shakespeare, or church-organ music, the monarchy is something that once was inarguably valued but now must make a case for its relevance. It is no secret that Charles believes the modern world to have gone to hell, in any number of ways; although such thinking is not unusual for a septuagenarian, few individuals can be as invested in the matter as Charles, whose whole gig is to be a symbol of tradition. Twenty years ago, a letter that he had written emerged in the course of an employment lawsuit brought by a former employee at Clarence House, his royal residence in London, and his words betrayed a similarly intemperate view of contemporary culture. “What is wrong with people nowadays?” he wrote. “Why do they all seem to think they are qualified to do things far above their capabilities?” He went on to blame “a child-centered education system which tells people they can become pop stars, high court judges, or brilliant TV presenters or infinitely more competent heads of state without ever

putting in the necessary work or having the natural ability.” He concluded with a grand flourish: “It is a result of social utopianism which believes humanity can be genetically engineered to contradict the lessons of history.” Charles did not dilate further on what those lessons might be. But it’s safe to assume that they’d justify one of the most notorious compromises struck between the claims of the genetic and of the social: the existence of a hereditary sovereign within a constitutional monarchy.

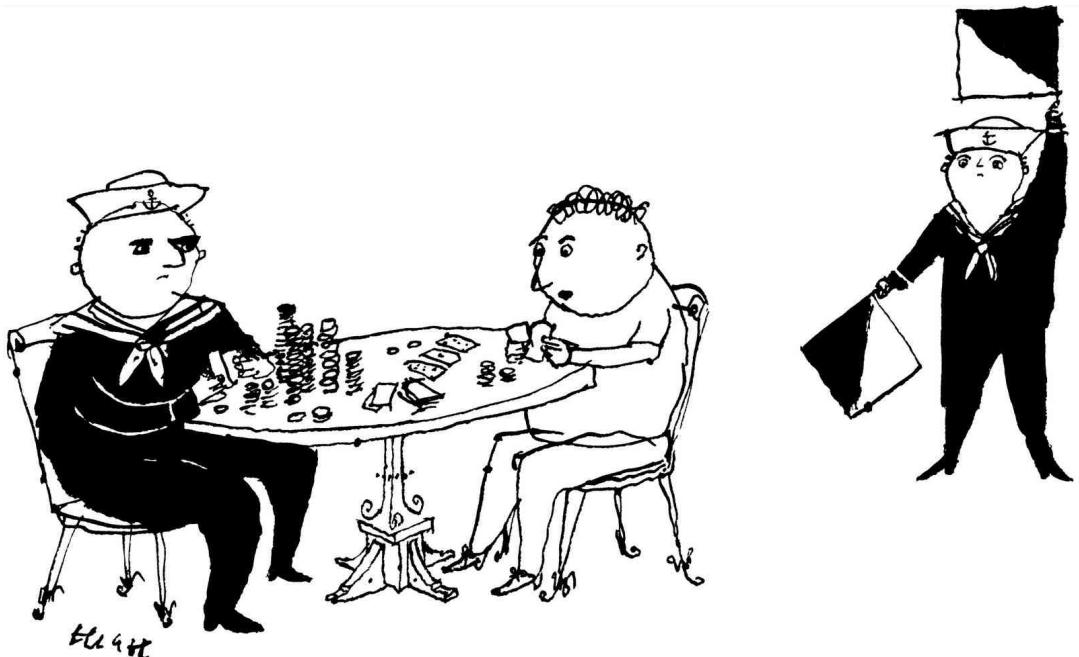
“This is a call to revolution”—so reads the grabby first sentence of [“Harmony: A New Way of Looking at Our World,”](#) a book that Charles published in 2010. The future king was quick to clarify that the sort of revolution he was calling for was not the monarch-deposing kind. He went on, “The Earth is under threat. It cannot cope with all that we demand of it. It is losing its balance and we humans are causing this to happen.” We must, he wrote, embark on a “Sustainability Revolution.”

Charles has long held strong views on environmental matters: in the seventies, he warned of the dangers of pollution, and by the early eighties he had become an outspoken advocate of organic farming and a critic of industrial agribusiness. At the time, he was often dismissed as a crank. A 1984 article in the *Daily Mirror* imagined the future king sitting “cross-legged on the throne wearing a kaftan and eating muesli”—little realizing how mainstream these activities would become, except for the throne-sitting. In a 1982 speech, Charles lamented, “Perhaps we just have to accept that it is God’s will that the unorthodox individual is doomed to years of frustration, ridicule, and failure in order to act out his role in the scheme of things, until his day arrives, and mankind is ready to receive his message.”

Ian Skelly, one of Charles’s two co-authors on “Harmony” and a writer who has helped him with speeches, says, “A lot of people have quietly realized that he was right all along about a lot of this. There’s always a lot of people who did take him seriously, but the vast majority thought he was up there in the trees with the fairies.” Charles’s criticisms of factory farming and of the use of artificial pesticides have become widespread, though the sustainability practices reportedly carried out at Highgrove, his beloved country residence in Gloucestershire, are beyond the capacities of most farmers: according to Tom Bower, a team of four gardeners lie face down on

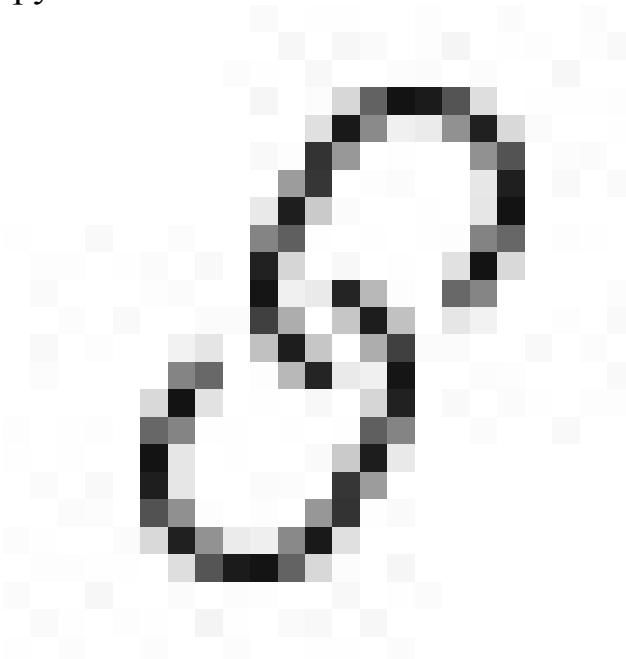
a trailer as it is dragged by a slow-moving Land Rover, so that they can pull up weeds.

Charles has also been unafraid to criticize powerful bodies of experts such as the British Medical Association, whose ire he earned forty years ago by unfavorably contrasting contemporary medicine with ancient folk healing, in particular homeopathy, and by comparing the modern medical establishment to “the celebrated Tower of Pisa—slightly off balance.” (A doctor with the B.M.A. subsequently declared homeopathy to be “nonsense on stilts.”) He is notoriously hostile to modern architecture, and, in a vitriolic 1987 speech to a gathering of distinguished British planners and designers, he proclaimed, “You have, ladies and gentlemen, to give this much to the Luftwaffe—when it knocked down our buildings, it didn’t replace them with anything more offensive than rubble. *We did that.*” Charles’s remarks bring to mind the Internet era’s Godwin’s law, which holds that once an argument escalates online someone inevitably invokes the Nazis; usually, though, the comparison is not in the Nazis’ favor. Once, while on a tour of a fifty-story office building that César Pelli had designed for the Canary Wharf area of London, Charles querulously asked, “Why does it need to be quite so high?” This remark prompted another member of the tour—the art historian Roy Strong—to observe that, if people had thought that way in the Middle Ages, there would be no spire atop Salisbury Cathedral. Charles made no reply—but, then again, we know how he feels about the Tower of Pisa.



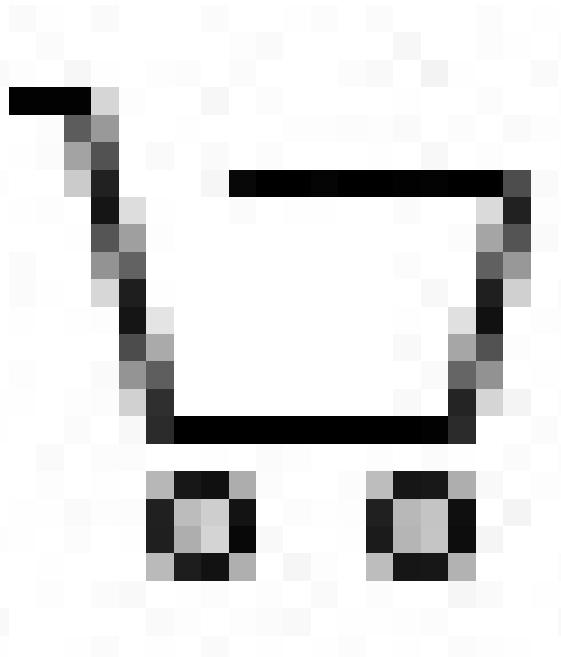
"It's like you're reading my mind."
Cartoon by Roland High

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Such rampant position-taking was often understood to be evidence of a butterfly mind, flitting from one issue to another. As Dimbleby, his biographer, put it, “He approached new ideas like a swimmer diving among rocks: sometimes he discovered a pearl and sometimes he banged himself on the head.” The press portrayed Charles as “the meddling prince,” suggesting that his interventions—including unsolicited memos to government ministers—both undermined professional expertise and ran counter to his future role. The King now has a weekly audience with the Prime Minister, during which he can quietly offer advice. (“Back again? Dear, oh dear” was Charles’s rather ungracious greeting to the hapless [Liz Truss](#) in October.) But the British monarch is, by convention, obliged to sign into law whatever the government puts in front of him, whether he agrees with it or not.

Charles is easy to condemn as out of touch. Bower’s book devilishly recounts an occasion when the Prince’s kitchen staff left him some cold cuts for a late supper. He shrieked with horror and called for Camilla’s aid—apparently, it was his first encounter with cling film. Having spent a lifetime being characterized by the press as a fogey, an oddball, or a nostalgist, Charles had an opportunity, in “Harmony,” to present a self-portrait, and a self-defense. In the book, he seeks to demonstrate how his apparently disparate concerns—architecture, farming, climate change—are in fact linked. Each of them, he argues, is an expression of the absence of

“harmony”—a concept that he defines as “the active state of balance which is just as vital to the health of the natural world as it is for human society.” In many ways, the book is profoundly conservative: an idyllic image of crofters’ huts in the Yorkshire Dales is paired with a dystopian shot of tower blocks and industrial chimneys in Dundee, Scotland, as if the former could perform the same function as the latter. But “Harmony” is also surprisingly radical in its rejection of the inevitability of consumer capitalism. “Real wealth is good land, pristine forests, clean rivers, healthy animals, vibrant communities, nourishing food and human creativity,” Charles writes. “But the money managers have turned land, forests, rivers, animals and human creativity into commodities to be bought and sold.”

Ian Skelly says of Charles, “He’s met every expert you can imagine, and is deeply informed about a massive range of subjects.” Skelly notes, “He says he can’t remember anything, but don’t talk to him about sheep! Don’t talk to him about flora and fauna.” Charles’s concern and commitment are transparently heartfelt, even if his solutions can seem arcane: it was recently announced that his vintage Aston Martin has been converted to run on surplus wine and leftover cheese whey.

Charles is known to have some frugal habits—he gets his clothes patched rather than having them replaced. Still, in other respects, his life is one of excess. The *Guardian* recently [estimated](#) that the King’s privately held assets, which include property, jewelry, horses, and vintage cars, have a collective value of nearly two and a quarter billion dollars. (In an indignant response, the Palace said that the figures were “a highly creative mix of speculation, assumption and inaccuracy,” but declined to offer an accurate tally.) And though only the most uncompromising of republicans would deny that a king needs a castle, or two, Charles has access to more palatial homes than the most advantageously equipped plutocrats. His estates range from Windsor Castle to Sandringham House and Balmoral Castle—and those are just the ones that he’s recently taken over from the Queen. The monarch does not pay an inheritance tax. For many Britons, it can feel strange to be lectured on the need to reduce consumption by someone whose family has arrogated so much to itself.

“Harmony” is perhaps most valuable for revealing how Charles would prefer to be understood: as a philosopher-king who, unlike a politician vulnerable

to the whims of an electorate, is in a position to take the long view. “‘Harmony’ was seen by some people as an environmental book, but it’s not just that,” Tony Juniper, an environmentalist and the book’s other co-author, says. “It’s a philosophy book about the place of people in the universe.” Charles describes ancient practices—the geometrical patterns of sacred architecture; farming techniques that respected rather than depleted the soil—that underscore how humanity once saw itself as integrated with Nature rather than elevated above her. (For the King, Nature is capitalized and female.) Khaled Azzam, the director of the Prince’s Foundation School of Traditional Arts, in London, which since 2005 has taught subjects as diverse as illuminated-manuscript-making and the principles of Islamic architecture, says, “His Majesty has always been interested in humanity as a whole, not humanity in its fragmented form.”

As Charles sees it, human civilization made its first errant turn in the seventeenth century, with the onset of the scientific revolution and the subsequent prioritizing of rationalism and secularism over other systems of thought. He writes reverently of Indigenous cultures, noting that the Kogi people, of present-day Colombia, see themselves as an “Elder Brother” created “to protect the Earth, whom they inevitably call the Mother”; they must also contend with “a Younger Brother, a wayward creature . . . whose ways must be curbed before it is too late.” The Charles of “Harmony” is given to pronouncements like this: “The Enlightenment caused wonderful things to happen, but I do wish that the champions of mechanistic science would be more prepared than they are to accept that it also brought downsides.”

It does not seem coincidental that, in Charles’s time line of history, things started to go downhill around the period when people began chopping off the heads of monarchs. Jonathan Healey, a professor of history at Oxford University and the author of [The Blazing World: A New History of Revolutionary England, 1603-1689](#), says that, in the tumultuous years of the early seventeenth century, when religious authority was being questioned, Charles I was also invested in the concept of harmony—which, as Healey points out, is another word for “order.” “It hinges on everyone knowing their place,” he explains. “The peasants don’t question who is in charge, and they are happy. They are fed and they are looked after by the aristocracy, but they don’t criticize them.”

Unlike Charles I, Charles III has shown a passionate concern for members of society who lack opportunities for education or professional advancement. More than a million young people have received financial support from the Prince's Trust to, say, start a business or further their education. But believing that everyone deserves an equal opportunity to make the best of her life is not the same as believing that everyone can—or should—rise to the top. In “Harmony,” Charles suggests that the happiest, most just, and most sustainable framework for humans is built on traditional values of community, with individuals enjoying the satisfactions of labor and the consolations of nature within a sturdy social structure. He writes most glowingly of the sorts of rural communities that would have been common in the time of Charles I: sheep farmers who produce mutton, “a once commonly eaten meat that has a really delicious flavor and texture,” belong to a “harmonious pattern of existence and production that not only sustains many of the landscapes that help to define our identity and nurture our very souls, but also sustains entire communities of people.”

The kinds of pre-industrial societies that Charles admires were headed by a lord of the manor, who, in turn, deferred to a king. Although it might not be entirely fair to describe Charles as feudalism-curious, his world view does appear to incorporate an implicit defense of his monarchical position. As Charles seems to see it, a king should be a benign convener at the head of a natural hierarchy. “Studying the properties of harmony and understanding more clearly how it works at all levels of creation reveals a crucial, timeless principle: that no one part can grow well and true without it relating to—and being in accordance with—the well-being of the whole,” he writes in his book.

At a gathering a few years ago, Charles was introduced to Thomas Kaplan, an American businessman and the founder of Panthera, a nonprofit devoted to the preservation of lions, tigers, and other big cats. Kaplan says, “I realized I had a few minutes, max, to have his attention, and I put it to him very simply—I told him that you have to see cats as an umbrella species for vast ecosystems. Cats need two things to thrive: they need land to roam, and they need food. If you have the flora and fauna to support the very top of the food chain, *by definition* you have a thriving ecosystem.” Several months later, Kaplan learned that Charles had essentially repeated his case on behalf of big cats while on a visit to government officials in South America. Kaplan

was impressed: “It told me that, when he is touched by something, it registers, and that he has a remarkable capacity to apply it.” But it’s no surprise that Kaplan’s pitch would resonate with Charles. The lion is the king of the jungle. When the King is thriving, it follows that all is also well in his dominion.

While Charles struggled to find his individual purpose as Prince of Wales, he was obliged to carry out his dynastic purpose by producing an heir. His marriage to Diana, Princess of Wales, was no more a love match than was Charles I’s arranged union, in 1625, with Henrietta Maria, the fifteen-year-old youngest daughter of the late King of France. (In time, they grew closer, partly because of a mutual love of art. It can happen.) Diana had initially seemed to share at least some of Charles’s enthusiasms: she submitted with apparent contentment to his love of the outdoors, even allowing herself to be taught to fish. And she promptly produced two sons, William and Harry. But when the marriage was still young it became clear that she had no interest in Charles’s devotion to the gardens at Highgrove, and that she was bored by and resentful of the books he read and the friends he kept. Although Charles rekindled an affair with his old girlfriend [Camilla Parker Bowles](#)—“Do you seriously expect me to be the first Prince of Wales in history *not* to have a mistress?” he reportedly once said—he was pained by the catastrophic failure of a marriage that he imagined he could never escape. “How awful incompatibility is,” he wrote to a friend, five years after the wedding. “How dreadfully destructive it can be.”

The Prince and Princess of Wales separated in 1992 and were divorced in 1996; a year later, Diana died, in a car accident in Paris. In a sense, the tragedy offered Charles a kind of liberation; as Catherine Mayer points out, Charles “appears to be sensitive to accusations that he benefited from Diana’s death, perhaps not least because on some level he may fear that is true.” His continued compatibility with Camilla was formalized by marriage in 2005, as the couple entered a late-in-life period of domestic fulfillment conducted across their multiple domiciles. By the mid-twenty-tens, it looked as if the future king was about as happy as a man apparently not congenitally disposed to happiness could be.

Lately, though, family affairs have become considerably less harmonious. There is the issue of Charles’s own wayward Younger Brother, [Prince](#)

Andrew, whose grubby dealings with the late sex offender Jeffrey Epstein brought the Royal Family into disrepute even before Andrew settled a multimillion-dollar lawsuit with Virginia Giuffre, who alleged that she had been sexually assaulted by him when she was a teen-ager. (He has denied the charges.) Andrew is reportedly “bewildered” that King Charles has not yet shared any of his inheritance from the Queen—primogeniture is a bummer—and appalled by the possibility that he may have to move out of Royal Lodge, the thirty-room country house where he has lived, with his mother’s forbearance, for nearly two decades. Andrew is only sixty-three, which means that the British monarch, whether that be Charles or William after him, will likely be managing the Andrew problem for decades to come.



"Charles I in Three Positions," by Van Dyck, hangs at Windsor Castle, where King Charles III spent much of his youth. Art work by Anthony Van Dyck / Courtesy Royal Collection Trust / © His Majesty King Charles III 2023

Then, there is Prince Harry, Duke of Sussex—that other troublesome Younger Brother. Harry’s de-facto abdication from the Royal Family for a royalties-underwritten life in California with his American wife, Meghan, Duchess of Sussex, has caused the King both private pain and institutional agita. “Spare,” Harry’s memoir, is too literary to sound much like Harry actually wrote it, but a woeful lament attributed to Charles—“Please, boys, don’t make my final years a misery”—sounds altogether authentic. It was a stroke of either Machiavellian genius or clerical obliviousness for the Palace to schedule the coronation so that it coincides with the fourth birthday of

Prince Archie, Harry's firstborn, thereby providing the perfect excuse for one or both Sussexes to skip the ceremonials in favor of sun-dappled festivities in Montecito. It did not bode well when, in late March, Prince Harry made a brief surprise visit to the United Kingdom—in order to appear at the High Court in a case against Associated Newspapers, which owns the *Daily Mail*—and the King was said to be too “busy” to see him. In the end, Harry confirmed that he would attend the coronation, but without Meghan or their children.

When Charles I ascended to the throne, there remained the shadow cast by a charismatic, long-reigning female monarch, Queen Elizabeth I, who had died twenty-two years earlier; similarly, Charles III's mother has set an unmatchable example. It's easy to forget now that Queen Elizabeth II's popularity dipped substantially during periods of her reign. She was criticized in the nineteen-eighties and nineties, not least for her perceived responsibility for the failure of three of her four children's marriages. All that, though, had become ancient history by the time she died. Charles I may be the only monarch ever to have been canonized in the Church of England—he is known by some High Anglicans as Charles the Martyr—but Queen Elizabeth II ended her reign enjoying the secular version of sainthood: near-universal acclaim.

Charles has never had polling numbers that approached his mother's. He and Camilla were recently heckled by protesters while on an official visit to Colchester. Though there currently appears to be little appetite for overthrowing the monarchy, there are indications that, for younger Britons, the whole shebang is irrelevant. There are no glamorous teen-age or twentysomething royals for the TikTok generation to scroll through, and the publication of “Spare”—which notes that Charles didn't hug Harry when Diana died—didn't help the King's personal standing. According to [one recent poll](#), only a third of eighteen-to-twenty-four-year-old Britons want the monarchy to continue.

The new Prince and Princess of Wales, William and Kate, are popular, but they are now in their forties. Some people who know the King say that, despite the inevitable brevity of his own reign, he will not be heavy-handed in directing William. Paddy Harverson, the King's former communications secretary, says, “I would expect him very confidently to allow William to

define his own role, as indeed Charles himself was.” Charles has expressed satisfaction that William has taken up protection of the environment as a cause by launching the Earthshot Prize, to encourage sustainable technologies. Before the publication of “Spare,” Charles also praised Harry’s commitment to green causes, in Africa in particular. Given that Charles is an advocate for the controversial idea of population control—in “Harmony,” he writes that “perhaps the time has come . . . to think very carefully how large our families should be”—he has surely been pleased by Harry and Meghan’s publicly stated choice to limit their number of offspring to two.

Charles is more popular than he once was, in part because he was once so very unpopular—but also because the institution of the monarchy has a quasi-magical power. The percentage of people who thought that Charles would make a good king nearly doubled upon the death of Queen Elizabeth. Becoming king is transformational; being crowned king will likely be even more so. “He becomes essentially a new person,” Hugo Vickers, the author of “[Coronation: The Crowning of Elizabeth II](#),” says. “They go into Westminster Abbey as one person, in a sense, and come out another.”

All the same, Charles remains the familiar figure he has been for decades; wearing the crown will not alter his fundamental character. When, in the days after the Queen’s death, he took part in ceremonies establishing his kingship, he got into not one but two altercations with malfunctioning pens, and his irascible response the second time—“I can’t bear this bloody thing, what they do . . . every stinking time”—was recognizable to anyone who has spent time observing him. As his biographer Catherine Mayer puts it, “The world is against him—even *inanimate* objects are against him. That is absolutely central to his personality.” Although it’s impossible to imagine that King Charles will leave his heartfelt opinions at the door, it is similarly unimaginable that he would precipitate a constitutional crisis by refusing to grant royal assent to the government’s legislation, as his fictionalized stand-in did in “King Charles III,” Mike Bartlett’s celebrated blank-verse play, from 2014. This past October, the U.K. government let it be known that it would prefer the King not to attend [the cop27 climate conference](#), in Egypt, even though he had attended *cop26*, in Scotland, in 2021. Charles complied. But, a few days before the conference, he convened two hundred politicians and activists for a reception at Buckingham Palace—a regal act of climate-change pre-gaming. “He must find it very difficult to shut up,” Ian Skelly

says. “Being King doesn’t stop him caring. I think what we’ll see in the future is an expression of that care, but in a different way.”

The King’s coronation will be a more modest affair than that of his mother, in keeping with his stated desire for a “slimmed down” monarchy. But, as always with matters related to the monarchy, “slimmed down” is a relative term. Whereas more than eight thousand guests attended the late Queen’s coronation, a mere two thousand will be invited to Westminster Abbey this time, with peers of the realm reportedly obliged to draw lots for seats, and other dignitaries jostling for invitations. Prince William will have a ceremonial role, as will Prince George, the nine-year-old heir to the heir, who—being exactly the age that Charles was when he acknowledged the “awful truth” of his monarchical fate—will surely experience his own moment of reckoning.

Charles will subtly put his stamp on the coronation. The Palace has said that he will be anointed with animal-cruelty-free oil—it will contain no products from civet cats or sperm whales. The formulation, which will include essences of jasmine, orange blossom, and neroli, will incorporate oil made from olives grown in Jerusalem, not far from the burial place of Charles’s paternal grandmother, Princess Alice. Charles has commissioned a new anthem from Andrew Lloyd Webber, adapted from the Nature-personifying words of Psalm 98: “Let the rivers clap their hands; let the hills be joyful together before the Lord.” In a harmonious confluence, restoration work conducted in Westminster Abbey a decade ago will allow spectators and television viewers to see the Cosmati Pavement—a thirteenth-century mosaic floor, in front of the high altar, upon which part of the ceremony is performed. For the late Queen’s coronation, and for many generations before, the mosaic was covered with carpeting. The pavement, an intricate pattern of circles and squares, is understood by scholars to represent the interdependence of Heaven and earth. During the ceremony, the throne will be placed at the center of the pavement, symbolizing the relationship between the monarch and God. “It’s a representation of his role—he is bringing Heaven and earth together,” Azzam, of the Prince’s Foundation School of Traditional Arts, says. “He’s standing on the geometry that he has been teaching all his life, and he’s fulfilling his role as king.” In light of Charles’s mystical proclivities, he’s bound to find the symbolism meaningful. If he once regarded his future role as monarch as an unsought

fate, Charles III will surely be inspired by the confirmation that, even within the prosaic limits of a constitutional monarchy, there's a divinity that has shaped his end.

By the conclusion of the ceremony, Charles will have been equipped with glittering royal regalia: the Sovereign's Sceptre, which symbolizes the temporal power of the monarch; the Sovereign's Orb, which symbolizes that the monarch's power is derived from God; and St. Edward's Crown. The regalia are modelled on objects used since medieval times, but were in fact manufactured in 1661. They were commissioned by Charles II for his own spectacular coronation—the celebration of the monarchy's restoration after what became known retrospectively as the Interregnum. The medieval originals had been melted down in the first flush of republican victory following the execution of Charles I, when it was thought that they wouldn't be needed anymore.

After Charles III began studying art and came to appreciate the glories of the Royal Collection that had surrounded him as a child, he surely would have been struck by [the remarkable portrait of Charles II](#), his second eponym, painted by John Michael Wright in the sixteen-seventies. It shows the King seated on a throne, his feet in high-heeled shoes balanced on a cushion, and his shapely, spread legs adorned in white hose. He is dressed in the Order of the Garter costume: voluminous cloth-of-silver breeches and a shirt lavishly decorated with lace, on top of which he wears red Parliamentary robes edged with ermine. Charles II—who dispelled the austerity of the Puritans by revitalizing the arts, had more mistresses than anyone could keep track of, and granted a royal charter that helped set the transatlantic slave trade in motion—appears as the picture of monarchical authority, orb in one hand and scepter in the other. The portrait offers none of the suggestive ambivalence of “Charles I in Three Positions” which so captured the young Prince Charles's attention when he saw it on the wall at Windsor Castle. What the portrait does offer is an illustration of the monarchy's remarkable capacity for regeneration, for good or for ill—a capacity that King Charles III will have new occasion to ponder, now that his own head finally bears the weight of the crown. ♦

By Rebecca Mead

By Tina Brown

By Laurie Colwin

By Adam Gopnik

Majesty Dept.

- Singing a Legendary King of England (Not Charles)

Singing a Legendary King of England (Not Charles)

The stars of Aaron Sorkin's new "Camelot" comb the Cloisters for traces of King Arthur, who may or may not have existed.

By [Michael Schulman](#)



Say, hypothetically, that you're being crowned king of England this weekend. First of all, congrats! Second, if you're feeling anxious, that's understandable. Your predecessors are, by definition, all dead, but they loom large. One was so bad at the job that he got beheaded; others were so beloved that they've been mythologized for centuries. For example, King Arthur, who still gets high marks—what with the Round Table, the cool wizard friend, and the pulling swords from stones—despite the fact that he ruled a millennium and a half ago and probably didn't exist. How are you going to compete with *that*?

It doesn't help that a classic musical about Arthur—Lerner and Loewe's "Camelot"—is being revived, handsomely, at Lincoln Center Theatre, or that the guy playing him, Andrew Burnap, is thirty-two and looks like an Abercrombie & Fitch model. "It becomes very intimidating if you think

about it too much,” Burnap said the other day, of his character’s legend. “The idea of the boy king was my way in.” Burnap, wearing a blue beanie and looking bleary after a two-show day, was at the Cloisters—the Metropolitan Museum’s medieval outpost, way uptown—with two of his co-stars, Phillipa Soo (Guenevere) and Jordan Donica (Lancelot). On their way in, a security guard told Soo, who was recently in “*Into the Woods*,” “Huge fan of yours. I saw you as Cinderella.” Donica, ascending a stone spiral staircase, said, “I want a house like this.”

A curator, Shirin Fozi, was there to show them New York’s finest specimen of Arthuriana: a tapestry, from circa 1400, showing Arthur on his throne. Visitors, especially children, tend to scour the museum for Arthur, Fozi said, recalling a summer-camp group she once showed around. “They came bouncing up, and they were, like, ‘Does King Arthur live here?’ ” The tapestry, she explained, was likely made for someone in the circle of the king of France. It was part of a set, the Nine Heroes Tapestries, some portions of which are lost. The five remaining heroes, including Julius Caesar and King David, take up a whole room at the Cloisters and represent “some of the oldest tapestries in the world that survive on a monumental scale,” Fozi said.

Burnap leaned in to peer at Arthur—a more seasoned version than his own, with a staff and a long beard—and observed, “This one looks like he’s got a lot on his mind. Very furrowed brow.” In the musical, Arthur is still growing into his role. “All of us in this room probably have some degree of impostor syndrome,” Burnap said. “His is an all-time high, because he’s King of England.”

The actors had grown up with Disney’s “*The Sword in the Stone*” and “*Monty Python and the Holy Grail*,” but, as Fozi pointed out, Arthur has always been subject to speculation and interpretation. “Could there have been a king or a warlord at some point?” she asked. “Legends often have a root in something that did happen—and then it gets elaborated.” The “*Camelot*” revival has a new book by Aaron Sorkin, with less sorcery and a spikier Guenevere, making it a 2023 version of a 1960 musical, based on T. H. White’s 1958 book, “*The Once and Future King*,” itself a riff on Sir Thomas Malory’s “*Le Morte d’Arthur*,” from 1485, which compiled legends popularized by Geoffrey of Monmouth’s twelfth-century opus “*Historia*

Regum Britanniae.” The tapestry, a mere six centuries old, is closer to our time than to Arthur’s. But the idea that someone in power actually deserved to be there has enduring appeal. Jacqueline Kennedy knew this when, a week after her husband’s assassination, she told a reporter that he had loved the music in “Camelot,” thereby burnishing the legend of a lost golden age.

“One of the great lines in the show is ‘We have greatness in our grasp,’ ” Soo said. She had studied depictions of Guenevere. “Sometimes she’s super Christian, sometimes she’s barely in it at all. I felt like that was permission to make her my own.” Eying a maiden woven high on a balcony, she said, “We walked into this room, and I was, like, Cool, no women. Oh, *there* they are.”

“Well, we always try to make sure people notice the women—and she’s holding a cheetah on her lap!” Fozi said.

Donica asked, “What were these used for? Was it, like, ‘Hey, come look at my wall for the evening’? Like a movie?”

“For them, this was kind of the background,” Fozi said. “Imagine yourself sitting on a throne with this behind you.”

“Ah,” Donica said. “Power move.”

Fozi pointed out a display of ivory carvings depicting courtly tales, including one of Lancelot crossing a bridge under dangling swords. The actors contemplated the deathless fascination with English royalty. “It’s, like, the most ancient form of reality TV,” Donica said.

“In the first scene, Arthur says, ‘People are entertained by all things royal,’ ” Burnap added. Now that he’d been King of England for a few weeks, did he have advice for King Charles III? “Oh,” he said. “I think humility goes a long way.” ♦

By Ted Chiang

By Robyn Weintraub

By Isaac Chotiner

By Will Nediger

Poems

- “[Fishing in the Blood](#)”
- “[How to Read in the Dark](#)”

By [Donika Kelly](#).

Read by the author.

T Baby my mama third or fourth cousin.
T Baby got pretty skin and a mouth
like a old grave. T Baby living
on his cousins' land, been taking care
of my great grandma, his cousin Juel.
We standing on her front porch,
me and T, and I'm watching a ant drag
a mud dauber up the wall. Maybe I gotta tell you
we in Arkansas, that I'm twenty, that it's my
homeless summer, that I'm living
with my great grandma for a minute. Maybe
I gotta tell you T a man long grown but shiftless,
that he got the same sick my mama got—drink
and too much and all day—that sweet stink
coming off him where we standing
on the front porch. T say *if we wasn't cousins,*
we'd be married. He fishing in the blood
that bind us, the statement slurry
in the water. I say *would we* and cut my eyes
to the field next door where T live
with his wife and three kids.
I make a noise in my throat. I mean
I ain't ready for the grave.

By Ted Chiang

By Robyn Weintraub

By Isaac Chotiner

By Will Nediger

By [Alfred Corn](#)

Read by the author.

Times after midnight, the night mind rolling,
thrashing, scrounging for sleep, I'd think:
Reading. That should work. If only dilated
pupils didn't always go blind in the flash
when the lamp at arm's length snaps to attention.

Eyes adjusting, I'd stare at the motionless
pentagram paddles of the ceiling fan
and picture the circle they would make, whirling.
Books, though, glared, looking leaden, stale, fatigued.
Why not learn to read in the dark? Why not?

First with my fingers, detecting letters, words,
phrases—like braille, but at a stumbling pace.
Still, deliberation's helpful, don't I think,
when the text encountered feels sieved and strange?
In a matter of weeks, the situation changed:

opening a book sufficed, no fingertips required.
Content floated up from unlit pages directly
into image and thought. In starred darkness, truths
lit up, brighter, really, than well-meant teaching
or even hard knocks had prepared me for—

including transgressions that as a rule involve
some sort of penance. It dawned on me that *light*
reading was the habit that had misled, views
of a past perfect at first glance, but glossing over
injustices it didn't want to face.

Dark reading highlighted buried meanings,
inferences, silent torments, even if the authors
themselves hadn't guessed them. Anyone might
have foreseen the next step: writing in the dark!
It took practice, practice not always making perfect.

Yet so many things spun through transmutation,
I didn't care. One night, the ceiling fan transformed
into Leonardo's five-point spread-eagled nude,
arms and feet just touching the circumference
of his hoop and begging to be adopted as a logo.

There are other outcomes, too—among them, these
naked remarks. I know, I know, they're marred
by infractions, misdemeanors, delinquencies.
Which is why, under shelter of darkness, I,
betrayer, reach, grasp, detain; and turn them in.

By Janet Malcolm

By Robert A. Caro

By Patrick Radden Keefe

By Philip Gourevitch

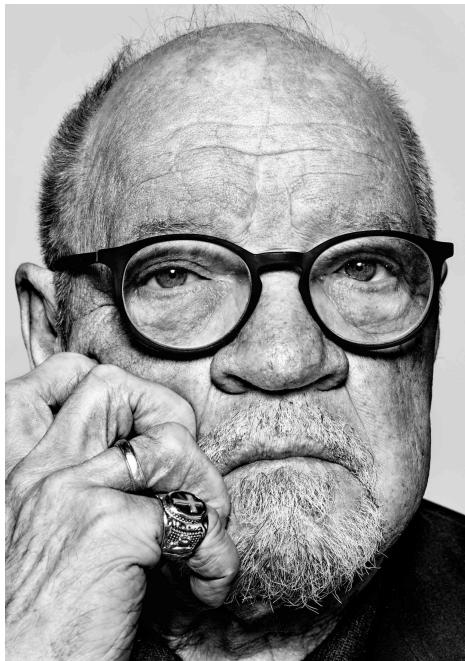
Profiles

- [Paul Schrader Wants to Make Another Movie](#)

Paul Schrader Wants to Make Another Movie

His new film, “Master Gardener,” completes a trilogy that began with “First Reformed.” But the writer-director is no longer content with it being his last.

By [Alex Abramovich](#)



Paul Schrader is seventy-six years old, compact, pugnacious. When production on his film “The Card Counter” was interrupted by the arrival of the pandemic, he took to Facebook and railed against the movie’s producers. “I would have shot through hellfire rain to complete the film,” he wrote. “I’m old and asthmatic, what better way to die than on the job?”

Last year, he came close to getting his wish. He was in New Orleans, working on his new movie, “Master Gardener.” First, the retina on his right eye detached. Without surgery, he risked damaging his vision permanently. Afraid he’d never get the movie off the ground if he stopped for an operation, he bought an eye patch instead. Then, in the middle of filming, he started gasping for breath. *COVID* tests came back negative, so he got a nebulizer and an oxygen tank. When production wrapped, he celebrated at

Teddy's Juke Joint, outside Baton Rouge. The next morning, he flew home to New York.

Schrader was living in a brown shingled house on the edge of a man-made lake in the Hudson Valley. Near the driveway was a greenhouse he'd built for his wife, the stage and screen actress Mary Beth Hurt. She and Schrader have two children, Molly and Sam, both in their thirties, and Molly, who was living in Queens, had come to stay with her mother, who has Alzheimer's, while Schrader was on location. When he got back from Louisiana that night, his breathing was shallow; the next day, they had to call 911. He had contracted walking pneumonia.

He spent a week in the hospital, watching old movies on cable and posting to Facebook. "*AMBIEN DREAMS*," he wrote, several days in:

Woke up in hospital room 3am this morn in a TOTAL panic. I was directing a sequence about an emergency room rescue. I was the patient. I could not get anyone at the hospital to help me or take me seriously. "He's gonna die!" I screamed for help—finally hospital workers came into my room. I begged for help. Gradually it became apparent that I was in a waking dream state and the staff calmed me down and got me back into bed. Adam Driver was there. "Fuck it," he said. "I'm outta here" and left. My chest was in pain. My blood pressure was 190/60. The staff got me on oxygen and I realized what had happened.

He was sent home later that day, a Friday. On Monday, he began editing his movie.

Schrader makes the sort of serious, character-driven films that always seem to be going out of fashion. He is perhaps best known for his screenplays for Martin Scorsese—"Taxi Driver" and "Raging Bull" among them—but he has made more than twenty films of his own, including "Mishima: A Life in Four Chapters," "Light Sleeper," and "Affliction." His greatest commercial success, "American Gigolo," from 1980, with a young Richard Gere in Armani, helped set the tone and the look of the decade that followed.

Many of these movies feature an archetype Schrader calls “God’s lonely man,” or “the man in the room.” Solitary, obsessive, in turmoil, this man writes in a journal and waits, trying not to boil over. Invariably, something terrible happens. Over the years, the character has been a cabbie, a sex worker, a drug dealer, a card sharp. In “First Reformed,” from 2017, Ethan Hawke played him as a tormented pastor. Schrader had gone through years when his movies were panned or ignored, but that film attracted a passionate audience, who responded not only to its moral seriousness and its anxiety over climate change—the pastor counsels a would-be environmental terrorist—but to its depiction of Schrader’s central theme, loneliness.

Then came *COVID-19*. When movie theatres reopened, Schrader was in vogue. In New York, his films enjoyed a series of revivals. “Blue Collar,” from 1978, screened at Film Forum in a run that was extended three times. “Light Sleeper,” “Mishima,” “Cat People,” “Hardcore,” and “American Gigolo” played at repertory theatres packed with people in their twenties. Perhaps, during lockdown, the idea of a man losing his mind in a room by himself had become more relatable.

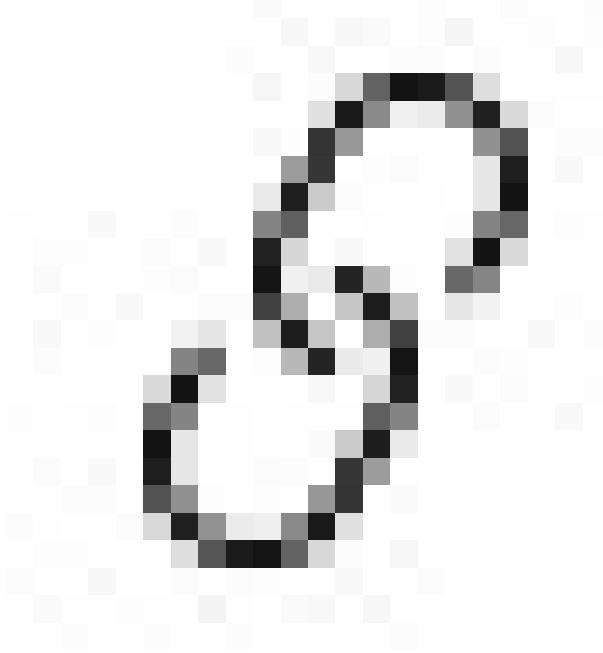
Schrader was ready to screen a rough cut of “Master Gardener”—the third film in a trilogy that began with “First Reformed”—two weeks after leaving the hospital. He assembled a sympathetic audience in a private screening room and took a seat in the last row, so that he could gauge everybody’s reactions. “This movie is going to piss people off,” he said. “There are a number of hot-button issues.”

Schrader’s gardener, Narvel, played by Joel Edgerton, is a former white supremacist—as we learn when he takes off his shirt, revealing a raft of horrifying tattoos. The movie pairs him, awkwardly, with a young Black woman, Maya, played by Quintessa Swindell. Maya is the niece of the gardener’s boss, played by Sigourney Weaver. Narvel becomes Maya’s mentor, and then her lover. The film builds to a violent climax, then ends on a gentle note of grace.



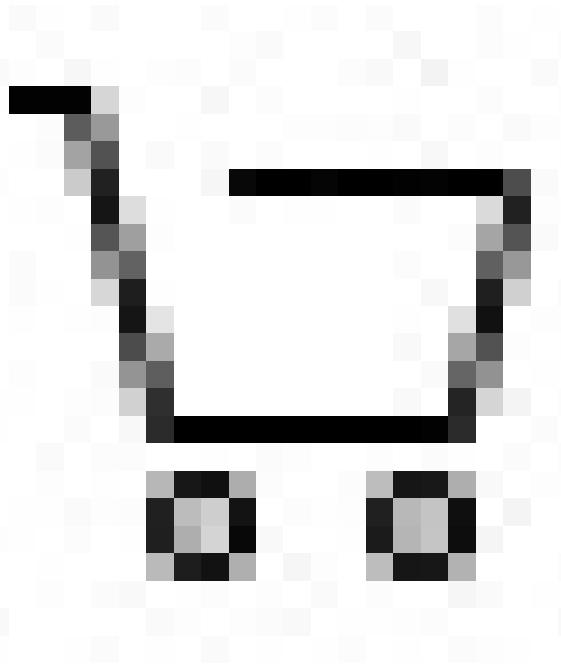
"I'm looking for a wedding gift that would be the equivalent of a chicken-piccata entrée with an open bar."
Cartoon by Barbara Smaller

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“I need a moment to process,” someone said when the lights came back on. She felt that the ending, in particular, had been too sentimental.

“How about the white-pride reveal?” Schrader asked. “Did that come as a surprise to you?”

“I have no context,” she said, “for what a white-pride reveal would be.”

He did his best to explain. The questions he fielded were smart; a few were quite helpful. But the consensus was that the film fell flat. When Schrader had screened his previous two movies, he knew right away that they worked. With this one, he wasn’t so sure. Andrew Wonder, a filmmaker and a former assistant of Schrader’s, said he felt as if he’d been watching several movies at once. As the audience filtered out, Schrader leaned over and asked him, “How much trouble am I in?”

Schrader is gruff. He is somewhat flamboyant—he likes fine things and first editions, wears a gold Rolex and several rings, and, on festive occasions, favors a jacket with Western trim and yellow piping—but he is not effusive. (Willem Dafoe, a frequent collaborator and fellow-Midwesterner, told me, “In some ways I feel very close to him, and in some ways I don’t know him at all.”) He is impish and ornery, a handful. Three times, when he’s had a film coming out, the distributors have asked him to stop posting on

Facebook, where he has a tendency to make impolitic comments, such as suggesting that he wanted to cast Kevin Spacey, an accused sexual predator, in a new project: “I believe there are crimes in life but no crimes in art,” Schrader wrote. (Spacey has denied the allegations against him.)

Schrader completed his first script, “Pipeliner,” in 1971, when he was twenty-five and living in Los Angeles. He described the broad strokes: “A kid whose life doesn’t work out in California goes home to Oil City, Michigan, which is a real place, to work on a pipeline, which I used to do, because he has been diagnosed with a terminal affliction. He thinks this has given him the license to behave as he chooses. And he screws up the life of the girl who loves him. He screws up the life of an old guy, a friend of the family. And he doesn’t die! He goes back to wallow in his own narcissistic demise and in fact just creates suffering for other people.”

It didn’t sell. His first marriage collapsed. He started living out of his car, a white Chevy Nova, and spent his time alone, in seedy places. “The porn theatres on Santa Monica Boulevard, in that stretch going west from La Cienega, were open for twenty-four hours,” he told me. “You could go up in the balcony and sleep if you ignored certain sights and smells around you.” He ended up in the emergency room with a bleeding ulcer and the realization that the only people he’d spoken with in a long while had been liquor-store clerks. “I was in the hospital when the metaphor came to me. A taxicab, like a yellow coffin floating around in the city.” He wrote two drafts of a screenplay in two weeks, drinking whiskey mixed in with Mylanta.

Schrader wrote every scene from the perspective of his taxi-driver, Travis Bickle, played by Robert De Niro. The idea was to encourage identification by starving the audience of other inputs; by the time we understand that the man in the room is psychotic, it’s too late for us. We’re trapped. “It’s a perverse trick that Schrader’s very, very good at,” the filmmaker Richard Linklater told me. “He’s the master, pulling you into someone’s life. Getting you to feel for them as a human being. And then they shoot up the place.” Linklater was a college dropout in Houston, working on oil rigs off the Gulf Coast, when he saw “Taxi Driver,” at a repertory theatre. The next day, he drove out to some land his family had in East Texas. “I remember just hiking through the woods. Beautiful nature, big thickets, and I was on the streets of Manhattan. I couldn’t get out of that movie,” he said. “I couldn’t get out of

that headspace for, it felt like, days. I don't know if I've ever been affected so much by a movie."

It was a common experience. "People forget," Bruce Springsteen, another Schrader fan, told me. "At that time, 'Taxi Driver' was 'Jaws.' Everyone in America went to see it. That feeling of someone speaking to us was unique. If you were a product of the fifties, and a deeply religious background, an Italian background—or even an Irish background, which is my neighborhood—it cut through so many existential issues you didn't even realize you were dealing with, but you were. The film was incredibly important. It was an amazing event in my friends' lives."

Schrader and Springsteen—who can quote the last lines of "Blue Collar" by heart—share certain themes: isolation, entrapment, escape. The men they write about could be brothers. A few years after "Taxi Driver," Schrader wrote a partially autobiographical script and asked Springsteen to play the lead. Springsteen declined, but he liked the title: "Born in the U.S.A." He nicked it, and, in return, wrote Schrader a song called "Light of Day." Schrader retitled his script accordingly and cast Michael J. Fox and Joan Jett. Like a lot of critics, he was disappointed with the result. "It just never worked," he said.

Schrader hit the road as soon as the "Taxi Driver" script was finished. He was in Winston-Salem when he got a letter from his brother, Leonard. Older than Paul by two years, Leonard had gone to the Iowa Writers' Workshop and then to Kyoto, to escape the draft. In Japan, Leonard's life fell apart, too. "He lost his marriage," Schrader says. "Lost his job. His health declined, and he took to watching Toei films, which were the real, hard-core, genre yakuza movies." Leonard described them to his brother, who saw commercial potential and pitched the idea for a script to an agent. He and Leonard wrote "The Yakuza" together. Like "Taxi Driver," it drew on John Ford's Western "The Searchers," telling the story of an American veteran who served in Japan and must return to rescue a friend's kidnapped daughter. The script got sixteen bidders at auction and sold for more than any studio had ever paid for a screenplay.

Schrader became a hot property. He wrote in the evenings—one screenplay after another, for Brian De Palma, Steven Spielberg, Joan Tewkesbury (one

of the only women to direct a Hollywood movie in the seventies)—and spent Sundays at a house that his friends, the producers Michael and Julia Phillips, were renting north of Malibu. Spielberg, De Palma, and Scorsese were all regulars there. Joan Didion and John Gregory Dunne lived up the hill and could see the house from their terrace. Didion said she could imagine all of Los Angeles being powered by the ambition she saw there. “We were all teeth and elbows,” Schrader says. “We were all fighting for every inch of territory we could.”

As a kid, in Grand Rapids, Michigan, Schrader was always brawling. “You would have all this ad-hoc football you’d play,” he says. “I remember going down, hitting people as hard as I could, and getting an asthma attack. I would lay on the ground, wheezing until I could get my breath back—and then going back and *bam*. I guess that’s just temperament.” He barrelled through Hollywood, too, adopting a wild-man persona, playing with guns, and practicing a discipline he called “fucking up,” as in up the food chain. “If you’re going to get anything done in this business, you’ve got to start fucking up,” he explains. “Don’t talk to anybody unless they can do something for you. Don’t waste your time on losers. That kind of thing. Obviously, it creates a bad impression. But there’s hardly anybody who’s been a success in this kind of atmosphere who doesn’t believe that.”

For some, Schrader’s persona was part of his appeal. I asked Scorsese how much of it was a bluff. “‘Bluffing’ implies inauthenticity,” he said. “For us, the construction of personae was a kind of by-product of the fact that we were filmmakers. In other words, it was always in the service of getting our films made.” He added, “Paul had his troubles, and he led a complicated life. So did I. We both went to extremes—just extremes of a different nature. All I know is he was the only one I could talk to about matters of the spirit, matters of existence, of faith. I think we shared that.”

Schrader’s mother, Joan Fisher, was raised on the family farm in Muskegon, attending Christian Reformed services. She met Charles Schrader at Herpolsheimer’s, a department store, where they both worked as clerks, and converted him to Calvinism. Charles took to it with a fervor, though his dreams of becoming a seminarian were derailed by the Great Depression. He became an executive at an oil company instead, running pipelines from Canada to Ohio, but in the basement of their house there was always a room

dedicated to his theological library. Paul and Leonard did their homework there, seated at desks that faced each other. Charles hoped they would grow up to be ministers. When Paul was eight, he copied the Book of Genesis out, line by line, on a yellow legal pad, filling forty-two pages and getting as far as Chapter 17—because, he says, he wanted to “own” the words.

Belonging to the Christian Reformed Church meant professing belief in the total depravity of humankind, through original sin, and in the impossibility of being good apart from God’s grace; it was the height of vanity to think that one’s actions could lead to salvation. Schrader and his first wife, Jeannine Oppewall—who also grew up in the church and met Schrader at Calvin College, in Grand Rapids—have identical, not quite canonical versions of Isaiah 64:6 stuck in their minds: “My best works are like filthy rags in the sight of the Lord.” Although man had free will, it was impossible for him to choose or work toward salvation, because God had already selected the saved.

Schrader found this troubling, because it seemed to leave no room for personal determination: how do you have free will, he wondered, when, in fact, you don’t? There seemed to be no escape from God’s sight and judgment, from his own guilt and shame. Max Weber wrote that the doctrine produced a “feeling of unprecedented inner loneliness,” and that work, though it would never be sufficient, was the only available consolation for its adherents. Growing up, Schrader went door to door selling marigolds, petunias, and tulip bulbs his uncles grew on the family farm. He carried crates of soda-pop bottles, and unloaded freight cars, hauling hundred-pound sacks of potatoes. He worked in a furniture factory—the same one that he later filmed in his movie “*Hardcore*. ” But none of the work brought him closer to God.

When the time came for him to make a public profession of faith, at sixteen, he told the minister that he couldn’t. The minister spoke to Schrader’s father. It was decided that, on Friday nights, instead of going out with friends, Schrader would sit with a church elder discussing religious concerns. After two weeks of this, he relented and agreed to make his profession. “I remember standing there in front of the congregation, thinking, I don’t believe a word of this,” he says.

If Schrader's own life were a movie, the next scene would show his escape, into the world of the movies themselves. But the Christian Reformed Church grouped moving pictures in with other forbidden "worldly amusements," such as card playing, dancing, and pop music. Schrader knew about rock and roll; his mother had caught him listening to Pat Boone in the basement and had smashed the radio against a wall. The movies were harder to get to. One afternoon, he took a bus downtown, snuck into the old Majestic Theatre, and watched one: "The Absent-Minded Professor," about the invention of something called flubber. "What is this all about?" Schrader recalls thinking. "Why all the drama?" Later he would dine out on the story. His friends and competitors in Hollywood grew up obsessively watching and making movies, but he hadn't, and when he had finally seen one he was unimpressed.

That changed when Schrader arrived at Calvin College, on the other side of Grand Rapids. A neighborhood movie theatre started showing films by Ingmar Bergman, and he was hooked: Bergman seemed to be asking the same theological questions that Schrader had been wrestling with. He began to write about movies, joining the editorial staff of *The Chimes*, Calvin's student-run paper. He started a film club, renting 16-mm. prints from Janus Films and arranging post-screening panel discussions with professors and pastors. He screened Robert Bresson's "Diary of a Country Priest" and Carl Dreyer's "Ordet," and caused a minor scandal with a showing of Luis Buñuel's "Viridiana."

Schrader likes to say that he got out of Grand Rapids "the same way a bullet gets out of a gun." The actual path was more circuitous. He spent the summer of 1967 in New York, taking film classes at Columbia. One evening, at a bar in Morningside Heights, he was reading Pauline Kael's first book, "I Lost It at the Movies," and he struck up a conversation with another patron, Paul Warshow, whose father was the late critic Robert Warshow. Warshow knew Kael; he brought Schrader to her apartment the next day. "Sitting around an oak table, beneath a spider-patterned Tiffany lamp, we ate and drank and argued," Schrader later recalled. He slept on the sofa. In the morning, Kael said, "You don't want to be a minister. You want to be a film critic. We are going to keep in touch." For years afterward, Schrader sent her everything he wrote. She offered to help him get into film school, and he started at U.C.L.A. in the fall of 1968.

After Oppewall got her graduate degree, at Bryn Mawr, she joined him in California. She told me that she and Schrader “used each other to escape the gravitational pull of the Christian Reformed Church.” They married and settled in Hollywood, in a three-bedroom bungalow on Sycamore Avenue. The back yard was dominated by a half-dead grapefruit tree whose fruit was so sour it was inedible. “We were kids,” Oppewall told me, “and had no idea how to take care of a yard, and no interest in it.” Schrader made a student film, now lost, about a Maoist cell that takes over the radio station at U.C.L.A. With Kael’s help, he got a job as a film critic at the Los Angeles *Free Press*, where he wrote about “Belle de Jour,” “Midnight Cowboy,” and “The Wild Bunch.” He met Hitchcock, Renoir, and Peckinpah. He was fired for panning “Easy Rider”—not a popular take with the alt-weekly’s staff—and then hired to edit *Cinema*, a vanity publication that became serious under his watch. He wrote a book, “Transcendental Style in Film,” that is still read by film students.



A young Schrader standing in his father's shadow in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Courtesy Paul Schrader

One day, Schrader went to visit Charles and Ray Eames at their famous design studio in Venice, hoping to interview them for *Film Quarterly*. Oppewall, who had been teaching in Watts, came along and ended up quitting her job to work for the Eameses. She later became a production designer, collaborating with Spielberg and Curtis Hanson and earning four Academy Award nominations. (Schrader has one, for writing “First

Reformed.”) The encounter changed his life, too. “Eames was my first insight into the poetry of images,” he told me one afternoon at the lake house. Schrader’s dogs, Harley and Tick, were darting in and out of the room. Hurt wandered in to poke around in the fridge. He put a mug down on the kitchen table.

“Coffee cup,” he said. “Two words, three syllables. That is a verbal code for many things, all of which are coffee cups.” Schrader pointed at the mug: “This is not a ‘coffee cup,’ except in verbal code. It is what it is: an object, an image. It’s an idea.” He picked the mug up and held it away from himself at an angle. “That’s another idea. Move the image, the object, and you have another idea. Shift your perspective: another idea. As you move or the light moves, the geometry changes. This was something I’d never come across when I was growing up.”

Schrader has been in and out of psychoanalysis; he views filmmaking as a form of therapy. “*Taxi Driver*” is a case in point. “I realized, if I wrote that guy, I wouldn’t have to be him,” he says. Schrader is not the man in the room. (“He’s me without brains,” he told Kael, about Bickle.) But, in weird, unpredictable ways, there is blurring and bleed-through between them.

“Let me tell you a story,” Ethan Hawke said. “I can’t read without my glasses. I really can’t see at all. And we’re doing this scene—it’s outside, there’s a crowd. My character’s reading Scripture, and he’s got a Bible. So, instead of memorizing the lines, I had printed them out in a bigger font and stuck them inside of the Bible. Just as we’re about to start shooting, Paul runs up to me. He takes the Bible away and puts another one in my hand. I open it up: ‘Merry Christmas—From Mom & Dad, Grand Rapids, 1959.’ Of course, the rest of it’s too small to read. But if you ask me, How personal do I think these films are? That’s how personal.”

As the years passed, Schrader tried to envision happier endings for the man in the room. Time and again, he lifted the last scene of “*Pickpocket*,” Bresson’s 1959 movie about a young man who has never felt human connection. The character ends up behind bars. When Jeanne, a woman who loves him, visits the prison, he cracks and allows her to reach him. Physically, he’s imprisoned, but spiritually and emotionally he’s been set

free. “Oh, Jeanne,” he says. “What a strange path I had to take to come to you.”

“American Gigolo,” “Light Sleeper,” and “The Card Counter” end on the exact same note. (“Cat People,” Schrader’s stylish, slightly unhinged remake of Jacques Tourneur’s nineteen-forties horror movie, also recycles the ending, albeit with a zoological twist.) These films about men on the margins, trying to find a way back in, are like a puzzle that Schrader can’t quite give up on or solve. He says that the problem he’s addressing in his most recent films is “despair and acceptance.” But, with “Master Gardener,” Schrader wanted to move the man in the room to the other side of the bars—to free him once and for all. He recut and rescreened the movie several times. Every edit improved on the first, but the film was still missing something. What it was missing, he decided, was a clear sense of Maya’s inner life.

The female characters in Schrader’s films, Sigourney Weaver told me, “are the answer, somehow. They are able to convert the violence, the cost to the human soul, into something ecstatic and glorious.” For the same reason, these women are also at risk of becoming symbols. With Maya, Schrader thought the solution was to give her more of a voice. “I needed a scene that would show her anger and assertiveness,” he said. In the spring, he wrote one: a fight between Swindell and Edgerton. “If they bring it,” Schrader said of Swindell, who is nonbinary, “the movie will work.” In order to shoot the scene, he would need to raise money, get the actors back together, hire a crew. It took a month. In the meantime, he wrote another script, about a trauma nurse, called “Amber Light.”

Before the pandemic, Schrader had a standard routine when beginning a screenplay. He’d tell the germ of a story out loud; if the tale held a small group’s attention for ten minutes, he’d go home, write it down with more detail, and run through the process again. He’d get up to twenty minutes, then forty-five. If the story still kept people interested, he’d set it all down on a legal pad, devoting a handful of words and a time stamp to every scene he envisioned. These final outlines are dense, uniform—almost without exception, they fit onto one page—and visually striking, like mathematical proofs. “Paul’s writing is all about concision,” Scorsese told me. “Everything counts, there’s not a word out of place, and all the parts work

together like a Swiss watch.” Scorsese cited that precision as the reason he and Schrader eventually stopped collaborating—he had “evolved into a different kind of storytelling,” he said, making movies that were “more like frescoes that keep widening, encompassing, and gathering more and more.”

Schrader’s papers, which are held at the Harry Ransom Center, at the University of Texas at Austin, contain ideas and outlines for dozens of movies that never got made, including other Scorsese projects—most notably, there is a full script for “Gershwin,” a life of the composer, written with De Niro in mind. In 1998, De Niro approached Schrader with another idea. “Dear Marty,” Schrader wrote to Scorsese afterward, “I’ve had a day to ponder that peculiar lunch yesterday with Bob. It seems he actually is talking about something like ‘Travis Bickle 25 years later,’ which we both agree is a terrible idea.” A week later, he reconsidered: “After deciding not to think about De Niro’s *Taxi Driver* suggestion, an idea unexpectedly popped into my head: Theodore Kaczynski.”

The ideas still come, at all hours. During the time that it took him to make “Master Gardener,” Schrader pitched two television series—one set in Biblical times and the other set, atypically, in the future. (Schrader has never made a sci-fi film, though he did write the first full draft of “Close Encounters of the Third Kind,” for Spielberg, who had envisioned a Watergate movie with aliens and hated the screenplay.) The trauma-nurse script was another departure. For the first time, he had imagined the man in the room as a woman.

On a drizzly morning in June, two trucks, a trailer, and a fifteen-person passenger van pulled into the parking lot of the Jacob Burns Film Center, in Pleasantville, about half an hour south of the lake house. The actors arrived an hour later, Edgerton clean-shaven and purposeful in khaki pants and a flat cap, Swindell in paint-spattered jeans and Chuck Taylors. Schrader, all in black, nibbled on a blueberry muffin, which he put down before taking the actors into a side room.

Alan Poul, a director and producer who worked on “Mishima” and “Light of Day,” describes Schrader as a man who gets what he needs and moves on—he is not a perfectionist, Poul said, “in the vein of obsessively trying things a million ways and shooting twenty takes sometimes just to exhaust the

actors.” Still, Schrader will go to considerable lengths to get a performance. He tells a story about working with James Coburn and Nick Nolte on “Affliction,” which he adapted, in 1997, from a novel by Russell Banks. Coburn plays a dominating, alcoholic father, Nolte his son. Schrader knew that Coburn had a tendency to coast on his voice. “Nick will get very intense on you,” he warned him. “He may bust you. And, if he does, I won’t defend you.” “I get it,” Coburn said. “You mean like real acting? No one asks. But I can do that.” Then shooting began and, sure enough, Coburn started leaning on his voice. Schrader invited him to his hotel room and had him read all his lines in falsetto. “He was a man’s man,” Schrader told me. “A baritone. And if he’s hiding behind his voice, and I take it away, he’s got to find some new place to hide. And that’s going to be inside his character.” Echoes of the falsetto readings made it into the film; Coburn won his first Oscar.

Swindell told me that they and Schrader talked for hours about the script, going over it line by line and discussing the meaning of redemption and whether people change. At Jacob Burns, they had time to ease into the scene. Schrader was filming in front of a green screen, which meant that he had to shoot several takes, from several angles. Swindell shouted. They whacked a glass of water to the floor. They stormed off, again and again. Some of the readings were intense, others more fragile. Schrader hadn’t meant to wear them down by shooting excessively, but the effect was the same, and it worked. Swindell brought it, he said.

There was time for an additional shot, a wordless scene that conveyed a bit more of Maya. To create the effect Schrader wanted, a team of electricians put a blind up on two lighting stands, then attached a five-thousand-watt tungsten bulb to a dolly’s pneumatic boom arm, which moved up and down: car headlights coming through a window, via movie magic. Swindell sat, silently, while shadows passed across their face and shoulders. The scene re-created a famous shot from “American Gigolo,” which had itself been a quote from one of Schrader’s favorite films, Bernardo Bertolucci’s “The Conformist.” “I needed something to give the idea of change,” he said. “So, I rolled up the light on Quintessa. I did that Bertolucci thing, and it became an idea. What is the idea? When you put it into words, Quintessa’s rethinking the relationship. They’re wondering, ‘What am I going to do?’ But that pales beside the image of it.”

Schrader sat down with the new footage early last summer. He was pleased, but there was still work to be done—C.G.I. shots to be inserted, colors to correct, sounds to mix. Devonté Hynes, who performs as Blood Orange, was writing a score, and Schrader had found a ballad, by the Kentucky songwriter S. G. Goodman, that he wanted to run over the closing credits. “I never want to leave this world,” the song begins, “without saying I love you.”

He spent a week in a midtown studio working with Hynes, playing Words with Friends on his phone during the lulls. Schrader has multiple games going, with multiple novelists. (I asked him how he does. “I win,” he said. George Pelecanos told me that Schrader’s lifetime record against him is 382–312.) By the end of July, “Master Gardener” was complete. The Venice International Film Festival asked to host the première, out of competition. The organizers also wanted to give Schrader a lifetime-achievement award. In the past year, festivals in Sarajevo, Kerala, Transylvania, and Victoria, British Columbia, have all reached out to him, but Venice, the oldest film festival in the world, was different.

The recognition would have seemed improbable at various points in his career. He’d endured his share of dry spells, long periods when the phone didn’t ring. Quentin Tarantino was at Sundance in 1992, with “Reservoir Dogs,” which became the talk of the festival, when “Light Sleeper” had its première. He was struck by how little attention the movie got. “I liked it so much,” he says. “But I remember feeling sorry for Paul a little bit, because I felt that the critical community was taking him for granted. He had been around a long time. And then he came out with this really interesting movie. And no one cared.”

Schrader got *Covid* in August and nearly had to bow out of Venice, but he was determined to go. When he arrived in the city, he looked around and saw ghosts everywhere: critics, agents, directors he had come up with, now gone. Hurt was back at the lake house with a caretaker and Molly. But there he was, flanked by his stars on the red carpet. Scorsese recorded a tribute for the ceremony, and when it was Schrader’s turn to give a short speech, he referenced the song he had used at the end of the movie. “I used to be an artist who never wanted to leave this world without saying ‘Fuck you,’ ” he said. “And now I’m an artist who never wants to leave this world without

saying ‘I love you.’ ” He brought the award home in his checked luggage and put it on his bookshelf.

Schrader was having trouble breathing again. The next day his primary-care doctor told him to go to the hospital. The day after that, his pulmonologist said the same thing. Schrader packed a bag. After lunch and Martinis at his go-to spot, an Asian bistro in a nearby mall, his assistant drove him to the hospital, where he spent the next thirteen days.

He was discharged in time for the North American première of “Master Gardener,” at the New York Film Festival, in early fall. It played to a sold-out house at Lincoln Center; there was knowing laughter when the film opened on yet another man in a room writing in yet another journal. But the occasion was bittersweet: the next day, on the way to a packed Q. & A. at the Walter Reade Theatre, Schrader told me that the time had come to place Mary Beth in memory care. Molly had first noticed something amiss with her mother in 2014. At Christmas that year, Schrader turned to Molly’s then husband and said, “She’s different, isn’t she?” He said she was. “And I knew it,” Schrader said. “I knew it.”

Before he met Mary Beth, in the early eighties, Schrader had wrecked his life completely—“self-immolated,” he says. His taste for alcohol dates back to Grand Rapids: “I found that there were all these little people who lived in the typewriter. But you had to offer them something before they came out. You’d offer them a little alcohol and caffeine and tobacco, and they’d come out and play.” On the set of “Blue Collar,” he had been introduced to cocaine. One night, a producer came into the office and said, “Here, this will help you work longer.” At first, it took Schrader a week to go through a quarter of a gram; by 1981, he was using five grams a week. That year, while filming “Cat People,” he had an affair with the lead, Nastassja Kinski, ruining a relationship with a woman he’d dated for several years and planned to marry. He went home and asked his fiancée for forgiveness. She granted it. Then the phone rang. “It was Nastassja in Paris. She said, ‘I miss you, why don’t you come over?’ I went straight to the airport.”

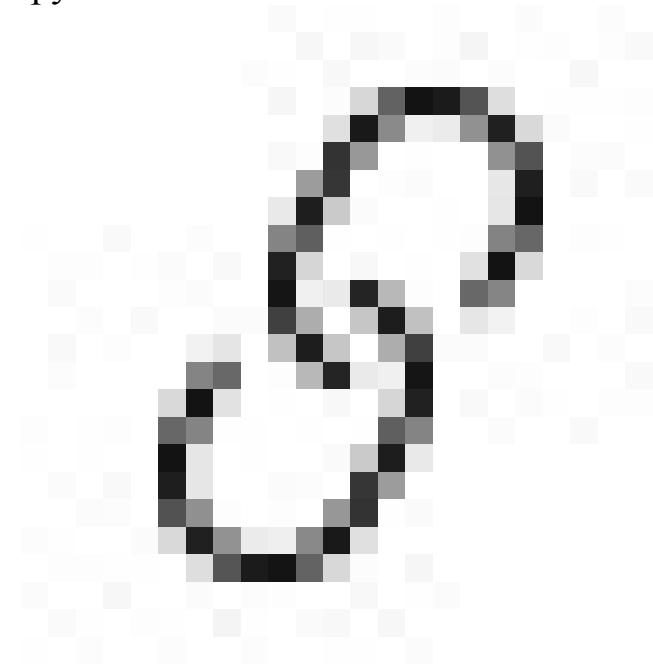
The affair fizzled, inevitably. He left L.A. for New York, thinking he could rid himself of his drug friends. “I came here and guess what? I made new

drug friends.” A publicist introduced him to Hurt. “Mary Beth saved me,” he says.



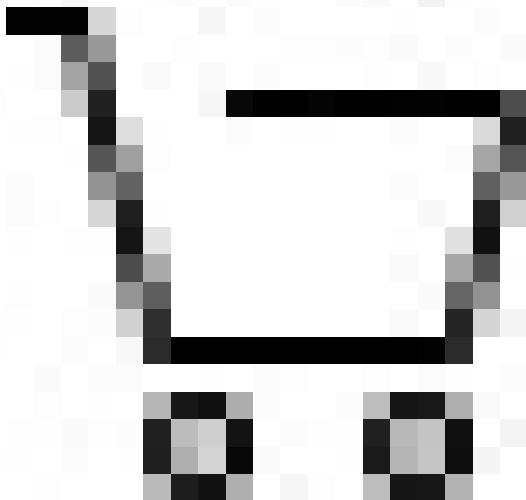
“Run! They’re going to force us all to read ‘Beowulf’!”
Cartoon by Brendan Loper

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She was wry, quick-witted, a little bit dark. Glenn Close, who started her career as Hurt's understudy and became a lifelong friend, told me Hurt had always liked bad boys. "When she married Paul, who was a consummate bad boy," Close said, "I thought, My God, this is not going to work." But, for four decades, Hurt rolled with the punches. Her attitude was the opposite of his Calvinist fatalism. "One thing or another will happen," she would say. "Then one thing or another will happen." They lived in Rome, Venice, Napa, Marrakech, Bucharest. They bought a spacious apartment on Riverside Drive and threw parties that were attended by movie friends, artists, writers, and musicians. They went to the theatre and the symphony and dined at Elaine's, Raoul's, Da Silvano.

Gradually, that world fell away. In 2019, around Christmastime, Schrader finally moved her into a home. But in the early days of the pandemic the home became a prison, and he brought her back to the lake house.

From the outside, it had always seemed evident that Hurt took care of Schrader. Now that the roles were reversed, friends were moved not just by the depths of his grief but by the degree of his attentiveness. He built her the greenhouse because she loved gardening. Their son, Sam, calls it her memory palace. "My dad wanted to give her a thing to look forward to and do in the winter that was warm inside and engaging," he says. "That turned

into a thing with my mom's aides where she can supervise the gardening. They can go in there together and reminisce: 'Oh, tomatoes! I love tomatoes. When I was a kid, we would plant tomatoes.' ”

Schrader feels that when he tries to write in a direct way about his family—his parents, his brother—he fails. He needs to come at his life slant. But as I sat through multiple screenings of “Master Gardener,” which Hurt has seen but has no memory of seeing, I kept thinking about her greenhouse.

In November, Schrader decided that the screenplay about the trauma nurse, which he had thought would be his next project, wasn’t his story to tell. He decided to sell it. “The film-entertainment industry now has many female writers and directors,” he said. “I am no more comfortable playing in Jane Campion’s yard than I would be in Spike Lee’s.” Elisabeth Moss plans to direct and star in the movie.

For his next project, Schrader thought of Russell Banks’s most recent novel, “Foregone.” The book is about a documentary filmmaker in Montreal—Leonard Fife, “the Ken Burns of the North”—who is dying, of cancer, and sits for a series of interviews. It had cinematic potential. In the book, we see the interviews and, in separate sections, the past Fife describes: the time he abandoned his first wife; seduced the wife of a friend; dodged the draft, fleeing to Canada. Half the film would be a monologue, perfect for an aging star. “Anybody from De Niro to Costner,” Schrader said. “Maybe even Al,” meaning Pacino.

Schrader and Banks had grown close during their work on “Affliction.” It was one of Schrader’s most personal projects: the portrait of an overbearing father, a submissive mother, and two sons, one more rebellious than the other. Every summer since then, Schrader had driven to Banks’s home, in the Adirondacks, to hike, drink (one Martini a night), and tell stories. But, like his character, Banks was struggling with cancer. Last summer was the first one he and Schrader missed. Now Schrader e-mailed him about “Foregone.”

The key inspirations for the novel, Banks said, were Tolstoy’s “The Death of Ivan Ilyich” and Beckett’s “Krapp’s Last Tape,” both of which Schrader read, along with Philip Roth’s “Everyman.” He rewatched Kurosawa’s

“*Ikiru*,” Bergman’s “*Wild Strawberries*,” John Huston’s “*The Dead*.” He told me, “One of the problems when you go down this rabbit hole is you meet up with all the long-ball hitters in the history of art. They’re all in the batting cage waiting. Because it’s the ultimate long-ball challenge, from Chaucer to Shakespeare to Philip Roth, that of the dying man.”

Schrader sat down to read Banks’s novel, which he’d only glanced at before. Fife’s missteps were less serious than he’d realized. To set a movie in motion, Schrader needed crimes, not minor infractions. He e-mailed his friend a series of questions, but Banks, who had weeks, not months, to live, replied that only Schrader could answer them, drawing on his own life. With Christmas nearing, and with Mary Beth’s memory palace collapsing around them, Schrader was left with the difficult work of excavating his past and grafting it, somehow, onto Fife’s.

He thought about happy trips to see his uncles in Muskegon, their homes “full of light, full of people.” He recalled his mother, who had been joyous, and his father, forever scarred by the Depression, cautious to the point of paralysis. He thought about his brother. As a young man, Leonard had wanted to get on a motorbike and go on the road. Charles, their father, put his foot down, and Leonard yielded. Paul never did. At the age of sixteen, Paul went for a drive and came home at midnight, after drinking a beer. Charles was waiting in their darkened kitchen. “He started giving me this shit,” Schrader says. “I didn’t even think it through—I just hit him. Hit him hard as I could. He went down. He looked up at me and went back to bed. And I thought to myself, Well, you did it, didn’t you.”

Paul had pushed Leonard around, too. When they sold “*The Yakuza*,” Paul fought to get more recognition: “I said, ‘I want to have a career in this business. And I want the script to say written by Paul Schrader, from a story by Leonard Schrader and Paul Schrader.’” He got sole credit. “I did a bad thing,” he said. He did it again when they wrote “*Blue Collar*.” He shared the credit on “*Mishima*,” but during the making of the film he’d elbowed his brother aside. “I stole Japan,” he told me. “I stole Mishima from him.” They had a final falling out a few years later, over a family Christmas; Leonard, at the last minute, refused to attend. He sent Paul a box of presents instead. Paul returned it unopened. “That tears it,” he thought. Leonard died in 2006.

In the year that I spent talking to Schrader, most of his memories held up. A few didn't. One day, Schrader recalled that his mother had let him go to the movies, just once, to see "Spartacus." I pointed out that "Spartacus" was released a year before "The Absent-Minded Professor." Perhaps "Spartacus," which ends with a long line of crosses, made for a better story? "When you embellish an origin story," Schrader said, "there is a risk that you believe the embellishments. I have tried rigorously to separate what happened from what I say happened, but it's not always possible."

Russell Banks died on the first Sunday in January. By then, Schrader had started writing the screenplay. (He has since finished it and written another.) With each of his last few films, Schrader has said that he would be at peace if it were his last. "Now I'm going a step further," he told me. "I'm saying, I want there to be one more. I don't want an open-ended deal, just give me one more. Give me 'Foregone.' Give me 'Ivan Ilyich.' Give me the Huston 'Dead' film. Huston made that in a warehouse in Valencia. In a wheelchair. With oxygen." I told Schrader he wasn't there yet. "No," he said. Then he pointed to a tank in the corner of the room. "There's the oxygen."

A few weeks later, Schrader moved Hurt into memory care at a luxury assisted-living facility in Manhattan. In February, he took an apartment two floors above her. In March, Richard Gere signed on to play Fife. Forty-four years after they made "American Gigolo" together, it felt like the closing of a circle. Schrader would make at least one more movie, about a man whose past was also his own.

"You never get out," Springsteen told me. "You get out sort of. But what you forget is how much the past feels like home. No matter what it was like, you know? You're moved to move away from it. And then you're also obsessed. Artists are always trying to figure things out. They can't stop. Those are the people we're interested in." Schrader was one of those people. "Every artist has one story to tell," Springsteen said. "Over and over and over and over and over and over again. It varies, it changes, it shifts a little bit. If you're doing it correctly, it morphs every time you tell it. More information is revealed. At the same time, you're still rooted in where you came from. That's just us." ♦

By James Lasdun

By Nathan Heller

By Cal Newport

Shouts & Murmurs

- Bud Light in Damage-Control Mode

By [John Kenney](#).

After receiving backlash for its partnership with trans actor and social media star Dylan Mulvaney, Budweiser has released a new patriotic ad featuring its signature Clydesdale horse mascot. . . . The ad shows the Clydesdale galloping past patriotic symbols, such as people raising an American flag and the Lincoln Memorial.

—*CBS News.*

A Zoom call.

WRITER: We open on a horse. Cut to, like, a farmer. Then a welder. Then a man on a horse. Maybe a jockey. We hear a voice-over. Reciting the Gettysburg Address.

ART DIRECTOR: I like that.

ACCOUNT EXEC: Does that make any sense, though?

STRATEGIST: Maybe let's back up. Just to recap. We need something that appeals to our base. Sends a clear message about who we are as a beer and as a brand. American. Masculine. Tough.

EXEC: While at the same time deeply feminine and open to new and exciting sexual ideas.

STRATEGIST: Exactly.

EXEC: While also using horses.

STRATEGIST: A win would be a spot that almost says something but doesn't.

WRITER: What about this? We open on a field. Midwest. One of those places they grow wheat or whatever. A lone farmer. He runs his hand over the tops of the wheat.

ART DIRECTOR: Yes. Yes. And maybe we notice—it's subtle—maybe we notice that his bare muscular chest is gleaming with sweat.

WRITER: Yes. That's very good. And we pull back to reveal another farmer. Also male. Also half nude and insanely fit. And he has a look that says, "Let's do this."

STRATEGIST: Wait. Do what?

ART DIRECTOR: Shoe a horse, perhaps. Throw lumps of hay. Maybe get it on. It doesn't matter. They hold hands.

EXEC: Are there horses?

WRITER: Two. Running. Slo-mo. We know they're running to go have sex.

STRATEGIST: But is it on brand?

WRITER: It is if the farmers' wives are also in the field. Young. Beautiful. Possibly pregnant. They share a look that suggests "Those husbands of ours."

ART DIRECTOR: Cut to a construction site. A pickup truck. Men load wood. Or bricks.

EXEC: A horse nearby.

WRITER: Maybe chill on the horse thing, Glen.

ART DIRECTOR: Or maybe it's a flag factory. American flags everywhere. The workers stop and look up at the flags waving in the breeze.

WRITER: And when we cut back all the men are in drag.

STRATEGIST: Wait. Why?

ART DIRECTOR: Why *not* is the question.

WRITER: Big muscles. But also a lovely ball gown and a tiara.

EXEC: O.K. I buy it. But what other images say red-state America like construction workers in drag?

WRITER: The Grand Canyon. Firefighters. The Lincoln Memorial.

ART DIRECTOR: Yes. But we use C.G.I. to make Lincoln wink.

STRATEGIST: Is that legal?

EXEC: Could he be holding a can of Bud Light?

WRITER: Farmers, fields, horses, someone doing something with horseshoes, rodeos, a kid on a horse, wheat, fields, cowboy hats . . . but all the while we hear John Mellencamp's "Little Pink Houses." But sung by the Whiffenpoofs.

ART DIRECTOR: Perfect. And everyone is trans. Not overtly.

STRATEGIST: Sorry. I worry we're straying a bit. Maybe let's focus on the script.

WRITER: "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!"

ART DIRECTOR: I love that. Sputnik. We could show Sputnik. Old footage. The moon landing. Pearl Harbor. Watergate. These are just words, I know. But still.

STRATEGIST: What does that have to do with us?

WRITER: Walls. Metaphorical walls. We're tearing them down. By building new ones. Listen. Just listen. A voice is heard, over the images. "America. Who are we? Where are we? How are we? We're good. How are you? Look. America is more than just beer. It's all of us. Together. But apart. The American way."

ART DIRECTOR: That's amazing.

strategist: Is it, though?

exec: Apparently, a pony isn't a baby horse, just a breed of small horses.

ART DIRECTOR: "America. You big place, you. Strong and bold. Gay and straight. Hungry for sex of all kinds. And, after, maybe you're thirsty. This story of America isn't just about beer. It's about you and me. And beer."

WRITER: Love.

STRATEGIST: Do we lose the sex stuff?

EXEC: I like it.

ART DIRECTOR: Fields. Farmers. Wheat. Monuments. Horses . . .

EXEC: Ponies . . .

ART DIRECTOR: Fishing. Men hugging. Men wrestling. Showering. Camping. Saluting. In uniform. Out of uniform. No uniform. We'll hear sweeping music. We'll say words. The words will have almost no meaning.

WRITER: I like this a lot.

STRATEGIST: We'll appeal to no one and everyone. Which is brave. Because it dares to say nothing.

EXEC: And that's the Budweiser brand. Purely American.

STRATEGIST: Owned by Belgians. Let's show the client. ♦

By The New Yorker

By James Lasdun

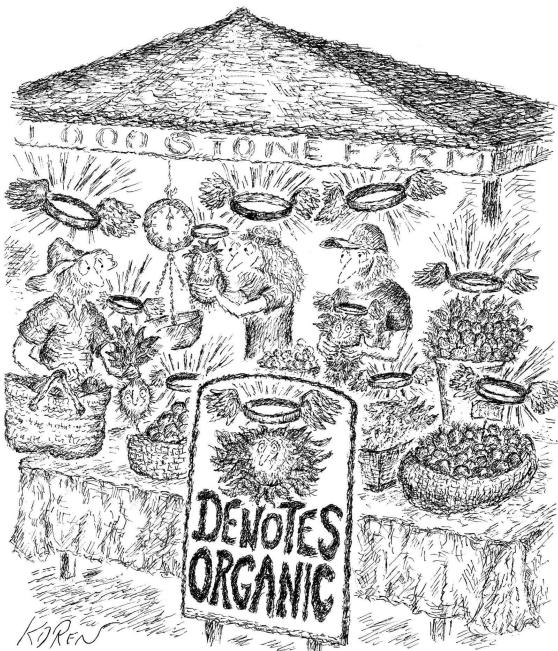
By Nathan Heller

By Cal Newport

Sketchbook

- [The Cream of the Crop](#)

By [Edward Koren](#)



By Janet Malcolm

By Robert A. Caro

By Patrick Radden Keefe

By Philip Gourevitch

Tables for Two

- [A Return to Extraordinary Lavishness, at Torrisi](#)

By [Hannah Goldfield](#)

Are we living in a Roaring Twenties redux, as was predicted when the pandemic began to wane? The other night, at the recently revived Torrisi, in Nolita's historic Puck Building, a woman wearing a flapper headband was a bit too on the nose for my taste, but the restaurant does suggest a return to a brand of extraordinary lavishness that dissipated as the virus spread. This might be the hottest table in town. Having failed to make a reservation earlier than 11 P.M. (Exhibit A: late-night dining is back), I arrived, on two afternoons, fifteen minutes before the doors opened, to find a line snaking down the block.

Twice, I succeeded in getting a pair of seats, first at the bar and then at a table in the expansive surrounding area, which is separated from the smaller, reservation-only "dining room" by an enormous open kitchen. Twice, I was sternly informed of my time limit: ninety minutes. From there, the hospitality improved, as well it should at a place whose wine list includes a glass for ninety-eight dollars. The sting was further soothed by a selection of dishes that were, with a few notable exceptions, superb. The food is Italian-ish, but the restaurant's theme is, more broadly, New York City, as perceived from Little Italy. This concept harkens back to Torrisi's original, much humbler iteration down the street (open from 2009 to 2014), the first place by Rich Torrisi and Mario Carbone, who went on to create, with Jeff Zalaznick, the empire that is Major Food Group.

Salt-cured ham, half American, half Italian, sliced in translucent sheets from enormous haunches displayed near the host stand, was served with a pyramid of crisp golden zeppole—dusted with black pepper and fried rosemary, interiors steaming and custardy—and pineapple mostarda. For the grapefruit-cocktail antipasto, the jewel-like citrus was tossed with Marcona almonds, grated aged goat cheese, and mint, and covered with opaque coins of fennel. It was almost as good as the escarole-and-endive salad, strewn with paper-thin persimmon, shaggy shavings of ricotta passita (aged and herbed), and toasted pine nuts.

With the clock ticking, on my first visit I ordered pastas—including raviolini with prawns and saffron, which brought to mind, happily, wonton soup—but not entrées, unless you count a late-arriving appetizer: the Sliced Boars Head on Rye, a clever pun that fell flat, given the rubbery texture of the flavorless

pig's-head terrine, wiped from my palate, if not my memory, by a tiny paper cup of lemon sorbet.

Aided by a publicist, I scored a prime-time table in the dining room, to see how the other half lives, on crushed-velvet banquettes. A group of three young men nearby (A.I. bros?) wore hoodies and the blasé expressions of people bored with their good fortune. Our lovely server, in an ivory tuxedo jacket and bow tie, cracked jokes like a Catskills comedienne. ("2020—a good year for wine, at least.")

Octopus Nha Trang, seared on a flattop and dressed with fish sauce, mint, and shallot, named after a thirty-year-old Vietnamese restaurant on Baxter Street, was a much more successful homage than Cavatelli with Jamaican Beef Ragu, which was intended to emulate a Caribbean patty but tasted overwhelmingly of harsh spice. The linguine in a pink Manhattan clam sauce was deliciously heavy on fresh parsley, and a special called Capellini Cantonese, featuring glossy angel hair tangled with garlic and jalapeño, was crowned with half of the most perfectly cooked lobster I've ever had. Duck Alla Mulberry better delivered on its pun, an expertly rendered breast, sliced and served with a mulberry reduction and melty leaves of butter-slicked Swiss chard.

My favorite course at Torrisi was the most inherently excessive: dessert. The staff pushes, rightly, the affogato, a coupe layered sexily with espresso granita, vanilla ice cream, mascarpone mousse, and hot fudge. But nothing beat the "frozen yogurt": half a grapefruit hollowed out and filled with absurdly creamy, tart soft-serve, swirled with grapefruit-Campari jam and a grassy, green olive oil, accompanied by a tiny tureen of extra jam—a marvel of both luxury and restraint. (*Dishes \$14-\$59.*) ♦

By Janet Malcolm

By Robert A. Caro

By Patrick Radden Keefe

By Philip Gourevitch

The Art World

- [Georgia O'Keeffe Before She Was Famous](#)

Georgia O'Keeffe Before She Was Famous

She's known for her paintings of skulls, flowers, and deserts. A new MOMA show suggests that her early work was stronger.

By [Jackson Arn](#)



You don't have to spend long at "Georgia O'Keeffe: To See Takes Time," MoMA's new show of the artist's works on paper, to see that she was wrong about her own talents. This is nothing unusual. Mark Twain was sure that his masterpiece was a soggy thing called "Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc." Susan Sontag thought that she was a great novelist whom the world had mistaken for an essayist. And O'Keeffe devoted the better part of her ninety-eight years to grand, sometimes grandiose oil paintings, despite the ample evidence that she was spectacular with charcoal and watercolor. A world-class sprinter chose to run marathons.

She must have had some sense of this. On the eve of her 1970 retrospective at the Whitney, she said, maybe not in jest, that she'd never topped her early drawings and watercolors. Elsewhere, she suggested that she'd turned to oils because that's what you did if you wanted attention. Fair enough, as far as

the young O'Keeffe was concerned—watercolors might have been too easy for macho avant-gardists to dismiss as dainty lady-painting—but what about decades later, when she'd become one of the most famous artists in America and could have done whatever she liked? Culture-makers are as vulnerable to genre snobbery as culture consumers, and so, much as Sontag seems to have convinced herself that novels mattered more than essays, O'Keeffe stuck with a medium that maintained her fame at the cost of muffling her gifts. Most of the pieces in this show had been completed by 1917, the year she turned thirty.

Compare any one of them with her most popular work: the endless pelvic bones, cow skulls, and yonic flowers. O'Keeffe may be the only famous painter whose greatest hits look better in reproduction; to find one in a museum and see what all the glossy posters were hiding is a bit of a bummer. Textures stumble over each other. Shading tries, fretfully, to look 3-D. Swooping curves agree with short brushstrokes about as well as an airplane wing agrees with drag. You can see why O'Keeffe has such a warm friendship with pop culture and such a lukewarm one with critics: she's known for her oils, and her oils reward glances, not scrutiny.

With O'Keeffe's works on paper, however, scrutiny is like oxygen. These are images so dense with detail that the poster treatment would ruin them. "No. 12 Special" (1916) is like a glossary of the footprints that charcoal can leave on paper: thin, slashing lines; plump, leisurely ones; smears pressed into the grain of the page with a rag or a fingertip. No matter how carefully you study these grace notes, you never forget the melodious whole: a bouquet of spirals dragging their tails behind them, refusing to be decoded. "I was alone and singularly free," O'Keeffe wrote of her early career. It shows. There's nothing overworked in images like these and, by the same token, nothing needy. At *MoMA*, this indifference creates a paradoxical intimacy: her works on paper don't stop to greet you, so you feel that you've known them forever.

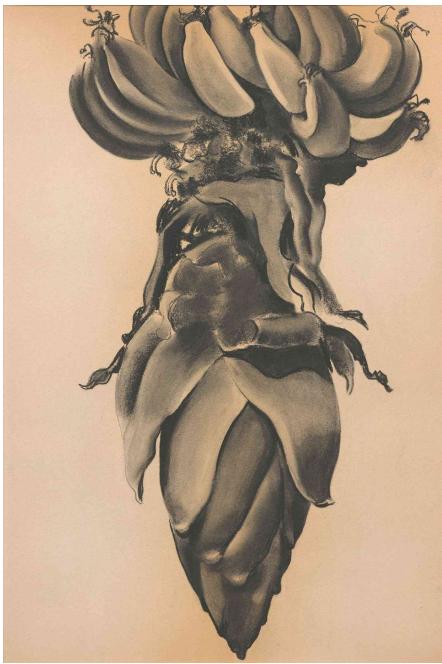
The exhibition is strangely, smartly paced. We're given morsels from O'Keeffe's middle and later years: pastel landscapes and seascapes from the twenties; a trio of magnificent charcoal drawings of banana blossoms (1934); some gentle, almost sisterly portraits of her friend Beauford Delaney (1943); and a late series of abstracted aerial views (1959) that might be the

best things she ever made. But the center of gravity is the twentysomething O'Keeffe whose legend was still a long way off. She made her first visit to New Mexico in 1917, but wouldn't live there year-round for another three decades. Her relationship with Alfred Stieglitz, the photographer who became her mentor, tormentor, No. 1 fan, and husband, was still a thing of letters and gallery openings.

So the legendary parts have been cut down or out. Leaving what? For starters, lots of travel, only a little of it to the Southwest. Read the wall text and you realize how incurable O'Keeffe's wanderlust was: she grew up on a farm in Wisconsin, finished high school in Virginia, enrolled at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1905, and joined the Art Students League of New York two years later. A prize-winning painting of a dead rabbit landed her a summer of free study in Lake George; later, there were camping trips in Appalachia and teaching stints in Texas and South Carolina. Canonical depictions of O'Keeffe, snug in her Abiquiu lair, throw a cozy shade over her art, suggesting that she painted her patio door over and over just because it was right there. The works on paper catch her in a more restless mood, fidgeting with the same lake or canyon as though she'll never see it again.



"Banana Flower," charcoal on paper (from 1934). Art work by Georgia O'Keeffe / © 2023 Georgia O'Keeffe Museum / ARS / Courtesy MOMA



"Banana Blossom," charcoal on paper (from 1934). Art work by Georgia O'Keeffe / © 2023 Georgia O'Keeffe Museum / ARS / Courtesy Hudson River Museum

The cozy-hermit thing is one O'Keeffe stereotype. Another is the notion that her art was technically unexciting. I'd say that this is basically true of her oil paintings, less true of her works on paper in general, and wrong of her watercolors, though with a few provisos. Watercolors can't be erased or endlessly painted over, and sometimes the only way of knowing exactly how the pigments will look is to wait and see. O'Keeffe is often called "intuitive," sometimes with a hint of condescension. She learned from some of the greatest instructors of the era—including Arthur Wesley Dow, the Johnny Appleseed of American modernism—but is supposed to have marched to her own stuttering drumbeat, relying more on instinct than on book learning.

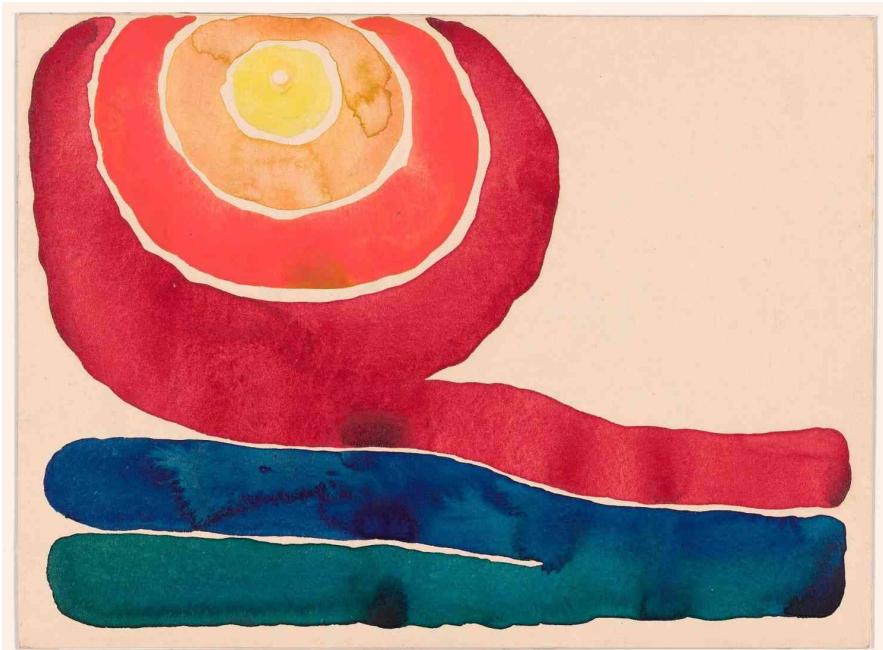
With watercolors, O'Keeffe was an intuitive, surprising artist, but only because she was a technically rigorous one first. Choosing the right paper narrowed the range of outcomes without avoiding risk altogether. In 1916, she opted for a tissue-thin Japanese kind that warps with the slightest moisture. In the resulting quartet of "Blue" watercolors, the paper looks like a desert, but the brushstrokes seem as fresh as rain; it's a controlled demolition of the blank page. In other works, O'Keeffe exploited the contrast between materials to smoldering effect. The first seven versions of "Evening Star" (all 1917) were painted with thick layers of orange and red on cheap pages, so that the shapes look hard and bright. (Imagine a snail

crossbred with a fireball.) In the eighth installment, she switches to a thin-fibred, pigment-swallowing paper, bringing things to a sudden, fuzzy end. The colors are dimmer, but somehow the mood is one of fulfillment.

O'Keeffe is great with skies, suns, mountains, and smoke. With people, she's more hit or miss. The Delaney portraits are nice, though head-only; the nude self-portraits are as stiff as first-year figure drawings. Tellingly, the three best portraits in the exhibition, watercolors of her friend Paul Strand, don't look like anyone (though, as the critic Thomas Micchelli helped me notice, they do look like someone's intestines, floating in a many-colored cloud). O'Keeffe is nobody's idea of a comedian, but the Strand trio could almost be a prank: the great black-and-white photographer gets thrown into a smoky rainbow dunk tank.

There's an important reason that O'Keeffe falters with portraits. Smooth, undulating abstraction is her favorite trick. With the human form, she has less leeway; an abstracted evening star is one thing, but an abstracted body can suggest caricature. O'Keeffe seems to have realized this early and mostly confined herself to nature, though her landscapes remained oddly indiscriminate. (Don't believe me? Ignore the labels and see if *you* can tell the difference between Appalachia, Texas, and the Rockies.) It's funny that she ended up the patron saint of New Mexico: there's nothing about the way she painted cow skulls—the hard colors, the crisp shapes, the curves—that wasn't already there in her earliest abstractions. She's a benevolent dictator of all she sees, bending it to her will, soaking it in her pigments, giving it a humming majesty. Wherever she ended up, she would have attracted a personality cult.

Her charcoal drawings (1959), inspired by window-seat sketches made during a three-month trip around the world, feel like the finale of something. As usual, we could be anywhere, and the opaque, slithery lines are no help. But for once there's nothing overpowering about O'Keeffe's abstraction. The shapes are spiky, even sinister. She stares down from the sky and they stare unblinkingly back. Although the drawings are larger than almost anything in the exhibition, they dart like sketches, so that you can sense her original anxiousness to get everything down on paper. If they strike me as culminating works, it's because they feel rash, rough, magnetic in their doubt as well as their confidence. In a word, alive.



"Evening Star, No. III," watercolor on paper (from 1917). Art work by Georgia O'Keeffe / © 2023 Georgia O'Keeffe Museum / ARS / Courtesy MoMA

This says as much about me as it does about the artist—but every generation of Americans has invented a different O'Keeffe, fiddling with her image to match the moment's predilections. In the fifties, she was hailed as the first color-field painter, godmother of Rothko and Newman; by the sixties, she'd been reimagined as a proto-hippie, dropping out of civilization to find herself in the desert; and in the seventies and eighties a new wave of feminists fell hard for her. Who's the O'Keeffe of the twenty-twenties? Or, to put the question the other way round, what *are* the twenty-twenties? Generalizing about your own era is a mug's game, but, if MoMA is any indication, ours is a jittery, in-between culture: allergic to the monumental, skeptical of "greatness" (scare quotes mandatory), and enthralled by aesthetic forms once thought minor.

But while the O'Keeffe of smallish works on paper seems a neat match for our present, she also points to one of its biggest conundrums: what happens when everyone accepts the majorness of minor art forms? It's all very well to argue that a TV show can be as transcendent as a film, or that essays are as worthy as novels, but when television and essays shoot to the center of the conversation perhaps they lose some of the messiness that made them delight in the first place. Some kinds of art are better off at the periphery. Part of me wishes that O'Keeffe had taken charcoal and watercolor more seriously, but another part suspects that seriousness is the last thing her work

needed. “A stack of it almost a foot high makes me feel downright reckless,” she wrote of the cheap paper she favored for watercolor. It’s easy to forget while savoring the pieces in this show, but O’Keeffe gave strong signs of not caring too much about them. To her, they were experiments, rehearsals for all the major art she’d make later on. That’s why they’re so good. ♦

By Ted Chiang

By Robyn Weintraub

By Isaac Chotiner

By Will Nediger

The Deep

- [The Shipwreck Hunters of Jamaica Bay](#)

The Shipwreck Hunters of Jamaica Bay

The city's unofficial waterfront czar hits the not so high seas (the final resting place of tugboats, houseboats, and one warship) for some salvage work.

By [Adam Iscoe](#)



New York City has had its share of maritime disasters. In 1904, a triple-decker steamship caught fire near East Ninetieth Street and shipwrecked on North Brother Island, off the Bronx. An oil tanker and a container ship collided under the Verrazzano Bridge in 1973; last summer, a firefighting boat smashed into a fishing vessel in the East River. More than five hundred shipwrecks lurk beneath the water's surface all around town: sailboats, houseboats, tugboats, a warship, and hundreds of abandoned yachts and Jet Skis. A Staten Island ferry exploded in 1871; its whereabouts are unknown. "There's still a bit of wildness to this realm, the water," Nate Grove, the Parks Department's unofficial waterfront czar, said the other day, aboard a thirty-six-foot sheriff's boat. He laughed. "I could wax philosophical about the unpredictability of our waterways." Grove, who wore an Arc'teryx softshell, corduroys, and a bureaucrat's smile, was overseeing a shipwreck

cleanup on Ruffle Bar, in Jamaica Bay, which is surrounded by four sewage-treatment plants, two airports, and acres of ecologically fragile salt marsh. The sun was bright, the water calm. Several minutes after leaving the marina, near Gerritsen Creek, the boat jolted to a halt. The captain, C. J. Pinto, shouted, “Fuck! What the freak was that?”

A length of thick buoy rope had wrapped itself around the propeller, choking one of the twin diesel engines. Grove shouted, “The adventure begins!”

On deck, a diver named Dan stripped down to his boxers, donned a dry suit and an oxygen tank, and descended to inspect the damage. He resurfaced and asked if anyone had a sharp blade. Dwayne Reith, a salvage expert, handed over a four-inch serrated knife. “It’s the biggest you’re allowed to carry,” he explained. His company, Custom Marine—slogan: “We Do Things Big, While Getting It Up!”—had been contracted to work some of the city’s shipwreck cleanups. “You have to have the right tool for the right job at all times,” Reith added. (Other tools: acetylene cutting torches, a hundred-ton Link-Belt construction crane, underwater hydraulic chainsaws, an excavator, three Vietnam-era Navy landing craft, and inflatable polyethylene bags, which are used to lift wrecks to the surface.)

Maritime disaster averted. Pinto started up the engines, and Grove said, “The wheels of government grind forward.” He continued his spiel: “There’s over five hundred twenty miles of shoreline in New York City. That’s more than the shorelines of Boston, Miami, San Francisco, and Los Angeles combined.” (“The watery sixth borough,” Grove calls it.) In the past decade, he’s hired contractors to haul off hundreds of dumpster loads of broken docks, stranded buoys, refrigerators, washing machines—and hundreds of wrecks, including a century-old wooden ketch with bronze portholes, which went down near City Island, and a sixty-eight-foot yacht stuck in the mud near Hawtree Basin, in Queens. “We haven’t uncovered any treasure chests or dead bodies,” Grove said. A diver named Richard explained the problem: “You save up to buy a boat, and you spend everything you have on the boat, and then—it sinks! People choose the easiest route, and that’s to abandon it.”

Around noon, the salvage crew approached two vessels marooned on Ruffle Bar. The beach was littered with orange traffic cones, blue plastic fifty-five-gallon drums, lobster buoys, and a remarkably intact birthday-party hat,

glitter and all. An osprey watched from a tree as two contractors used buckets of Splash Zone underwater epoxy to patch up the boats before their removal. Most of the first vessel, a houseboat, which had been on the island since Hurricane Sandy, in 2012, was chopped up with chainsaws and placed inside the second, a twenty-foot fibreglass-hulled skiff. “We call it a dumpster boat,” Reith said.

The team couldn’t complete its mission until high tide. As they waited, a baby seal surfaced, and two kayakers paddled past. Black smoke from a live-fire training exercise at J.F.K. drifted over their boat. The moon started to rise over the island. The men used the time to get ahead on work. (“Tomorrow, we’re doing City Island,” Reith reported. “And there’s effing foam out the yin-yang.”)

A motorboat approached. Grove shouted, “It’s Don! Don knows everything Jamaica Bay!” The man was Don Riepe, a conservationist with the American Littoral Society. He said that he was checking out a nest where a bald eagle had been spotted. “Now there’re ospreys there,” he said. “It would’ve been the first eagle nest in Jamaica Bay.”

Riepe’s boat left, and the salvage team continued their wait. Eventually, at high tide, the crew yanked the floating dumpster from the shore and towed it back to the marina. The abandoned hull was filled with Styrofoam, plywood, some truck tires and two-litre soda bottles, and the door to the houseboat. “At some point, that was someone’s dream,” Grove said. “And now it’s our pile of crap.” ♦

By Ted Chiang

By Robyn Weintraub

By Isaac Chotiner

By Will Nediger

The Theatre

- [The Big City Stars on Broadway](#)

The Big City Stars on Broadway

In “New York, New York,” directed by Susan Stroman, and “Good Night, Oscar,” starring Sean Hayes, the city is both the setting and a lead character.

By [Vinson Cunningham](#)



Critics don’t come to the theatre with empty brains and untroubled hearts, ready to take in a play and shun the outside world. No, we bring our hopes and stresses to our seats. The challenge is to put the show into jangling harmony with one’s own unspoken flow of feeling. That’s doubly true in New York City—which serves not only as the setting but also as a lead character in two new plays on Broadway. The other day, as I was on my way to midtown, I saw one guy noodling a version of “Sir Duke” on his violin while another sparked up a joint. How, in a town like this, could anyone arrive at the theatre as a pure, empty vessel of objective observation?

So please forgive me: when I showed up in a hurry, uncomfortably exact in my timing, to see “New York, New York”—a new musical at the St. James, directed and choreographed by Susan Stroman, with a book by David Thompson with Sharon Washington, a score by John Kander and Fred Ebb, and additional lyrics by Lin-Manuel Miranda—I was preoccupied with worry about the Knicks. They’d started out Game Three of their first-round

playoff series against the Cleveland Cavaliers in rare style and force, and at halftime they were up big. But then the Cavs came storming back, and, by the time I had to leave, the game was tied at fifty-nine points. There was an irony in this that I couldn't quite name: being worked up over the Knicks—who, at the moment, are putting on possibly the best and most dramatic show in New York—while settling in for a play about strivers in New York.

“New York, New York,” set in 1946, is about a loose group of largely undistracted young people who use the city as the staging ground for their hungrily sought aspirations. Jimmy (Colton Ryan), an itinerant piano player who can’t keep a gig, is a well-worn type: the Irish trickster with a black streak of sadness in his past. Both he and his older brother, Mikey, served in the war—Jimmy as a lowly secretarial staffer, and Mikey, also a singer, as a private first class. Mikey, always the model boy, never made it home, and Jimmy’s prior stint as Kid Wonder, his brother’s sidekick, is long over. Now he’s heartsick and taking it out on every irritated venue owner in town. When we meet him, he’s arguing with one of them about the merits of a prospective new singer, Francine (Anna Uzele), a Black woman from Philadelphia with stardom on her mind. She doesn’t get the job, and Jimmy gets fired trying to get it for her. But soon he invites her to his instrument-bedecked apartment and begins the process of wooing her.

Around this central story float several others. There’s Jesse (John Clay III), a Black veteran who wants to play the trumpet, and Mateo (Angel Sigala), a young Cuban immigrant who—against the wishes of his abusive, homophobic father—wants to follow his dream of playing the bongos. You get it: everybody has a struggle, and the only fix is music.

There’s a smooth, impressively polished competency to every aspect of the show. Stroman’s direction is dancerly and strong—the company members move in flowing tandem, using their bodies to echo the lively churn of the city. Beowulf Boritt’s scenic design is evocative, sometimes fantastic. A dense set of fire escapes, from which an entire neighborhood looks down on the street, emphasizes the watchfulness (verging on nosiness) of closely situated neighbors and the casual beauty of even the most ploddingly functional aspects of urban design. A scene that takes place in the sky, on treacherous beams of naked metal at a construction site, turns into a tap-dance number, one of the best I’ve seen in recent Broadway shows. The

songs are a mix of originals and classics from the big-band era—yes, the song “New York, New York” is sung, and, yes, it comes at a climactic moment—and the performers deliver them with charm and energy, even if none of the melodies or lyrics from the new numbers are especially memorable.

Theatregoers without much interest in story, or in how the seemingly indifferent city, hulking and unsentimental, is actually an intimate nudge, a goad to narrative, will find a lot to like about the show. But, its obvious excellence notwithstanding, “New York, New York” falters when it tries to match the common clichés about the city—that it’s a locus of focus and drive, a trampoline upward, toward a high, wild dream—with the less linear actualities of human behavior.

It’s strange: Jimmy and Francine are often talking, in one way or another, about Francine’s race, but the conversation almost never breaks the surface of a story whose only truly realized dimension is personal ambition. There are several oddly avoidant passages, such as a conversation between Jimmy and his harried booker:

JIMMY: Max, listen, I need a gig. I’ve cleaned up my act. I’m off the booze. I’m a married man now.

BOOKER: I heard. You two are the talk of the town. You marrying a—

JIMMY: Singer. Max. A singer. You gotta have something!

There’s a joke in there somewhere, but I’m not sure I get it. Maybe the booker wants to use a different word that ends in “-er,” but none of the menace that ought to proceed from that possibility makes it across. There are racists out there, somewhere—nobody’s denying it—but their power can’t really be felt onstage, under the lights, where the true prize is a recording contract or a steady slot on a popular radio program. Similarly, the spectre of war, and its traumatizing aftermath, hangs over the whole show. One character is a violin teacher named Madame Veltri—played with heart and moving depth by Emily Skinner—who’s waiting and waiting for her son to come marching home. Still, the war never serves as anything more than part of the backdrop.

There's no question that the narrative of upward motion through work is part of the lore of New York. But life, here and elsewhere, is never so singularly aimed. There are accidents and coincidences—the odd passion, thrillingly unanticipated, picks you up and drops you down on a street you've never seen. You think two things at the same time. At intermission—this show runs to two hours and forty-five minutes, unbelievable for a story that's not even close to an epic—I realized that, although I loved the dancing and liked the singing, I didn't care much about the fates of the characters. A moment later, though, standing in line for a Diet Coke, I learned that the Knicks had won the game. That's New York: one story can fizzle while another shines.

The city's production value, as it were—its nighttime vistas and accidental dances, its constant, unconscious song—works on the soul and the emotions only because of how it sometimes underlines and sometimes cuts against the vivid, plural lives of the people on the streets. A quick, melancholy spring rain, like the one I got caught in the day before seeing "New York, New York," is memorable only if, for instance, you've been rushing around, looking for a place to have dinner with a new friend, trying to leave just enough time to—yes—make it to another show.

You get a better sense of this parallel music in "Good Night, Oscar," a day-in-the-life bio-play by Doug Wright, directed by Lisa Peterson, at the Belasco. Sean Hayes plays Oscar Levant, a wisecracking virtuoso pianist famous for his interpretations of George Gershwin.

In Hayes's hands, Levant—whose mental-health struggles led to bleak periods of depression and intermittent institutionalization—is a halting, harried, angry man, whose frequent hallucinations center on his regret about devoting himself to Gershwin instead of following his own muse. His wife, June (Emily Bergl), has hatched a plan, together with the great talk-show host Jack Paar (Ben Rappaport), to spring him from a mental-health facility so that he can spend just one night chatting it up on late-night TV.

The production gets wooden when Oscar goes on long rants that are thinly veiled exposition, catching the audience up on every nook and cranny of his career. But Hayes, a classically trained pianist who puts this lesser-known gift to exciting use toward the end of the show, plays him with real soul, showing how rote ambition—being on TV, getting a bit of shine—isn't all

that's at stake in the big city. There's music to play, but there's also, always, a life—one's own—to save. You've gotta do two things at once. ♦

By Janet Malcolm

By Robert A. Caro

By Patrick Radden Keefe

By Philip Gourevitch

Wind On Capitol Hill

- [Watergate as Tragic Slapstick](#)

Watergate as Tragic Slapstick

In HBO's "White House Plumbers," David Mandel directs Woody Harrelson and Justin Theroux as the bungling burglars E. Howard Hunt and G. Gordon Liddy.

By [Bruce Handy](#)



A standard-issue invitation arrived for a party in Washington, D.C., but with an odd addendum—odd, at least, to an out-of-towner. A small-print paragraph advised that the party had “been designed to comply with” ethics rules for congressional and executive-branch employees regarding gifts and free entertainment. Nevertheless, instructions were included should attendees feel it necessary to remit “the fair market value” of the evening’s centerpiece: a preview screening of a new HBO series’ first episode. That would be \$12.50, please, payable by check.

People in government—judicial branch apparently not included, *ahem*—didn’t always have to be so careful. Super-persnickety ethics rules were a response to the Watergate scandal, which happened to be the subject of the new show, “White House Plumbers.” It focusses on E. Howard Hunt and G. Gordon Liddy, the operatives working for Richard Nixon’s White House, and later his reëlection efforts, whose bungled break-in at the Democratic

National Committee's offices set the whole thing off. Woody Harrelson and Justin Theroux star as Hunt and Liddy. Bait of sorts, the actors attended the screening and a reception at the United States Navy Memorial Visitor Center, where guests could enjoy ethically O.K. finger foods while perusing exhibits that included old-timey diving suits and a display case devoted to Admiral Elmo Zumwalt. In attendance were several Watergate veterans, including the Washington *Post* eminences Bob Woodward and Sally Quinn. Representing more recent D.C. contretemps: Kellyanne Conway and Kathleen Buhle, Hunter Biden's first wife.

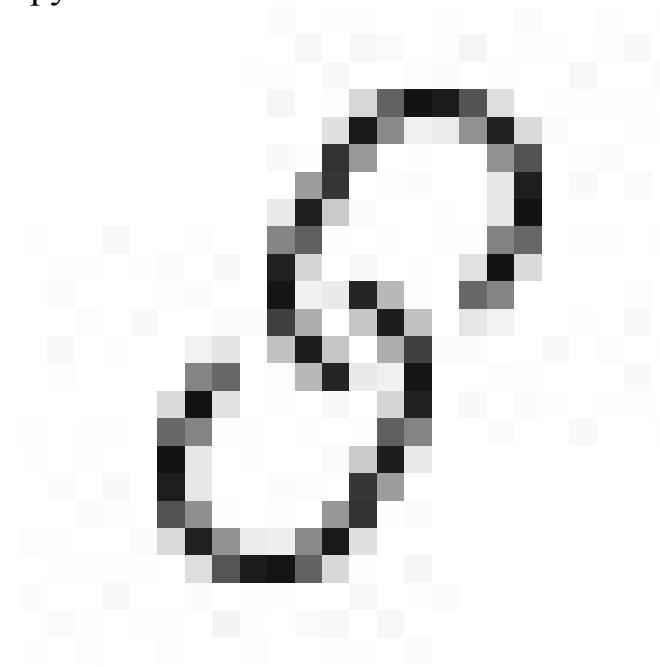
Also on hand were the show's director and executive producer, David Mandel, and its writers, Alex Gregory and Peter Huyck. All three previously worked on "Veep," where Mandel was the showrunner for the series' final three seasons. Radiating an appealing fearlessness, Mandel warmed up the audience with some Washington-centric jokes. "There are so many reporters here tonight," he observed. "I have been told a million times that, basically, reporters in D.C. don't watch pornography anymore. You just masturbate to 'All the President's Men.'" That won a polite laugh. "I got to do that joke in front of Bob Woodward," he added, to a much bigger laugh.

The next morning, Mandel, who lives and mostly works in Los Angeles, paid a visit to the National Museum of American History. On display, not far from one of Lincoln's stovepipe hats, is a file cabinet that once belonged to Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist. Ellsberg was the military analyst who leaked the Pentagon Papers to the *Times*, in 1971, enraging Nixon and prompting Hunt and Liddy's first caper: a break-in at the psychiatrist's Beverly Hills office, in the hope of finding records that would discredit Ellsberg. The file cabinet itself is unremarkable, except for the way the top drawer and frame are bent, evidence of the burglars' crude efforts at prying it open. Mandel said that he and his colleagues had studied it closely during preproduction, trying to reverse engineer how, precisely, the damage had been done so as to scrupulously re-create the fumbling mayhem. He also showed pictures of the artifact to Yul Vazquez, the actor playing the burglar Bernard (Macho) Barker (later arrested at the D.N.C.), who would do the prying onscreen. Authenticity, Mandel believes, "kind of supercharges the actors."



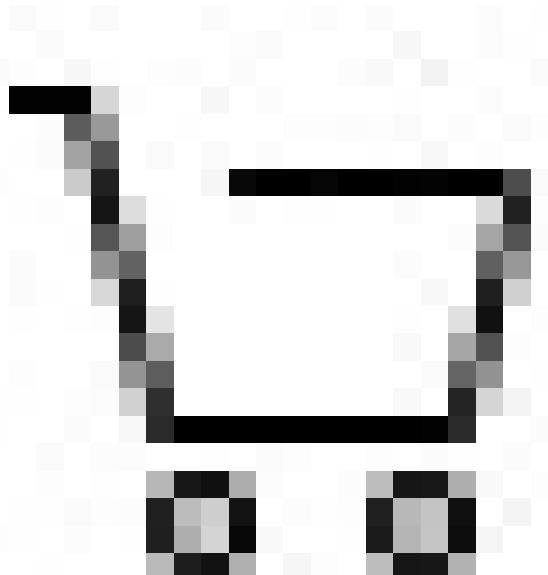
Cartoon by Bruce Eric Kaplan

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To that end, he also filmed on location at the Watergate office-hotel complex. A scene where Hunt and Liddy's crew tape open the lock on a parking-garage door, leading to their discovery and arrest, was shot at the actual site. But there was a catch: historical sources don't agree on what kind of tape the burglars used. "The number of discussions we had about what color the tape should be," Mandel said. "How thick, how thin, black, blue, white. Someone describes it more like duct tape. Someone else describes it more like masking tape."

Mandel can't rely on his own Watergate memories; he was three when Nixon resigned, on August 9, 1974. "Honestly, my first exposure to Watergate? Dan Aykroyd as Nixon and John Belushi as Kissinger." He was referring to a famous "Saturday Night Live" sketch from 1976. As a kid, he said, "you'd hear the word 'Watergate,' but I wasn't sure what it meant. I remember reading about it in *Mad* magazine and 'Doonesbury.'" Certainly, there are worse places to get a political education, and few better to learn satire. Mandel continued both lines of study at Harvard, writing for the *Lampoon* and graduating, in 1992, with a government degree. That fall, he started at "S.N.L.," where he spent three seasons as a writer before moving to L.A. and a job on "Seinfeld."

But viewers expecting “White House Plumbers” to be anything like “S.N.L.” or “Veep”—broad? scathing?—will be surprised. Mandel sees the new show as more of a tragicomedy about “true believers,” however misguided or delusional, with Hunt in particular taking on Willy Loman shadings, battered and benighted. Mandel demurred, however, when it was suggested that he’d succeeded to the point that his show provoked genuine sympathy for its subjects. “Well, maybe I feel bad about that,” he said. “I mean, they’re horrible—they’re not good guys. But I did want you to understand them a *little* bit.” ♦

By Ted Chiang

By Robyn Weintraub

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