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THE NEW YORKER
GOINGS ON
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CONTRIBUTORS

Kai Bird (*"The Mentor," p. 38*) is a co-author of "American Scoundrel: Roy Cohn's Dark Journey from Joe McCarthy to Donald Trump," and a co-author of "American Prometheus," a biography of J. Robert Oppenheimer.

Alexis Okeowo (*"For Ransom," p. 12*), a contributing writer, covers conflict, human rights, and culture. Her most recent book is "Blessings and Disasters: A Story of Alabama."

Rachel Yoder (*Fiction, p. 48*) is the author of the novel "Nightbitch."

Larry Doyle (*Shouts & Murmurs, p. 17*) is the author of "I Love You, Beth Cooper," which won the Thurber Prize for American Humor.

Eric Drooker (*Cover*) is a graphic novelist whose books include "Flood!" and "Naked City," which was recently acquired by the Library of Congress.

Anthony Lane (*Books, p. 54*), a staff writer, is the author of "Nobody's Perfect: Writings from *The New Yorker*."

Evan Osnos (*"The Future, Made in China," p. 26*) is a staff writer who covers politics and foreign affairs. His books include "Age of Ambition: Chasing Fortune, Truth, and Faith in the New China," which won a National Book Award.

Susan Goldmark (*"The Mentor," p. 38*) is a researcher and a co-author of "American Scoundrel."

Paige Williams (*"Kaboom!," p. 18*), a staff writer, is the author of "The Dinosaur Artist" and a recipient of the National Magazine Award for feature writing.

Jon Allsop (*The Talk of the Town, p. 9*) is a contributing writer at the magazine and the author of "What Is Journalism For?"

Megan Fernandes (*Poem, p. 50*) is the author of, most recently, the poetry collections "I Do Everything I'm Told" and "Good Boys."

Inkoo Kang (*On Television, p. 64*), a staff writer, has been a television critic for *The New Yorker* since 2022.

THE NEW YORKER INTERVIEW

SIMONE RISOLUTI / VATICAN MEDIA / GETTY

Antonio Banderas on Art, Aging, and the Pope
By Helen Rosner

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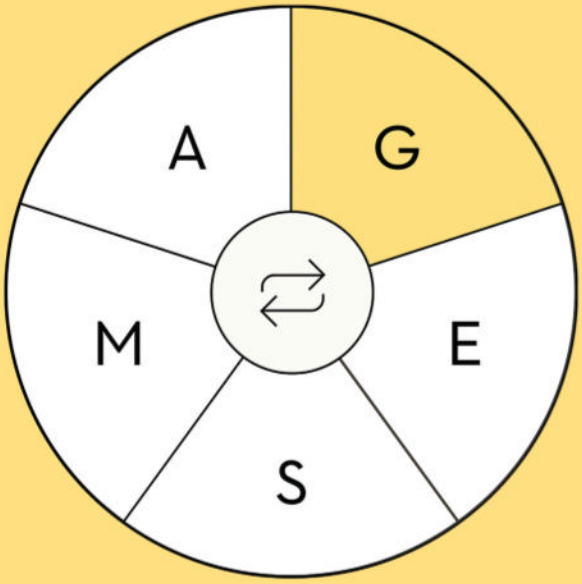

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GOINGS ON

AUGUST 5 – 11, 2026

What we're watching, listening to, and doing this week.

Nearly thirty years after its Broadway début, Wendy Wasserstein's **"An American Daughter"** is being revived, by La Femme Theatre Productions. The play—partly inspired by the failed nominations of Zoë Baird and Kimba Wood for Attorney General, in 1993—concerns a blue-blooded public-health expert (Jean Lichty) whose nomination for Surgeon General is derailed after her husband casually admits on television that she has never answered a jury summons, prompting a national referendum on her fitness for civic life. Long before social media accelerated public pile-ons, Wasserstein recognized how swiftly an accomplished woman's résumé could be recast as a bill of indictment against her character.—*Rhoda Feng (Pershing Square Signature Center; in previews, opening Aug. 11.)*

ABOUT TOWN

MOVIES | Ebrahim Golestan's drama **"Brick and Mirror,"** from 1965, widely considered the first feature of the Iranian New Wave, turns a local problem—a Tehran taxi-driver finds an abandoned infant in his back seat—into a teeming panorama of city life. The driver brings the baby to friends partying in a night club; his quandary yields existential debate in a police station, a portrait of a courthouse's bureaucratic frenzy, and a heartrending documentary vision of an orphanage. These tumultuous incidents are bound by a daring half-hour-long scene of the driver's erotic overnight reunion with his hard-living girlfriend, who wants to adopt the child. Golestan's blend of harsh realism and visual imagination is, even now, startling.—*Richard Brody (Streaming on Criterion Channel.)*

DANCE | The ballet dancer Misty Copeland's fight on behalf of Black dancers, who have traditionally been underrepresented in ballet, along with the determination and grace that have characterized her own rise, has arguably transcended the art itself. Now retired from the stage, Copeland moves into the role of mentor and producer. For the Joyce's two-week **Ballet Festival**, Copeland brings together dancers including Dance Theatre of Harlem's Alexandra Hutchinson and the Paris Opera Ballet's Guillaume Diop (a veritable star). Two programs include a solo from John Taras's "Firebird," José Limón's "Sonata for Two Cellos," and a solo by Bob Fosse—a celebration of the diversity of dance itself.—*Marina Harss (Joyce Theatre; Aug. 4-16.)*

ART | **"Mexican Abstraction: Over a Century of Photography,"** the title of an excellent show at Throckmorton, is a bit misleading. The images are mostly still-lifes, landscapes, and nature studies, but they're never merely representational. If a few of the pictures—Tina Modotti's telegraph poles, Manuel Álvarez Bravo's optician's sign—have come to define Mexican modernism, the show explores the full range and depth of that style, often with superb vintage prints. Modotti's famous overhead shot of massed workers, in a soft, hazy sepia print, has an unusually subtle power. Some of the most memorable photographs take us into the uncanny. Graciela Iturbide finds a sky so dark with birds that we can practically hear their calls. Bravo zooms in on a skeletal hand—nightmarish, but oddly exquisite, with a thorny ring.—*Vince Aletti (Through Sept. 26.)*

OFF BROADWAY | In **"The Saviors,"** two altar boys—Paul (Julius Rinzel), grappling with his faith, and Michael (Ivan Howe), with his sexuality—find their friendship unsettled by the arrival of Julian (Stanley Simons), a long-haired drifter who has seemingly freed himself from the constraints of family, church, and ordinary human ties, only to be cornered by his own ruinous desires. The playwright Bubba Weiler, who has spoken of being raised in a "pretty conservative, Catholic atmosphere," gets at the double consciousness of a Catholic atheist. Paul and Michael could be two sides of the same doubting person, and the setting, a Midwestern Catholic church, is both a crucible of assorted boyhood anxieties and, thanks to the gemütlich presence of its music director, Judy (Crystal Finn), in many senses a sanctuary.—*Rhoda Feng (Atlantic Theatre Company; through Aug. 15.)*

HIP-HOP | In 2016, an open-mike bard turned rapper, going simply by **Noname**, released the mixtape "Telefone," making good on an early endorsement from a red-hot Chance the Rapper, and the project's raw but cogent poetry heralded her as hip-hop's next great theorist. She has since become one of the past decade's most brilliant lyricists and evenhanded critics, emerging as a social activist and a proponent of pulp and revolutionary Black lit. Her self-released début, "Room 25," from 2018, moved from mere rhetorical triumph into finesse and mastery, and its 2023 follow-up, "Sundial," is her magnum opus, as sharp and focussed as it is compositionally rich. For the tenth anniversary of "Telefone," the rapper returns to the moment when she established that making a name didn't require having one.—*Sheldon Pearce (Sony Hall; Aug. 5.)*

MOVIES | The Georgian filmmaker **Otar Iosseliani** has long been a North Star for wistful post-Soviet cinephiles. Metrograph's series "Otar Iosseliani: Fables of Modern Life" will afford New Yorkers a rare opportunity to discover his œuvre of Georgian and French films, meticulously restored in 4K. It is the auteur's early efforts that truly shine. Iosseliani's poetic portraits of life on the Soviet periphery range from neorealist documentation of collective farms to playful snapshots of Tbilisi, with a light touch reminiscent of the French New Wave. "There Once Was a Singing Blackbird" is particularly unmissable: a charismatic young timpanist, taking advantage of a ninety-minute gap between parts mid-performance, leaves his orchestra to run around seducing chic Tbilisi women, wreaking havoc by returning just in time for the finale.—*Madeleine Wulfahrt (Aug. 8-16.)*

ILLUSTRATION BY ELENI KALORKOTI

TABLES FOR TWO

Sanwits
149 First Ave.

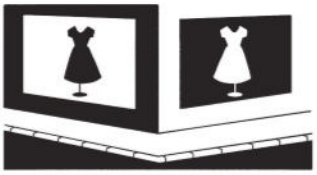
I've been worried, a little, that Unapologetic Foods was going soft. Over the past decade or so, the restaurant group more or less detonated the New York dining scene with Adda, Dhamaka, and Semma, whose undiluted takes on Indian cuisine were a jolt to the city's sleepy South Asian culinary landscape. But recent years have brought some subtle shifts—little concessions, maybe, to the normative American palate. Most dismaying was the group's downgrading of the heat scale at Rowdy Rooster, its fast-casual fried-chicken spot, such that the upper limit now offers, roughly, the soothing warmth of an electric heating pad.

The original Rowdy Rooster, a slim East Village storefront, closed earlier this year. In its place is Sanwits, Unapologetic's latest, a sandwich shop overseen by Eric Valdez, the chef-partner of the Filipino restaurant Naks, the group's other non-Indian outpost. Sanwits is Filipino, too—the name is a Tagalog gloss on the word "sandwich"—despite the fact that, as Valdez told me, the Philippines, where he grew up, doesn't really have a sandwich culture to speak of. This is, unapologetically, exciting: with no inherited form to honor or betray, Valdez has room to do whatever he wants, and the menu is a glorious mashup of recognizable American sandwich silhouettes and frank, unhedged Filipino ingredients.

The sandwiches are messy, oozing, saucy, and insistent; what they lack in structural integrity they make up in brain-exploding flavor. A riff on the French dip is built on *lechón* and slicked with "Vienna-sausage mayonnaise." A take on a cheesesteak draws on *calderata*, a Filipino beef stew, and comes with gloriously melty Eden cheese, a Velveeta-like product specific to the Philippines. A hint of Rowdy Rooster survives in the fried-chicken sandwich, whose battered chicken thigh is exactly as crackling as it was out of the previous establishment's fryer. But the most exciting thing on the menu is a sandwich made with egg-battered, house-made "spam," piled on toasted white bread with shredded lettuce and a secret sauce made with Filipino banana ketchup. The result tastes, very pleasurably, like a Big Mac on a bender.

Since opening, Sanwits has dropped a few sandwiches, including fried mackerel and a gloriously savory mushroom adobo. I miss the foregone items—especially the mackerel, which I never got to try—but this is what tends to happen at any adventurous restaurant: it opens, it waves its flag around, and then it starts to settle in. Naks has evolved from a tasting-menu-style *kamayan* to a more casual brasserie, and the place is very much the better for it. Maybe Sanwits will go the same route, moving away from challenging choices and toward pleasing the masses, and maybe that will turn out to suit Valdez—and all of us—just fine. Right now, though, I like it just as it is. *(Sandwiches $14–$18.)*

—Helen Rosner



ON AND OFF THE AVENUE

Gut Check

Like many other women in New York with a smartphone and a shopping problem, I have a thing for shoes, and my Instagram algorithm has adapted accordingly. All day long, my feed serves up a parade of pretty platforms and squishy sandals, beckoning me to part with my savings. I now know (mostly) how to avoid these lures, but a few weeks ago Instagram served me a pair of shoes that I could not manage to look away from—instead, I kept returning to my phone to stare at them, in all their tacky, lurid glory. This has to be some kind of joke, I thought—or maybe an art project? But, no, they were real, and available to buy, for just $69: beige platform sandals, about ten inches high, that are meant to be worn only during one extremely private activity. They were called, simply, "Sh*t Shoes," from a company named **Let Loose**, a gut-health brand founded in 2024, by Alexandra Houx Grounds, a willowy blonde who suffered from constant gastric distress and wanted to bring products to market that could address women's tummy issues with a sense of humor. Grounds's first offerings were supplements—digestive enzymes, a constipation-relief lemonade mix—but it is the "Sh*t Shoes," essentially a squatty potty split in two and made a bit more fashionable, that has sent the company viral. The first batch has already sold out, thanks, at least in part, to TikTok enthusiasts; now they are available only via pre-order. The shoes may be a gimmick, but they are part of a larger trend, in which people are openly talking about (and buying things to augment) their intestinal microbiomes. Synbiotics, fibre bars, colostrum powder, the new best-selling book "You've Been Pooping All Wrong," by Trischa Pasricha—and, now, poop shoes. There's never been a better time to trust your gut.—*Rachel Syme*

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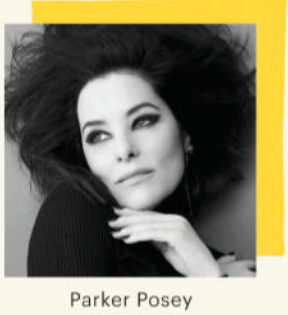

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THE NEW YORKER

THE TALK OF THE TOWN

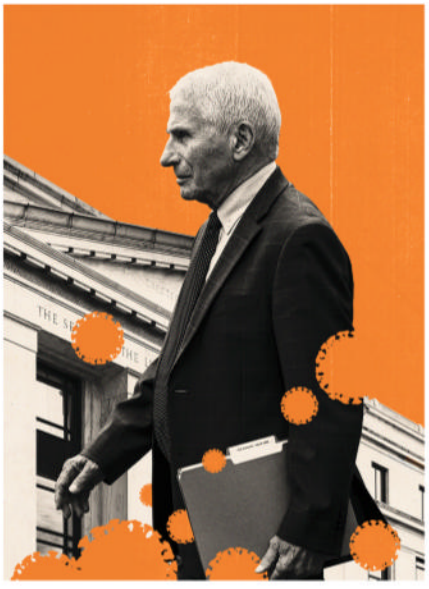
COMMENT

WITNESS

About an hour into Dr. Anthony Fauci's appearance before a Senate committee last week, Senator Ron Johnson, Republican of Wisconsin, expressed skepticism about a passage in Fauci's personal diary regarding the early days of the coronavirus pandemic. "Did you *literally* lie to your own diary?" Johnson asked. For a second, Fauci almost seemed to laugh, and there was a glimpse of the public-health official who had charmed much of the country during the pandemic, with his air of amiable competence. But the moment passed. "On the advice of counsel, I respectfully decline to answer, based upon my rights under the Fifth Amendment to the Constitution," he said. He repeated that line dozens of times in the course of three hours, looking more sombre and reserved and—at the age of eighty-five—notably older than he had six and a half years ago, when the world first became acquainted with the SARS-CoV-2 virus.

Fauci's decision to take the Fifth was understandable. The hearing was engineered by Senator Rand Paul, who has accused the doctor of lying about the origins of COVID-19 in order to cover up his own supposed culpability and misdeeds. Fauci, in a brief opening statement, said that the senator had an "unhinged obsession with me," and had made "slanderous comments." It was Paul's office that released Fauci's diary—more than a thousand pages of notes, articles, and internet memes—which was apparently retrieved from a government computer at the behest of Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., who now oversees the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, where Fauci worked until 2022. A measure of Paul's approach is the title he gave the entries: "Tony's Diary!," in Barbie-pink script, with a heart dotting the letter "i."

Fauci led NIAID for thirty-eight years and played a laudable, lifesaving role in combatting both H.I.V./AIDS and COVID-19, but since his retirement he has had to live with not only mockery—President Trump has called him an "idiot," a "phony," and a "terrible 'athlete'"—but with death threats. In January, 2025, President Biden preëmptively pardoned Fauci for any federal crimes related to his public service during the prior eleven years, citing the possibility of "unjustified and politically motivated prosecutions." But the pardon wouldn't protect him from a state prosecution or from any perjury charge that could be drummed up from his testimony now. In any event, Paul said that he would try to get Fauci charged with contempt of Congress.



Yet Fauci's silence was a loss. Paul may have come at the matter with theatrics and ill will, but some of his questions, in their most basic forms, are worth exploring, because the debate about where the novel coronavirus came from is ongoing, divisive, and important. One scenario, which Fauci has favored, involves a naturally occurring jump from bats to humans, probably via some other species; another postulates a lab leak, most likely from the Wuhan Institute of Virology, in the Chinese city where COVID-19 first emerged. Some of the Wuhan lab's work involved developing new variants of coronaviruses. (Embedded in the Fauci-Paul conflict is a genuine dispute over the definition and risks of what is called "gain of function" research.) The institute also received funding from NIAID, via a sub-grant from a nonprofit. According to NIAID, however, the coronaviruses that were the subject of that grant were not closely related to the one that caused the pandemic.

Fauci, in his opening statement, noted that he had testified before or briefed Congress "well over two hundred times" in his long career, including on COVID-19 and its origins. When he was confronted by Paul at a 2021 hearing, Fauci gave as good as he got. He may feel that he doesn't have much left to say—asked and answered. But he had a unique role in a traumatic mass experience that is still being felt and assessed. Paul isn't the only one who'd like to hear more.

From the beginning, after all, Fauci was an influential voice in the government

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY CRISTIANA COUCEIRO; SOURCE PHOTOGRAPHS FROM GETTY

response to the pandemic, and in some ways served as its anchor. There are many aspects of the early days that seem surreal now: the mobile morgues in New York City, the daily banging of pots and pans, and the juncture in which Donald Trump treated Fauci as his brainy sidekick. That relationship inevitably turned bad, as the President became impatient with the pandemic and demanded politicized boosterism from Fauci.

If the diary entries are any indication, Fauci, in the midst of the pandemic, also savored his own press coverage and lionization. There are too many mentions of Julia Roberts and of Fauci bobblehead dolls. In the hearing, Senator Josh Hawley, Republican of Missouri, accused Fauci of being on a narcissistic "power trip" (which is the kind of journey that Hawley himself seems to relish). In Fauci's defense, idolatry is a group effort. Thousands of Americans were buying those bobbleheads, and someone had to publish the flattering articles he read with pleasure. Particularly after his split with Trump, Fauci became something of a politicized totem, for better and worse.

Despite the near-miracle of the vaccine, which became available in December, 2020, there was much about the pandemic response that was far from perfect, in both blue and red states. Why, for example, wasn't there an all-government effort to get schools reopened sooner and more consistently? There were reasonable concerns about infection and the impact on teachers and on vulnerable family members. Still, the costs of those closures have become more clear with each passing year.

In the hearing, Senator Gary Peters, Democrat of Michigan, observed that "it's tempting to turn one person into the scapegoat" in a crisis for which "hundreds of officials" across two Administrations were responsible. Paul and his Republican colleagues did not resist that temptation. Paul ejected one of Fauci's lawyers. Senator Bernie Moreno, of Ohio, told a story about a woman who he said had been arrested for watching a middle-school football game, from mostly empty bleachers, without a mask, and punctuated it by snapping at Fauci, "Who the fuck do you think you were for doing that?"

Watching Fauci as he sat listening was a reminder of how little anyone really knew back in 2020. Most of the world was fumbling and scared, and Fauci seemed to have some idea of what to do. But, even acting on the best evidence available, and with the best of intentions, there were times when he, too, must have been guessing. Realizing that truth would be a route toward not only better preparedness going forward but also a more general granting of grace. If Fauci has regrets about the pandemic, he wouldn't be alone.

—Amy Davidson Sorkin

SAME SHIT DEPT.
EXTRA! EXTRA!

The *Times* has published sixty thousand nine hundred and sixty-some issues, so what are the odds that today's paper is the one you really want to read? "The news doesn't change that much," Aaron Reiss, an aspiring entrepreneur, said one recent morning. "A newspaper costs around four dollars, and it's the quickest-expiring product in the world. Even milk lasts longer. So I was, like, What if I sell old news? That's free for me, and it's still good."

Reiss was on the corner of Thirty-fourth and Ninth, outside B&H Photo, where he'd just opened a kiosk called the Old News Newsstand. "I came up with this catchphrase I'm very proud of. 'Old News: Still bad, but cheaper and more predictable,'" he said. His price for an old issue of the *Times* was three dollars—about twenty-five per cent off. It was a Friday morning ("IRAN AND U.S. ESCALATE STRIKES DESPITE COUNTRIES' EMPHASIZING PEACE"), and Reiss rolled up a metal grate and laid out the news for the day, which wasn't that day's news but could've been. He had a bunch of June *Timeses*, salvaged from the trash. June 13th: "IN GRAY AREA OF NOT PEACE AND NOT WAR." June 18th: "TRUMP LASHES OUT AT CRITICS OF DEAL." June 21st: "STRAIT IS CLOSED." "It's the exact same shit," Reiss said.

Reiss, who wore a button-down, unbuttoned, over a wifebeater, has the job history of the highly educated itinerant class. He's been a researcher at a design agency, a lecturer at Yale (Urban Studies 3307: Telling Stories with Maps), a journalist, a ceramist, and a hot-chocolate salesman. "I sold out of a pushcart near Seward Park, out of my ceramic cups," he said. "I sold it for two dollars, very cheap, and I'd say, 'If you like the cup, keep it for twenty.'"

The newsstand idea was meant to expand his ceramics business. Initially, old news was partially a regulatory workaround: all sidewalk newsstands in the city must sell periodicals. But eventually it became an organizing principle. "Now we sell weird stuff that's newsstand-related," Reiss said. There are ceramics and art, plus zines (*Several Chairs I Briefly Loved, Vol. 3*; *Americans Draw America*) and unusual snack items—Jordanian chewing gum, Iraqi Cokes, Taiwanese canned cappuccino. There's a rotating exhibition of photos from the New York Public Library's Picture Collection. Reiss's five-year-old son, Milo, contributed art, on which he'd written "Free 0¢." "Wrong," Reiss said. "I charge a dollar." He has old magazines, too. "I really wanted to have porn," he said. "So we have old *Playboys*." Most customers want cigarettes or lottery tickets, but he's not selling those. "Those things ruin people's lives," he said. "Plus, I would smoke all the cigarettes." Instead, a friend is developing a scratch-off zine concept, and another friend is writing "loosie" poems, rolled up like cigarettes. He splits the revenue with the artists.

Reiss opened for business. Sales were slow. It was his thirty-ninth birthday, and most of the early foot traffic was friends. His wife, Lizzie Fulton, arrived at the same time as an artist friend named Max Glaser, who'd brought a box full of old nudie mags. "Check this out," Reiss said. "A huge crate of smut!" He did a little dance. He and his business partner, Sylvea Wong, had been cutting pictures from books of erotica and bundling them as "vintage mini smut," for five dollars. "The way somebody takes a pickaxe to a mountain to turn a big rock into small diamonds, we're doing the same thing with the smut," Reiss

said. The previous day had seen his best sales so far. "I need about seventy dollars to break even," he said. "I think we'll do it today."

Glaser looked skeptical.

"You think my accounting is all fucked up," Reiss said.

"It's really bad," Glaser said.

Reiss opened a ledger, which was just a notebook page listing items beside tally marks. "He won't tell anyone how much he paid for the stand," Fulton said. "And I was, like, 'This actually affects me.'"

Business picked up. Reiss called out, "We got weird shit for weird people!"

A man heading to B&H asked, "Do you have Zyns?"

"We have zines," Reiss said. The man bought a painted ceramic toadstool for ten dollars. "That's how you fucking sell a fucking thing," Reiss said.

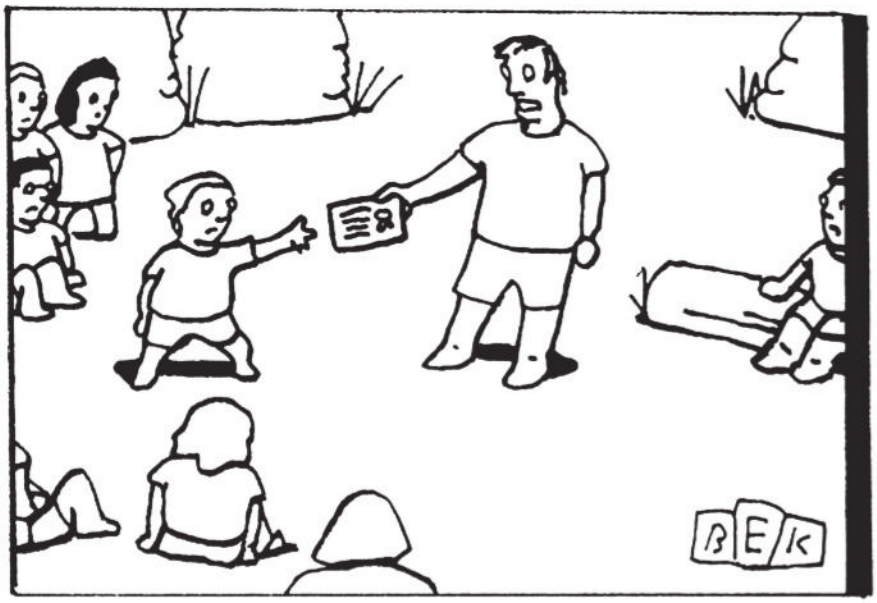
The old papers went fast. Tourists love them. "They're on their way out of the city and want an object," Reiss said.

Reiss has his regulars. He stocks kosher snacks for B&H employees. One news vender on Sixth Avenue offered mentoring. "I told him I was selling water for a dollar," Reiss said. "He was, like, 'You're an idiot.' But he sold me some cases at cost."

At the end of the day, Reiss had made a hundred and eighty-two dollars. "I'm in the green!" he said. His friends think that his newsstand is performance art. "This is a literal store," he said. "It's a capitalist endeavor."

At home that evening, Reiss reran the numbers and discovered an error: he'd forgotten about paying the artists. "My current cash position is negative twenty-six dollars and sixteen cents," he reported. "Accounting is an emotional practice."

—Zach Helfand



"This award goes to the camper who showed up begrudgingly every day because his parents needed somewhere for him to go this week."

• •

DEPT. OF NOMENCLATURE
IDENTITY POLITICS

Dan Sullivan doesn't want Dan Sullivan to be the senator for Alaska. Dan Sullivan is already the senator for Alaska and wants to keep it that way. He thinks that Dan Sullivan is trying to trick voters into thinking that he is Dan Sullivan, as part of a plot to oust Dan Sullivan.

To add some helpful initials: in May, Dan J. Sullivan, a retired teacher in Petersburg, Alaska, filed to run as a Republican against Dan S. Sullivan, the G.O.P. incumbent, in a Senate race that Democrats see as a promising pickup opportunity; the Party's much hyped candidate, Mary Peltola, previously won as Alaska's representative in the House. (The top four candidates in the primary, which is on August 18th, will advance, regardless of party.) Dan S. and his allies claimed that Dan J. was a plant. Among other things, he had made (very small) donations to Peltola in the past, and he had initially asked to appear on the ballot as "Dan S. Sullivan." (A typo, according to Dan J.) Smelling a rat, officials disqualified Dan J. But the courts soon overturned that decision. Dan J. insists that he is running in good faith. Even if he weren't, his lawyer argued, candidates with "un-American and unsavory" goals seek office all the time.

Certainly, candidates have run against namesakes before, and have faced cries of foul play. When J.F.K. first stood for Congress, in 1946, his campaign allegedly induced a Boston janitor named Joe Russo to join a field that also included Joe Russo, a popular councilman. More recently, there have been three Bob Fergusons, two Bob Bakers, and two Jerry Garcias (neither of them the late Grateful Dead front man). Sometimes name clashes are clearly coincidental. When Dan S. Sullivan first ran for Senate, in 2014, he appeared on the same ballot as Dan A. Sullivan, the mayor of Anchorage, who was running for lieutenant governor.

In July, a correspondent reached Dan J. Sullivan over Zoom. Dan J. wore glasses, a fraying ball cap, and a light jacket. A pair of banjos and an octave mandolin hung on a wall behind him. (He plays both instruments, plus guitar and fiddle.) It was 7 A.M., and Dan J. had a busy day ahead. His nephew was in town, and they were planning to fish for trout.

Dan J. is a third-generation Dan Sullivan, and one of seven Dans in his family. They use nicknames to tell one another apart. (Dan J. wouldn't disclose his.) Some voters, it seems, could use such an aid now: when Dan J. posted online about an interview he had done with a local public-radio station, a commenter erroneously took him to task for voting to defund public media in the Senate. He is, at least, drawing attention. "I knew that my name recognition would get me immediate

publicity," he said. "It's succeeded beyond my wildest hopes."

To find out more about the importance of standing out in a crowded field, the correspondent wrote to Dan T. Sullivan, a marketing consultant based in Indiana who specializes in search-engine optimization—the magic art of helping businesses surface on Google. Dan T. replied, almost instantly, that the correspondent had found "THE RIGHT DAN SULLIVAN." Over the phone, Dan T. said that he regularly fields e-mails meant for assorted other Dan Sullivans: pest-control reports (Ohio), hotel receipts (Florida), the details of a Ferrari test-track experience (the U.K.).

Dan T. said that, typically, in business, "you want to differentiate yourself with your name." In his own line of work, he could easily be mistaken for a Dan Sullivan who coaches entrepreneurs, or a Danny Sullivan who works at Google.

Dan J. Sullivan and Dan S. Sullivan

If either of the Alaska Dan Sullivans were a client, Dan T. would advise them to emphasize the order in which their names appear on the ballot, to make sure that voters know which is which. On a more philosophical note, he said he'd remind them that "nobody's *one* thing. You're a lot more than what your name is."

Dan J. Sullivan, on the other hand, said he believes that "your name is your identity, for better or worse." He acknowledged that this had informed his decision to run against Dan S., but not in a dirty-tricks kind of way. "There's a visceral tie that you have with someone who shares your name," he said. "As this person who has the same name as me is my representative and is making decisions that I don't think are necessarily moving our state forward, maybe it hangs on me a little harder than it does other people."

Recently, Dan J.'s attention was directed to the 1886 governor's race in Tennessee, where two brothers, Alf and Bob Taylor, ran against each other. A cartoon at the time showed them side by side onstage, "fiddling for votes." "That really tickled me," Dan J. said. "If we were going one on one with Dan Sullivan, I'm sure I could beat him in a fiddle contest."

—Jon Allsop

THE PICTURES
SAME RIVER THRICE

In 1978, a Californian named Robb Moss, then twenty-eight, went on a five-week float trip through the Grand Canyon with a bunch of fellow river rats. As an aspiring filmmaker, Moss brought along two cameras (a synch-sound handheld and a Bolex on a tripod he lashed to the stern of a dory) and later cut the footage, much of it of his friends naked on the sand and stone, into a short documentary called "Riverdogs." The idea was to memorialize a vanishing Eden and the end of his five years of vagabonding, working on rivers, paying no rent. This trip was a last hurrah. "I considered the film to be like a cave painting," he said recently. "I was commemorating our life, our deeds, as though it was a hunt."

Moss was walking along another water course, the Loch, the stream in the Ravine, at the north end of Central Park. He'd just spent a day scouting at Mount Sinai Hospital, for a documentary that he was planning about its neurosurgery department, and he was getting a gulp of greenery before dinner. He is now, at seventy-six, a film professor and former department chair at Harvard, and is a half century (and more than a dozen films) removed from that restless seeker wearing no pants in the Big Ditch. Still, he has a serene aspect that one might guess is the ripening of that rudderless youth—or of what he learned from his subsequent films about its expiration.

Twenty years after "Riverdogs," he made "The Same River Twice," a feature-length update, combining a lot of the 1978 footage with fresh film following five of those riverdogs as they navigate the banalities and indignities of middle age. This film attracted a keen fan base. The past-present juxtapositions—of bodies, circumstances, attitudes, and even film stock—made for a sly and poignant ode to (or lament over) time's passage. The lives had layers, like the geological strata of the canyon's walls.

Eight years ago, Moss returned to those waters a third time. His new movie, "The Bend in the River," again repurposes the old footage and incorporates new material featuring the same friends, now on the crest of old age. The years are not solely unkind.

"The Bend in the River" is being screened at Film Forum this month. Moss would love the trilogy to be shown together. "Each film is about the view from there, which was then the view from here," he said. (He wouldn't run them chronologically; he'd show "The Same River Twice," then "Riverdogs," then "The Bend in the River.")

The Ravine, on this evening, was as verdant as the Grand Canyon hundreds of millions of years ago, when it consisted of coastal lowland and swamp. Moss mentioned another film he'd made called "Containment." "It was about the difficulty of containing nuclear materials for time frames longer than anyone can imagine," he said. While he was filming, the Fukushima accident occurred, and, two years later, he went to Japan. "Everything was covered in this nuclear dust, a coat of cesium and strontium. It didn't change the color of the vegetation, but it made the exquisite beauty of it more poignant. That's what this color green reminds me of."

When Moss was seventeen, at Palisades High School in Los Angeles, his brother was drafted and sent to Vietnam. Moss graduated early and began travelling, getting as far as Afghanistan before abandoning a vague plan to go to Vietnam to find his brother. Instead, he went to college, at U.C. Berkeley. It was 1968.

"After I graduated, I felt that my job was to work against whatever ambitions I had accrued in my first twenty-two years," Moss said. "Ambition was the

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

handmaiden of the status quo." So began the untethered era, whose end he celebrated in "Riverdogs." With an old summer-camp friend, Barry Wasserman, he hitchhiked across the Sahara, south to north, then visited Paris, where he made his first film, a day-in-the-life piece. "It was that diaristic impulse, the urge to film the things around you. How do you know where you are?"

A lot of his friends were working as river guides then. While hitchhiking in Arizona, he saw a photo of a boat hitting a giant wave, which spurred him to find his way onto a rafting trip with Martin Litton, the great riverman of the Colorado. "I want to do that," Moss thought. So for five years he did, in Mexico, California, Utah, Oregon, Idaho, British Columbia, and the Grand Canyon. "Then it stopped being satisfying enough," he said. "I wasn't learning anything new." Grad school. Marriage. Career. Rent.

Near where the Loch empties into the Harlem Meer, a long-haired child, unaccompanied by an adult, bounded along the bank with a fly rod. "I just caught a nice largemouth!" the kid said. Moss paused to watch, as an oak catkin blew down and nestled in his hair.

—Nick Paumgarten

L.A. POSTCARD
PLANT MAN

A Queensland bottle tree (*Brachychiton rupestris*) is not something you would typically find in the chaparral of Southern California. The cartoonishly stout tree would be right at home in a Dr. Seuss book, but it is native to the shrublands of Australia. Even so, one recent morning, a flatbed trailer cruised down the I-5 freeway, with two massive bottle trees secured in its truck bed, and pulled up to Serpentine—a plant-design studio (that is, a high-end nursery) in the Boyle Heights neighborhood of Los Angeles, owned by the comedian and filmmaker Eric Wareheim.

Wareheim, who stands well over six feet tall and wears a trim beard and square-framed glasses, raced outside to meet the delivery. "Oh, wow!" he yelled, seeing the trees, each more than twenty feet tall, with bulbous trunks nearly nine feet in diameter. "This is the absolute holy grail for me."

Wareheim's botanical obsession began as a hobby after his divorce, in 2024. "Gardening is just so therapeutic," he said. Somewhere between his day job of making movies and TV ("Tim and Eric's Billion Dollar Movie," "Master of None") and a side hustle blending wine under a label called Las Jaras, he began collecting plants. Soon, they overwhelmed his house.

"I started having to sell plants because I had no room," he said. So, with a studio manager, Alexis Florio, he rented a loft, and they began potting desert plants in vintage vessels they sourced from around the world. They also shaped the plants into dramatic forms—sometimes by pruning, other times by leaning a plant away from the sun and letting it twist back toward the light.

Eventually, they outgrew the space, and they moved their wares into the loft's parking lot—a wispy fifteen-foot dragon tree ($8,500) that evoked a ballerina mid-jump, a floss-silk tree ($7,500) with five trunks rising from a Willy Guhl saucer like a giant zombie hand coming up through the earth. Word of the oddball plants spread, and commissions rolled in—Martha Stewart, Kelly Wearstler, Flamingo Estate. "Buyers see them as art pieces, not just some green," Wareheim said.

The bottle trees on the flatbed were to be the centerpieces of a celebration of Serpentine's success. Gazing up at them, Wareheim said, "They put them in museums, stadiums, and zoos—that's it." Asked how much each one would go for, he answered, "I don't know. What does it cost for me to spend two years befriending someone?"

That's how long it took him to find the two trees, scouring nurseries all over San Diego County. "The whole game is to find that shape," he said. He discovered this pair growing in the driveway of Hula Tropicals, a plumeria nursery in Bonsall. But the owner didn't want to sell. Like Hollywood, the plant world is about relationships, so Wareheim spent months returning, buying increasingly larger plants, and gaining the owner's trust. Finally, a deal was struck, and the bottle trees were dug up.

During the unloading at Serpentine, there was a hiccup: Wareheim had wanted to display the Brachychitons in a couple of huge limestone saucers that turned out to be too shallow. Plan B was two cement bowls, but they were too narrow. "So Plan C is the box, right?" Wareheim asked his team, pointing to a container made of what looked like Lincoln Logs. "We cut the box down a little bit to make it look nice for tonight."

A forklift crane rattled to life and hoisted one of the two-ton Brachychitons.

Eric Wareheim

"This is the greatest thing I've ever seen!" Wareheim said, watching the tree glide through the air like Fellini's Jesus over Rome. "Look at that thing!" He stepped closer to the crane operator and said, "I'll drive." The operator cracked a smile. "The guys hate me," Wareheim said. "My humor is so dumb."

The crane maneuvered the tree into position. As it was lowered, team members quickly trimmed its roots so that it would fit inside the container. If they overdid it, they risked shocking—or even killing—the tree. "I can't watch," Wareheim said. It took almost an hour to get the first tree in its box.

By the time guests arrived (Nathan Fielder, Tim Heidecker), the bottle trees were tucked in discreetly among the nursery's dozens of other weirdo plants. "The prevailing theory is, you have to show off your big thing right when you come in. But actually the classy way is to not do that," Wareheim said. "You've got to work to find these. That's the cool way to do it." He priced the trees at fifty thousand dollars apiece.

—Oren Peleg

OUR FAR-FLUNG CORRESPONDENTS

FOR RANSOM

Thousands have been taken by Nigerian bandits. One man was abducted twice.

BY ALEXIS OKEOWO

The kidnappings have become a bizarre cause célèbre for the American right.

Izuchukwu Anyanwu, a university lecturer in Abuja, Nigeria, came home one evening and settled in for a quiet night. It was September, 2023, and he had spent the afternoon playing soccer with friends on the campus of Veritas University, where he taught. He was tired and was running a fever, so he took a shower and had some tea and bread; he also took medicine for malaria, in case he had contracted it. His wife, Immaculata, put their infant daughter to sleep, then went to bed herself. Around midnight, Anyanwu was watching a political-news program on TV when he heard a noise at the outer door of the veranda. It sounded as though someone was trying to break in. There had been a power outage that night, and he was using a solar-energy system to run the TV. He opened a window but couldn't see who was there. "I was scared," he told me recently. "I started shouting, 'Who is that? Who is that?'"

At thirty-eight, Anyanwu is slim and bearded, with a youthful face. He grew up in a small town in the southeast of the country, then went to Veritas, a Catholic university, to get a master's in political theory. He eventually was offered a teaching job, and rented a place in Zuma II, a neighborhood just outside the university's gates where many faculty members live. It's on the northern outskirts of the city in the rocky foothills of some nearby mountains. "I felt safe," he said. "My hope was to build up my academic profile and eventually have my own house here." His daughter would be turning one in February, and the family was planning a big celebration.

As the noises grew louder, Anyanwu tried calling a neighborhood-watch group, then some friends, but the calls didn't connect. His wife woke up, and the two of them screamed out the window for help. Then the intruders broke the locks. "That is when I saw that it was over," he said. Seventeen men entered his house, some wearing camouflage and carrying AK-47s, rocket-propelled-grenade launchers, and machine guns. "They were armed like people going to war," he recalled. They made Anyanwu and Sunday Ujah, a twenty-year-old man who lived with the family and helped with housework, lie on the floor in the sitting room, then demanded that Immaculata show them where the valuables were kept. Anyanwu protested, telling them that he was not a politician and had no money. Since there was little of value, the men took rice, groundnuts, soft drinks, and powdered milk. A few finished Anyanwu's leftover tea and bread.

The men took away Anyanwu's and Ujah's phones, and brought the two to a neighboring house to kidnap a local trader. Then they all set off on foot toward the mountains. The captives carried the stolen food. Anyanwu was still in his house clothes: shorts, a polo shirt, and slippers. They walked through the forest for hours. The area was wild and uninhabited, but the bandits moved through it with practiced ease. "There were those that went ahead of us and then gave signals for us to continue," Anyanwu said. The kidnappers were all Fulani, a Muslim-majority ethnic group whose members live largely in the north of the country. Considering their sophisticated weaponry, he wondered if they were associated with the Islamist militant group Boko Haram, but the men didn't give a name for their group or profess any particular ideology.

They set up camp in a forest near a village called Tunga Maje. Anyanwu knew their location because he saw the address of a local manufacturer on a package of bread that the kidnappers bought. He and the other two hostages were kept in a cave. It was the rainy season, and he had to put leaves on the wet ground to

PHOTOGRAPH BY ETINOSA YVONNE

sleep. He could hear the voices of another group of hostages somewhere in the forest, out of sight. "They kept them apart from us," he said.

The men asked what each of the hostages did for a living. "They were trying to profile us to know how much they could demand," Anyanwu said. He tried to downplay his position at the university, but they set a ransom of a hundred and fifty million naira, or about two hundred thousand dollars, to release him and Ujah. "I told them, 'If I had such an amount, you wouldn't have been able to access me,'" he said. " 'You saw the house I was living in.' " They eventually agreed to about half that figure. They gave him his phone back to call his family, but he couldn't remember his wife's new phone number. He called his uncle, and then his priest. In the days that followed, he called other relatives. While he was on the phone, the kidnappers beat him with machetes, wires, and the butts of their guns, so that his family would know he was in danger. Before each phone call, he would get excited to hear a familiar voice, then remember the brutal beating to come.

After a few weeks, when the bandits saw that he could not raise the money, they relented, settling for a ransom of about six thousand dollars, which his sister brought to a transfer point. But several days passed, and they still didn't release him and Ujah. The bandits finally told Anyanwu that they had decided his family hadn't paid enough. The next day, one of the men brought him before the *oga*, their boss, who said that they would cut off his leg as punishment. The *oga* asked him to choose which leg to lose. Anyanwu started crying and begged for mercy, saying that he would bleed to death. "But the *oga* insisted," he said. He chose the left one.

Kidnapping is now so rampant in Nigeria that it seems as if everyone knows someone who has been taken. People have been kidnapped while driving on interstate roads, while worshipping at church, and while sleeping in their homes. The novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's late father, a professor, was once kidnapped on the road between his home town and the university town where he lived; he was released three days later, after his family paid a ransom. The mother of the former finance minister Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala was taken; so were an Anglican archbishop and his wife. At least forty-seven hundred Nigerians were kidnapped between July, 2024, and June, 2025, and more than seven hundred of them were killed, according to the research firm S.B.M. Intelligence. Victims' families and friends collectively paid more than two and a half billion naira, or about one and a half million dollars, to kidnappers during that time—double the figure from the year before. This study relied on cases reported in the media, meaning that the real total is almost certainly higher. The kidnap-for-ransom industry has become one of the most lucrative in the country.

The crisis began in the nineties, in the Niger Delta. Militant groups had formed there to oppose the exploitation and pollution of their communities by foreign oil companies such as Shell, and they began abducting oil workers and demanding ransoms from the companies as a form of protest. In the two-thousands, criminal gangs in the southeast began emulating the practice—but as a way of making money rather than as an act of resistance. They often seized people from vehicles on busy roads. "People could not go home for Christmas," Abubakar Siddique Mohammed, the director of a Nigerian think tank called the Centre for Democratic Development Research and Training, told me. The gangs would pay cattle herders in the vast, ungoverned forests of northern Nigeria to hold the hostages until ransoms were paid. "That is how some of them were actually initiated into kidnapping," Mohammed said.

In 2009, Boko Haram, based in the northeast of the country, began a campaign of guerrilla attacks and suicide bombings, in an effort to establish a caliphate in the region. It declared itself against Western-style education, and began kidnapping children from schools and forcing them to convert to Islam. Fighters raped the girls and married them against their will. In 2014, Boko Haram took almost three hundred girls from a secondary school in Chibok; the whereabouts of some ninety are still unknown. Last November, the group is believed to have kidnapped about three hundred students from a Catholic school, some as young as five.

In the northwest, the practice spread through less ideological conflicts. There are ongoing disputes in the region between farmers from the Hausa ethnic group and Fulani cattle herders over access to grazing land. Attacks between the communities have displaced thousands of people. Some young herders turned to organized crime. "Initially, they would go to a village, attack, and extract money from the local notables," Mohammed said. "Then they moved to blocking local highways to seize whatever is in the vehicles. Then they started kidnapping people." Today, according to a report from the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, some thirty thousand armed Fulani militants operate in Nigeria. Some groups consist of only a couple of dozen people; others, several hundred.

The groups are usually named for their leaders. One of the most brutal is led by Bello Turji, a Fulani man believed to be in his early thirties. Turji uses the language of Fulani liberation; he told a Nigerian newspaper called the *Daily Trust* that he had "been forced into banditry" because of "a genocide being committed against the Fulani," and that a group of farmers had stolen a thousand cattle from his family and killed several of his relatives. His group now carries out kidnappings, extortions, and evictions in farming communities. A few years ago, a pseudonymous musician released a song calling Turji a hero, angering many Nigerians. A group led by a man named Ado Aleru, which kidnapped twenty-five schoolgirls last November, has promised to stop its campaign if the government provides alternative means of livelihood for its followers, along with better schools and hospitals and access to clean water. (Turji and Aleru did not respond to requests for comment.)

"When we started our work, they had grievances, and they were eager to discuss them," Mohammed said of the militant groups. But the ones he sees today "are very dangerous, because they are just criminals." Young bandits brag about their kidnappings on TikTok. A screenshot from one man's account shows him in a traditional Fulani tunic and turban, wearing dark sunglasses and flashy rings; he has a stack of cash in one hand and another stack in his mouth—like a nomadic herder who doubles as a rapper. A kidnapping group led by a man named Kachalla Mati also makes money

from illegal gold mining in the state of Zamfara, and has begun forcing nearby residents to work in the mines. "There are now no-go areas" of the country, Mohammed said. "They have been taken over by bandits, and nobody passes there."

The government's efforts to alleviate the crisis have been ineffective. Mike Ejiofor, a former director of the Department of State Services, the country's domestic-intelligence agency, told me that the police and the military do not have the resources to deal with the situation. "There is inadequate funding," he said. In 2010, Nigeria awarded a four-hundred-and-seventy-million-dollar contract to a Chinese company to install CCTV cameras around Abuja; there is still not a single working camera, and the money is unaccounted for. A government program called the Safe Schools Initiative was given thirty million dollars in 2014 to provide guards for schools, create security plans for them, and work with the government to develop a rapid-response system for attacks. None of that appears to have been done. Investigators of the program's implementation found that more than sixteen hundred children have been abducted since its work began. (A government spokesperson said that the initiative is ongoing, but that local compliance levels are unknown.)

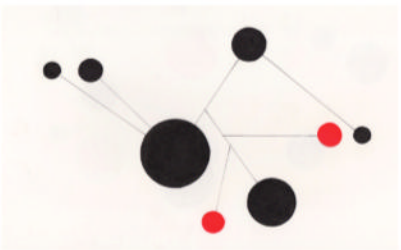
Paying a ransom is technically illegal in Nigeria, a crime that carries a minimum prison sentence of fifteen years under the country's Terrorism Prevention and Prohibition Act. In reality, though, it's often the only way to get people back alive. Even the government has been accused of secretly paying ransoms for cases that make international news. A former intelligence official told me that the Office of the National Security Adviser has paid ransoms in at least a few high-profile kidnapping cases. (A spokesperson for the Nigerian government maintains that it does not pay ransoms.) Payments are mostly made in cash, with the money routed through multiple middlemen. "No government will openly admit that it has paid ransom to criminals," the former intelligence official said. "That will serve incentives to the criminals."

Still, the cycle continues. In 2022, terrorists kidnapped dozens of people from a train between Abuja and Kaduna, and Tukur Mamu, a newspaper publisher, negotiated their release. The government is now prosecuting Mamu for coördinating with Boko Haram to demand ransom money from the families and to take a cut for himself. (Mamu denies the charge, and says that the families themselves suggested paying the ransoms.) Ejiofor told me that he, too, was kidnapped, in 2017, while driving across the country. But he would not admit to paying a ransom. "I was just freed," he said. "In my position as a former official, I don't encourage payment of ransoms, and I wouldn't want to be seen as paying a ransom."

In the forest, Anyanwu placed his left leg on a rock, and the *oga* told one of the men to get a sharp machete. But after a moment the *oga* called the man off. "They said my people need to bring the money quickly," Anyanwu said.

Not long afterward, the group heard drones in the sky and started moving again, perhaps to evade capture by the military. They trekked for two days to a big camp. It looked like a market, with at least three hundred bandits. "They were on motorbikes," Anyanwu recalled. "They were shouting, firing guns. What scared me the most was the ages I was seeing. You see children who are ten, fourteen. They were the ones busy servicing the guns, assembling them."

While en route, the bandits had kidnapped several more hostages: two farmers, an elderly school principal, and a man who had met with the group to deliver a ransom for his brother and was abducted himself. The kidnappers had begun making Ujah fetch water, gather firewood, and carry out other tasks. So, while most of the hostages were chained to one another, Ujah was allowed to roam. One night in December, Anyanwu woke at about 4 A.M. to learn that Ujah and the two farmers had run away. The bandits caught one of the farmers, tied him to a tree, and began beating him. "Blood was gushing from his body," Anyanwu recalled. "We pleaded for them to stop." But Ujah escaped.



Meanwhile, Immaculata, Anyanwu's wife, was struggling to get enough money for his additional ransom payment. She was going house to house to beg for contributions. By January, Anyanwu was wasting away. His slippers had fallen apart, and his clothes were torn. The hostages ate only white rice, and not every day; the water they drank was dirty. They washed themselves in a river just once or twice a month, without soap. "My skin was peeling off," Anyanwu said. "The kidnappers were calling me 'skeleton.' They would look at me and start laughing." But, later that month, Anyanwu got his own chance to escape. The hostages were being watched by a bandit who was epileptic, and he had a seizure. They splashed water on his face to revive him. As he came to, they asked him for the keys to their shackles so that they could urinate, and he relented out of gratitude. Once free, they fled in different directions.

Anyanwu ran all night, for nine hours. Finally, he lay down under a tree and slept. When he woke up, he crossed a ravine and saw cigarette butts and human skulls on the ground. "I was scared," he said. "I didn't know what to do." He was determined to make it home for his daughter's first birthday, on February 4th.

The next morning, he encountered a Fulani herdsman, who let him use his phone to call his wife. Immaculata had just dropped off another ransom payment of about forty-five hundred dollars. The money was lost, but she was glad that he was free. After he hung up, the herdsman made his own call, and, very quickly, four men from a different bandit group arrived with AK-47s. Anyanwu pleaded with them for help. The bandits took him to their camp, where they gave him medicine and food, and expressed sympathy about his long captivity. They seemed kind. "I thought this was the point that they would let me go home," Anyanwu said. But that night they chained him up and told him to call his wife for another ransom. He was a hostage again.

The violence in Nigeria has become a cause célèbre for the American right. Since Donald Trump's first term, Christian activist groups, including one called Aid to the Church in Need, have

been lobbying the U.S. government to do something about the persecution of Nigerian Christians by Islamist groups. They made progress last year, when Riley Moore, a Republican congressman from West Virginia, introduced a resolution condemning violence against Christians in Muslim-majority countries, and Ted Cruz, the senator from Texas, introduced a bill calling for sanctions against Nigeria. Activists also met with Sebastian Gorka, a member of the National Security Council, and other White House officials.

Soon afterward, Trump announced that Islamist terrorists were kidnapping and killing Christians in Nigeria. Celebrities have since joined in. The rapper Nicki Minaj, who has recently taken a political turn to the right, testified before the United Nations about the oppression of Christians. The TV host Bill Maher called the situation an attempted genocide. I recently passed a billboard in Manhattan with the words "END THE GENOCIDE IN NIGERIA," next to an illustration of a woman holding a baby in front of a burning church. Last Christmas, Trump, with the knowledge of Bola Tinubu, the President of Nigeria, launched an air strike against the Islamic State in Nigeria, a terrorist group; it hit largely empty forest encampments and farmland. A Nigerian newspaper reported that villagers were visiting the site of the bombing to collect metal fragments and then selling them to scrap dealers.

In Nigeria, the air strike prompted confusion. "When the allegation of genocide came, many of us were shocked," Sunday Dare, the Nigerian President's special media adviser, said. "We said, 'Genocide?'" Boko Haram has waged an insurgency for nearly two decades, killing tens of thousands of Nigerians. But in recent years the group has splintered and inspired copycats. Some, such as the Islamic State West Africa Province, take a hard ideological line. Others are motivated more by money than by religion. Most operate in the Muslim-majority north, and most of their victims are Muslims, too, not Christians. Naseer Mu'azu, the security commissioner in Katsina State, told me, "Muslims bear the brunt more than anybody."

Northern Nigeria has the highest illiteracy rates in the country and twice as much poverty as the south. The entire country is experiencing an economic crisis because of inflation caused by the recent removal of a fuel subsidy. Kidnapping has become an alternative to the formal economy. The bandits' networks are difficult to identify, in part because they are now so deeply rooted in their communities' economic life. "You don't know who is the informant, who is divulging information to the bandits," Mu'azu said. Katsina State has begun cultivating locals who might provide intelligence, but recruitment remains difficult.

This year, the U.S. sent two hundred military personnel to assist Nigeria in counterterrorism efforts. Trump has launched further strikes in the country. But Sheikh Ahmad Gumi, a Muslim cleric who has acted as a middleman between the government and bandit groups, told me that economic development would be more effective than bombs. "The military approach cannot solve this problem," he said. "Indiscriminate bombardment is only going to worsen the situation, because we will have innocent casualties. People will start uniting against the United States."

Muslims bear the brunt of both the kidnappings and the military actions against the kidnappers. Since 2014, hundreds of people have been killed in Nigerian air strikes intended for bandit groups. In 2023, a bombing accidentally killed eighty-five people during a Muslim religious festival in Kaduna. This past April, a strike killed a hundred civilians in Yobe State, including several children. In May, Trump posted online that U.S. and Nigerian forces had killed a leader of the Islamic State in Nigeria named Abu Bakr al-Mainuki, during a "powerful and deadly strike against ISIS Terrorist Scum in Northwest Nigeria." Nigerians were perplexed: their government had announced two years before that it had killed Mainuki. The Nigerian government then clarified that the killing in 2024 had been a case of mistaken identity.

"Better turn back. All the mid-level-executive office space has been reclaimed by the sea."

• •

Kidnappings in Nigeria target the rich and the poor, the prominent and the unlucky. Last December, Praise Idesimi, a twenty-five-year-old nursing student, was travelling home on a bus from Veritas University for Christmas break. After she'd been on the road for nine hours, men with covered faces, carrying guns, stopped the vehicle and ordered the passengers to get out. "I was so scared," Idesimi said. "I thought I was going to die." One of the kidnappers

cocked his gun at her and accused her of staring at him. Later, the group released some of the children, and the bus driver took them to the main road. He never came back, and she wondered then whether he had been working with the bandits all along.

The kidnappers made the hostages walk through the forest for almost a week, travelling each night for ten hours. During the day, they were tied up and forced to lie on the ground in the sun; they were beaten with sticks. Idesimi's ransom was set at about three thousand dollars. At one point, she and the other hostages tried calling the bus company for help. "They said it was none of their business," Idesimi said. (A manager at the bus company told me, "It is not our business to negotiate with kidnappers. We are not security.") After six days, her family paid her ransom, and she was released.

I visited Idesimi afterward at Veritas. The campus was calm, but on guard. Young people walked freely among the terra-cotta buildings and mango trees, but there were military posts at the gates. The kidnapping crisis "keeps the university tensed up at every moment," Hyacinth Ichoku, the vice-chancellor of Veritas, said. "Students are afraid. Their parents are worried." The university has increased its security: Ichoku said that members of the police, state security services, and local watch groups patrolled the campus. He rarely slept through the night; he usually woke up several times to check in with campus security. I sat with Idesimi in Ichoku's office. She appeared younger than her age, with a soft voice and a thin frame. She was seeing a therapist, but still had nightmares. She was having difficulty keeping up with her living expenses, because her family was in debt after paying her ransom; Ichoku said that he would help arrange some kind of financial assistance.

Nigerians are not always better off when they seek help from the police. Adoyi Omale, a lecturer and a politician who lives in Abuja, was kidnapped from his car while driving out of town with his niece and two builders who were working on his home. "It was broad daylight, at around two o'clock in the afternoon," he recalled. His family paid a ransom of about six thousand dollars for the release of Omale and one of the builders. "I went straight to the police," he said. Instead of receiving help, he was given a bill for the money they had spent on the case: getting his niece and the other builder back to Abuja, hiring local vigilantes to look for Omale, holding his car at the station. The total was about twelve hundred dollars. "I just paid them," he said. "I wanted to get myself back to Abuja." (A spokeswoman for the police blamed this on the actions of a rogue officer. "It's wrong," she said, adding, "It's bad enough that we could not stop the kidnapping.")

In January, 2024, Mansoor Al-Kadriyar, a civil servant, was kidnapped with his five daughters from his home in Abuja. "They marched us all out," he said. Kadriyar called his brother, who called the police, and when they arrived there was a shoot-out. But the bandits overpowered the police and took the hostages into the woods. Kadriyar's daughter Nadheerah had been unable to cover her hair with a hijab before they left, which made her feel exposed. Her older sister Nabeeha was the bravest among them; even when the bandits pointed a gun at her, she didn't flinch. Kadriyar agreed to pay a ransom of about sixty thousand dollars, then was released so that he could gather the money.

When he returned to Abuja, he learned that his brother had been killed in the shoot-out. A relative started an online fund-raising campaign for his daughters' ransom. But a week passed, and they still didn't have enough money. The bandits then called to say that they had killed Nabeeha, in punishment. "It was a calamity," Kadriyar said.

After Nabeeha's death, more donations came in, and the family paid the ransom. Kadriyar's remaining daughters were released. "We were celebrating, we were thanking God," he said. He grieved for his daughter and brother, but tried to focus on his gratitude that the rest of them had survived. When I visited the family, Nadheerah could joke darkly about her ordeal. "Before it happened, I was trying to lose weight," she said. "So I was kind of happy that I was walking. I was getting my steps in." Kadriyar had since moved his family to an apartment in a more secure part of Abuja, but it was expensive. "We are not finding life easy," he said.

On February 4, 2024, the day of his daughter's birthday, Anyanwu's captors released him. Local motorbike-taxi drivers had brought money and phone cards from his sister, along with food, power banks, solar panels, and two new motorcycles. One of the drivers dropped Anyanwu off at the nearest highway, and his sister picked him up and took him to a hotel. The next day, he went to the hospital to be evaluated, then finally returned home. His wife cried when she saw him. She, too, had lost weight. "I couldn't recognize my wife. My baby didn't know me," he said. Immaculata told me, "My life was shattered. I was traumatized and very depressed. But I didn't give up."

Kidnappings in Nigeria have continued unabated. In Kogi State, bandits recently raided an orphanage and took twenty-three children hostage. In Katsina State, a retired military general and his wife were kidnapped from their car; the general later died in captivity. More than eleven hundred people were kidnapped in northern Nigeria in the first three months of 2026, according to Amnesty International.

Earlier this year, I visited Anyanwu and his wife at their home in Abuja. Their bungalow had modest furniture, and sunlight filled the sitting room. Anyanwu marvelled at the beauty of Immaculata, who was wearing a leopard-print dress and a matching headband. They seemed protective of each other: she stayed close as Anyanwu and I talked, keeping her eyes on him. "We are still not feeling comfortable," he said. "The incident is always with us."

He was looking for academic opportunities abroad. If they had had the means, he said, they would have left the country as soon as he was released from the hospital. But they had to pay back the money they had borrowed for the three ransoms. "There was no institutional support, nothing," Anyanwu said. "The support I got was from my friends, the school, of course, family, and the church." These days, he can't fall asleep until after midnight—the time when the bandits broke into his house. Before his abduction, Anyanwu had heard of people being kidnapped, but had not thought much about it. He said, "I never knew that it could happen to me." ♦

HEADLINES *STUPID ONION* EDITOR REJECTED

BY LARRY DOYLE

College Grad Escapes
Vicious Learning Cycle

Date Lectures Man
On Racist History
Of "Going Dutch"

Man Laughs Just
Right Amount at
Job Interview

Boyfriend Saving
First "I Love You"
For Emergency

Woman Insists
On Proposal Do-Over
Just Because He Forgot
Ring, Her Name

Groom Sees Omen
In Bride's Grammy
Leaving Teeth
In His Beer

Honeymoon Ruined
By Too Much
"Lovey-Dovey" Stuff

Man's Socks,
Underwear,
Favorite Shirt
Lost in Dryer

Married Man Still
Able to Drink at
Collegiate Level

New Father Who
Witnessed Miracle of Birth
Not Tapping
That Again

Man Loses Job
Over Handful of
Benign Remarks

Santa Expands List to
Include Naughty,
Nice, and
Too Nice

Sloppy Eater Dog's
New Best Friend

Trad Wives Give
Better Blow Jobs,
Experts Say

Second Baby
Redder Than First,
Dad Observes
From Chair

Sister-in-Law
Keeps Harping On
Toilet Incident

Man Cave Established
In Car in Driveway

Husband Furious Wife
Won't Let Him Swap Out
Free-Sex-Pass Celebrity
Who Got Old

Honey-Do Jar
Bursts Into Flames

Man Did Not Drink
Too Often Much

Tooth Fairy
Just Forgot,
O.K.?

Son Saying "Dad"
With Less Conviction
These Days

Dad Abdicates Marriage,
Mom Vows Changes
Around Here

Divorced Man's
Trusty Pick-Up Bar
Now a Chicken Place

Late-Night Cheese Snack
Not Cheese, E.R. Doctors
Determine

All Man's Old
College Girlfriends
Are Lesbians
Now

Ex-Wife Dating
Probable Mobster,
Pedophile

Daughter Doesn't
Wait Until Marriage
To Change Surname

Divorced Man
Shocked to Discover
Cunnilingus Mandatory
All of a Sudden

Man Fired Because
Boss's Kid
Also a Retard

Man's Life
Not Worth Living,
Goes On Anyway

Onion Rejects
Funny Man's
10,000th Headline

Ex-Wife Finds
Man's Death
Hilarious ♦

LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

U.S. JOURNAL

KABOOM!

Fireworks by Grucci's empire of explosions.

BY PAIGE WILLIAMS

A few days before the Fourth of July, I was on the rooftop of a casino in Las Vegas, where I ran into the head electrician of the Eisenhower Theatre at the John F. Kennedy Memorial Center for the Performing Arts, which is in Washington, D.C. The electrician, Thomas Benya, who is also a licensed pyrotechnician, had come to Vegas with a swarm of other pyrotechnicians, to set up, and set off, what was being billed as the nation's largest fireworks show. Back in D.C., President Donald Trump was claiming that *his* show, around the National Mall, would be bigger, and that he would be giving a "really long" speech. Trump had been trying to muscle his name onto the Kennedy Center, and then, amid a series of staff departures and cancellations by performers, closed the place down for a "comprehensive revitalization project"; Benya, who enjoys "building art with people," and who has worked at the Kennedy Center for twenty years, since he was eighteen, told me, "It's been traumatic." Vegas seemed unlikely to offer respite. A molten-gold "TRUMP" tower loomed over the north end of the Strip.

Three hundred and twenty-nine thousand visitors were in town, to celebrate America's two-hundred-and-fiftieth birthday, and all of them were on my elevator. It was a million degrees outside. On a different rooftop, on another day, a gloved woman whose T-shirt read "AS REAL AS IT GETS" paused while loading orange-strobe fireworks shells into three-inch mortars and told me, "When you've been around one hundred and twenty and above, this doesn't even feel like anything." The best sweaty person I saw in Vegas was an older woman with upswept black hair and bangs, wearing a lime-green fake chrysanthemum as plump as a grapefruit tucked behind her right ear, and carrying a Spanish fan. This was at a coffee shop in the Arts District, miles from the Strip. At the next table was a woman who also had black bangs, plus lip piercings and a tattoo on both wrists. She was engrossed in a book called "Fool's Errand," a fantasy novel about an assassin named FitzChivalry Farseer who, per a quick Google, has abandoned "self-imposed exile to rescue a missing prince and navigate perilous political waters." The woman wore an "Invader Zim" T-shirt: "DOOM! DOOM! DOOM! DOOM! DOOM! DOOM! DOOM!"

Belowground was the Vegas Loop—Elon Musk's idea. The Loop is a privately funded system of one-way tunnels designed to ferry passengers, in self-driving Teslas, among nine destinations, primarily the Las Vegas Convention Center, which is the size of eighty football fields. One of Musk's enterprises, the Boring Company, has been operating the tunnels since 2021. A local professor of public policy has called the Loop "the biggest, most absurd transit scam I have ever heard of." *ProPublica* uncovered ominous gaps in oversight, saying that because the Loop "receives no federal funding, it is exempt from the kinds of exhaustive governmental vetting and environmental analyses" often demanded of such proj-

For America's 250th, Grucci fired dozens of shows, including one that covered the entire three-and-a-half-mile Vegas Strip.

PHOTOGRAPH BY SPENCER LOWELL

ects. In other subterranean tunnels—storm drains, really—humans were living. It was monsoon season. Up top, you cook; down below, you drown.

The Strip provided distracting saturations of red-white-and-blue. The Sphere transmogrified into an enormous American-flag beach ball. Gift shops sold bedazzled Stars and Stripes tumblers. I saw a woman in a sequinned American-flag minidress, a man in American-flag shorts overalls. There were American-flag stilettos, cowboy hats, handbags. Topgolf was offering a "Let Freedom Swing" discount of 17.76 per cent. One casino was selling a cocktail called the Firecracker, which cost an ahistorical nineteen dollars. A G.M.C. Terrain was roaming around with its windows chalked in advertisements for "Peptides" and "IV Hydration," suggesting that there's a cure for everything.

A cure for mortality, in imperial China, was thought to be an alchemical mixture of sulfur, charcoal, and potassium nitrate—later known as gunpowder, or black powder. It did not work. But, when burned, the mixture went *BANG!* It could be stuffed into the hollow center of bamboo stems, which were already used to scare off evil spirits and mythical "mountain men," because the joints popped when thrown onto a fire. According to the historian John Withington, "It is said that for centuries, no self-respecting Chinese traveller would leave home without a stash of natural bamboo firecrackers."

Modulating the mixture produces different effects. More potassium nitrate sustains a longer burn; more sulfur quickens the explosion. Someone eventually thought to add metals, which yield color: sodium, for yellow; strontium, for red; barium, for green; aluminum or magnesium, for white. Copper chloride breaks up quickly under high heat and washes out—blu*ish*. Adding titanium produces a crackly effect. Iron shavings render gold. Today, various combinations are packed into cardboard spheres or cylinders—shells—along with fuses coated in a flammable slurry, then sealed inside kraft paper and shot from fibreglass mortars. Modernity has relieved humans of the added danger of approaching fireworks with a flaming torch or a lit cigar: professional displays are fired by electric current.

Shells are rigged to burn, and blow, in a specific manner. They can be made to go *POW*, *poof*, *boom*, BOOM, *BOOM!*, BOOM*BOOM*, *whoosh*, *CRACK*, *fffffffffft*, *tsssssssssssss*, *EEEEeeeeee.* Finales go *BOOMBOOM-BOOMBOOMBOOM*. One kind of firework sounds as though the sky just emptied its digital trash. Visual effects have their own names—chrysanthemum, peony, willow, palm. A falling-leaves effect looks like an enormous, invisible bucket of glitter just tipped. Crossettes fly apart like a cluster of struck billiard balls. A fireworks show's designer considers, in this order: theme, venue, budget, playlist. Setting fireworks to music has been compared to "scoring characters in a ballet—some are very robust and baroque-like, and some are very delicate, soft." The difference between a ten-thousand-dollar show and one that costs much more involves product quality, pacing, duration, density, and degree of difficulty. It's generally more complicated to make fireworks scale the Washington Monument than it is to, say, shoot them off a barge on a lake. The downsides of fireworks—trash, smoke, wildfire, dog trauma—are something that the average spectator pushes out of mind.

Fireworks shows happen continually in Vegas. A couple of nights before the Fourth, I stood in a parking lot at the Palace Station casino, waiting for one to begin. A father in a Bud Light T-shirt took selfies with his small son; a security guard told people to stop leaning against his Range Rover. At nine o'clock, we heard a distant whining. A cloud of dust rose in a gravel lot nearby, and a fleet of drones could be seen lifting in unison. Suddenly, in the sky—colored lights! In the shape of a giant lottery drum! It was like a spaceship, and it seemed close enough to reach up and touch. The drum rolled, and a green ball of light with the number 5 appeared beside it. The ball turned red, and the 5 turned to 4. Yellow (3), blue (2), back to green (1)—POW! POW-*POW!* Fireworks erupted in the black void next to the lotto drum—green poof, gold poof, silver spangles, white comets. Drones, which can be equipped with lights and programmed to precise G.P.S. coördinates, are meant to enhance, not necessarily replace, fireworks; they can even be equipped *with* fireworks. Would it have ruined the experience for spectators to have known that drone operators were using computers, not joysticks; and that pyrotechnicians, also using laptops, were sending thousands of lines of code via a radio transmission called F.S.K., frequency-shift keying, which sounds like AOL dial-up, to tell the fireworks when and where to go off?

The drone pilots—Nebraskans—worked for a company called Fantasy Drone Shows. Their leader, Scott Buss, a pyrotechnician and also a pilot, managed retail stores before moving to drones. Drones, he said, let him "tell stories in the sky"—a hand of blackjack, a giant margarita—but they don't tickle our monkey brain with their odor, or their concussive jolts. Buss enjoys drones; he *loves* fireworks—"the *feel* of it all."

The writer George Plimpton, a founder and the longtime editor of *The Paris Review*, considered fireworks the "eighth art," and he was obsessed with them. As part of the research for his book "Fireworks: A History and Celebration," which was published in 1984, he discovered an industry periodical with the slogan "He who hath once smelt the smoke is ne'er agin free." He interviewed a reverend in Minnesota who, having merged "his hobby with his clerical work," had become known as the "blaster pastor." The pastor explained to Plimpton that, during outdoor sermons, "I might say, '. . . and thus is the way of the Lord.' *Boom!* "

When Queen Elizabeth I reigned, from 1558 to 1603, she created a Fire Master of England position. Colonialist empires used fireworks to "overawe local people" and attempt to control them, Withington, the historian, notes in his recent book, "A History of Fireworks." Pyrotechnics have been performed at Versailles, the pyramids of Giza, Tiananmen Square, the White House. They have been launched from mountains, riverbanks, bridges, medieval ramparts, cathedrals. Fireworks herald the World Cup, the Olympics, inaugurations, weddings, railroad openings, royal matrimony, saints, the Saints,

the spring equinox, eclipses, the New Year, the Day of the Dead, the beginning of summer, the end of it. Peter the Great designed a display that "celebrated the treaty and final peace after twenty-one years of war with Charles XII of Sweden," Plimpton wrote, adding, "Apparently, he simply *loved* noise." America's founding is inextricable from fireworks; John Adams sent a letter to his wife on July 3, 1776, predicting that the nation's independence would be "solemnized" with, among other things, "Illuminations." Two hundred and fifty years later, this is taken to heart—relentlessly. Americans spent an estimated two and a half billion dollars on fireworks this year, and that's just the backyard stuff.

Fireworks shells are measured in diameter—one inch, three inches, four, twelve. Pyrotechnicians, and the designers of professional fireworks shows, decide which shells to use based on what a venue can physically and legally bear. In Las Vegas, Benya, the Kennedy Center electrician, and his colleagues were working a rooftop whose rubberized membrane could withstand only one-inchers, which can still take off a human hand. Plimpton always insisted on lighting his own. Fireworks spoke to him—the juxtaposition of "flamboyant colors" and "that fine fringe of danger." His summer parties in the Hamptons never failed to feature pyrotechnics. A guest once sued him, for eleven million dollars, over a burned arm. At one party, Norman Mailer wanted to light a shell. "He had his bourbon drink in a blue glass, really more a *vase*, the sort of receptacle one usually finds in the back of a kitchen cabinet when everything else in the house, even the plastic cups, has been commandeered," Plimpton wrote. "He held the drink in one hand, safe out behind him, and he approached the fuse" with a railroad flare, lighting a six-incher that weighed about eight pounds. It "came out almost instantaneously," and the surprise "toppled Norman into a complete backward somersalt through the sawgrass. Astonishingly, the blue vase remained upright as he pinwheeled around it; not a drop of bourbon splashed out. He got up and took a sip and asked if he could do another. 'Do you have anything slightly larger?'"

Fireworks have magical names—Red Silk, Monkey Child. Plimpton used to say that when he retired he wanted a job naming fireworks, and he wanted his cremated remains to be launched as fireworks. He was about to begin his memoirs when he died suddenly, in his sleep, at his family's apartment, on the Upper East Side. This happened on September 25, 2003, and he was seventy-six. The ashes waited. In 2005, his close friend Hunter S. Thompson, another writer who loved fireworks, died; the actor Johnny Depp, who had played Thompson in a movie, fired Thompson's cremains from a cannon near Aspen. Invited guests included Jack Nicholson, Sean Penn, and Senators George McGovern and John Kerry. A neighbor told the *Times*, "I'll always remember where I was when Hunter was blown into the heavens."

On July 4th of the next year, at Gardiner's Bay, in the Hamptons, Plimpton went up in his favorite firework, a Japanese Kamuro, which is also "known as the Boy's Haircut, or Japanese Willow—a golden cascade of light that hangs there for a moment, shimmering, before winking off into the darkness," his son, Taylor, later wrote. Taylor had packed the shells himself.

Fireworks by Grucci was Plimpton's preferred pyro provider. That's who Benya was working for on the casino roof in Las Vegas. The Gruccis have been in the business for six generations, since 1850, first in Bari, Italy, on the Adriatic Sea, and later in Bellport, New York, on the South Shore of Long Island. Grucci forebears immigrated through Ellis Island. It has been said that they "came here, basically, with a shoebox with some formulas in it, and a dream to be in the United States."

Felix Grucci, Sr., opened a small factory in Bellport in 1929. During the Great Depression, fireworks shows went dark, and Grucci found a side job playing drums in a band. Later, to diversify, Grucci took a U.S. military contract manufacturing training simulators that mimicked an atomic bomb. In the early seventies, his adult children, Butch, Donna, and Jimmy, started running the fireworks company. Jimmy liked trying new things. The Gruccis were among the first to fire shows using computers and electronics. Jimmy was said to have invented an effect called the split comet, which multiplies as it blows apart. In 1979, he insisted that the Gruccis travel to Monte Carlo to compete in an invitation-only fireworks competition. They won. The Gruccis started to be referred to as the First Family of Fireworks, an honorific that,

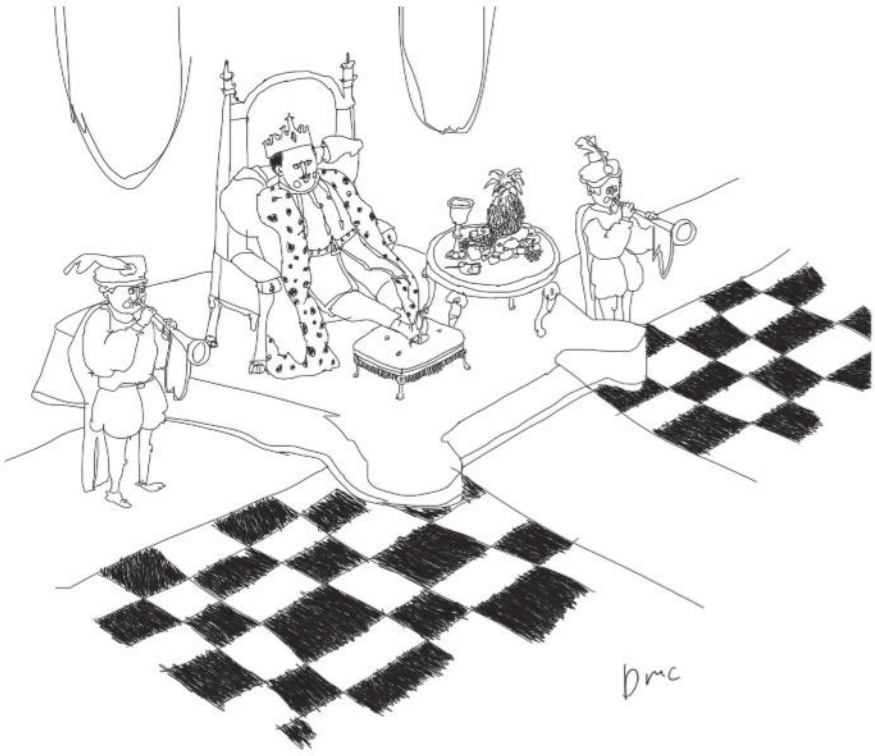
"What if nobody wants your papers?"

to this day, can be found on the company logo.

The Gruccis were spending Thanksgiving weekend of 1983 making final preparations for Christmas and New Year's Eve shows when an explosion levelled their factory in Bellport. The ground shook for twenty miles. Locals immediately figured Russian bombs—the end of the world. Felix was at the factory but somehow was not injured. Jimmy and a nineteen-year-old cousin, Donna Gruber, were killed. Plimpton, who was close with the Gruccis, got a phone call and was in Bellport within hours, talking his way past police barricades and onto a "tortured" landscape, which reminded him of photos of trench battles in the First World War. Butch told Plimpton that pyrotechnicians never quite stop thinking about the worst that can happen: "You live with it every day, sort of like knowing that nuclear weapons are pointed at you." Then he said, "When it really happens, it's nothing like what you thought. I had an idea the sound would be deep and kind of awesome, like being inside a wave, but it was different. It was a ripping and tearing sound, high and piercing, almost a kind of shriek."

A member of the Pyrotechnics Guild International wondered if the explosion had been caused by spontaneous combustion. "It was awful to consider," Plimpton wrote. "A single shell, packed in amid its fellows, slowly, in the darkness of the warehouse, changing its internal composition until now, a deadly instrument, it awaited some delicate shift of atmospheric pressure, or a certain degree of humidity, to be triggered into that first puff of smoke." Another theory was arson. A town had grown up around the once rural factory's location, and certain neighbors had been pushing for Grucci to relocate, which is eventually what happened. The cause of the explosion was never revealed, if ever it was known.

A eulogy for Jimmy Grucci was delivered by Plimpton, whose vibe had been theatrical since at least his Hasty Pudding days. (When Plimpton met his first wife, at P. J. Clarke's, he was wearing a cape.) A double descendant of prominent Mayflower families, he spoke in an accent that Taylor has described as "old New England, old New York, tinged with a hint of King's College King's English." You might imagine how it sounded, then, when Plimpton noted, to a crowd of mourners, that Jimmy's after-dinner "recreation" was to "watch tapes of his favorite Grucci fireworks shows on the great curved extra-sized television screen at the foot of his bed," and that his alarm clock was that same television, set to "the climactic moment of the Tchaikovsky 1812 Overture as played outdoors by Arthur Fiedler and the Boston Pops." During performances, Plimpton said, Jimmy often threw in extra shells, "to give an audience just a bit more than what was necessary."



"Establish an absolute and unquestionable rule over the entire kingdom and you'll never work a day in your life."

• • •

Jimmy Grucci had a son, Phil, who was a freshman at Long Island University at the time of the explosion. Phil had been going to Grucci shows with his family since he was a boy, and he remembered spectators crowding around his grandfather on the Coney Island boardwalk, to congratulate and praise him after each finale. "That's very addictive," he once said. Plimpton called Phil "Philly"—"Phil-*lay!*" They climbed the Brooklyn Bridge together, to work on its centennial show. Phil remembers Plimpton sitting beside him during performances, gazing skyward and banging him gleefully on the knee, and shouting, "Go! Go! Go!" Phil-*lay* later oversaw the packing of Plimpton's ashes into the Kamuros.

Fireworks by Grucci survived the Bellport explosion, in part because, the following year, the developer Steve Wynn hired the company for the opening of a new tower at the Golden Nugget, in Las Vegas. The Gruccis have performed the big shows in Vegas ever since. They went on to fire the Statue of Liberty centennial, several Olympic Games, World's Fairs, dozens of New Year's Eve millennium shows, the Inaugurations of Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Donald Trump. "I've had people say, 'I can't believe you're shooting fireworks for that guy!'" Phil told me. "I say, 'We are a bipartisan fireworks company.'" (Barack Obama skipped fireworks at his Inaugurations.)

Phil and his wife, Debra, who wears

a "Grucci" necklace studded with tiny, tasteful diamonds, have two children, Lauren and Christopher, who are in their thirties. Along with a cousin, Corey, they are the next generation of Fireworks by Grucci. All are licensed pyrotechnicians. Lauren's first show was at Pearl Harbor. A photographer, she documents the performances that her father and brother put on. Chris works shows and is also a program manager for Pyrotechnique by Grucci, the defense-contracting side of the business, which still makes training simulators for the military: now hand grenades, and the kinds of groundbursts that a soldier might encounter via a trip wire. His wife, Lemonia, who goes by Lena, was the company's H.R. director until she decided to spend more time at home with their daughter, Siena, who was born two years ago—two days after the Fourth of July, to Phil's feigned dismay. Gruccis aren't required to work in the family business, but they usually do. Phil told me, "We get hooked on it in the womb—hear the noise in the background, come out ready to go."

In 2006, Wynn took the Gruccis to Macau, to fire an opening for the first of his properties in Asia. "He always said, 'I'll give you the building, you give me the razzmatazz,'" Phil told me. Two years later, the hospitality magnate Jerry Inzerillo hired the Gruccis for the opening of the man-made archipelago Palm Jumeirah, in Dubai. Plans for Grucci shows—even those performed in the U.S.—now come from engineers and designers in Dubai, where Grucci has an office. Phil expects the Middle East to overtake the U.S. soon as the largest over-all market. "They're not about razzmatazz—they're about *big*," he said.

Saudi Arabia alone has a "giga-tourism" goal of attracting a hundred and fifty million annual visitors by 2030, through U.F.C. fights, Formula 1 races, theme parks. "Something beyond oil," as Phil put it. Fireworks shows for certain events have giga-budgets, though it is hard to get a dollar amount. Millions? I pressed Phil. "Oh, yeah," he said. The bigger the budget, the better the "opportunity to go outside of the box." The Gruccis have fired the Burj Khalifa, the planet's tallest building, which stands just over half a mile high, in Dubai; a UNESCO World Heritage site made of clay, in Saudi Arabia; and Al Marjan Island, another man-made archipelago, in the emirate of Ras al-Khaimah.

For years, Grucci held the record for having made and fired the largest aerial shell—sixty inches. Phil showed me a replica at one of his company's warehouses; it looked like a mutant Christmas ornament. That record was broken in 2020, in Steamboat Springs, Colorado. Such records require feats of engineering. The Steamboat Springs shell contained three hundred and eighty comets and had been wrapped in fifty-one miles of gummed paper by a machine built specifically for that purpose. The shell weighed two thousand seven hundred and ninety-seven pounds and was shot out of a custom-made mortar, on a mountaintop. The lift had to be powerful enough to blast the massive orb into the sky, and the shell had to explode at just the right moment, without raining flaming debris. The Gruccis have been commissioned to break that record on New Year's Eve, in Dubai, with a sixty-six-inch shell, and they have already been hired to plan for seventy inches, in 2027. Phil told me, "The Middle East—particularly the U.A.E. and Saudi Arabia—are very, *very* energized by world records."

The Gruccis import their fireworks already assembled, largely from Italy and Spain. The Italians are respected fireworks-makers from way back, and the Spanish city of Valencia has long been known for its pyrotechnics festivals. "You want flawless, perfect stuff? Go to Japan. It's like getting a diamond," Chris told me one morning, in Las Vegas. Grucci also imports from China—but less, these days. "It's just too expensive," he said. (Tariffs.)

The imports come through Pyrotechnique by Grucci, which is based out of the Radford Army Ammunition Plant, near Virginia Tech. The plant was built during the Second World War, to manufacture propellants for rockets and other artillery. During the coronavirus pandemic, when fireworks shows were cancelled, the company surged staff to Radford, where most Grucci operations now take place. Chris moved there from Bellport. He and Lena, whose family is from Greece, got married in Roanoke, which had the closest Greek Orthodox Church they could find. Phil marked the occasion with a fireworks tribute. The hotel hosting the reception allowed this only after a demonstration and with the assurance that the Gruccis would not shoot off anything that generated close sparks. The hotel, which is on the National Register of Historic Places, had nearly burned down before.

Chris prefers the rote stability of defense manufacturing to the logistical chaos of fireworks shows, which can get derailed by anything from high wind to a fumbled permit. A couple of weeks before the Fourth, I met him and his father at the Radford plant, a complex that occupies nearly seven thousand acres straddling the New River. I had to clear three security checkpoints to get in. Parts of the property appeared unused and overgrown, with signs that read "Welcome to First Rolled Powder" and "Increment Weigh House." There were steel chutes and silos and rusted railroad tracks and gas pumps, and objects that looked like intergalactic lug nuts. A contractor, B.A.E. Systems, now runs the plant and leases workspace to thirteen commercial tenants. As a Grucci assistant and I passed a Northrop Grumman building, the assistant said, "I don't know what goes on in there. I try to be careful with my curiosity."

Grucci's main office was a prefabricated building set among long, low-slung, flat-roofed structures that called to mind old-timey chicken houses, with open bays. The buildings were color-coded. Blue trim meant no explosives; red meant the obvious. A safety official named Scott handed me a fire-resistant lab coat, goggles, and a pair of black clodhoppers designed to discharge static electricity. Some of the buildings had specialty flooring and lighting, and maximum-occupancy rules. In one, Scott had me step onto a machine that resembled a scale, with a needle indicator that moved from red to green, measuring the conductivity of the shoes.

My needle stayed in the red—my feet were too dry, potential friction. Scott directed me to remove the shoes and spritz the bottom of my socks with water from the kind of bottle that you'd use to mist a houseplant. I put the shoes back on and tried the scale again. The needle shot into the green.

Chris walked me to a building where workers were using automated machinery to drop black powder and pulverized aluminum into cardboard tubes, to make the hand-grenade and groundburst simulators. The tubes reminded me of the inside of a roll of toilet paper. The grenade simulators are designed to build muscle memory in soldiers: pull the pin, throw it, take cover, don't just stand there and watch.

In a room smelling of cornstarch, Chris showed me where workers coat cotton twine in a black-powder slurry, to make fusing called "quick match." In an X-ray area, an employee was running explosives samples through a machine that printed out moisture levels on a diagnostic slip that looked like a receipt. Then we watched a team leader named Paul tape fuses to cardboard tubes, venting each with two tiny holes made by a corncob holder.

We passed through an area where the *tsssssssssss* of compressed air was so loud that one employee wore earplugs. She was attaching whistles to simulators—some can be made to sound like incoming missiles—and sealing them with glue. Near a building marked "Prime & Ferrule," an employee named Jimmy handed Chris a small container in which he'd been test-mixing an oily amalgam of black powder, camphor, and acetone. I took a sniff—nail-polish remover, times a thousand. Jimmy laughed and said, "It'll clear you out."

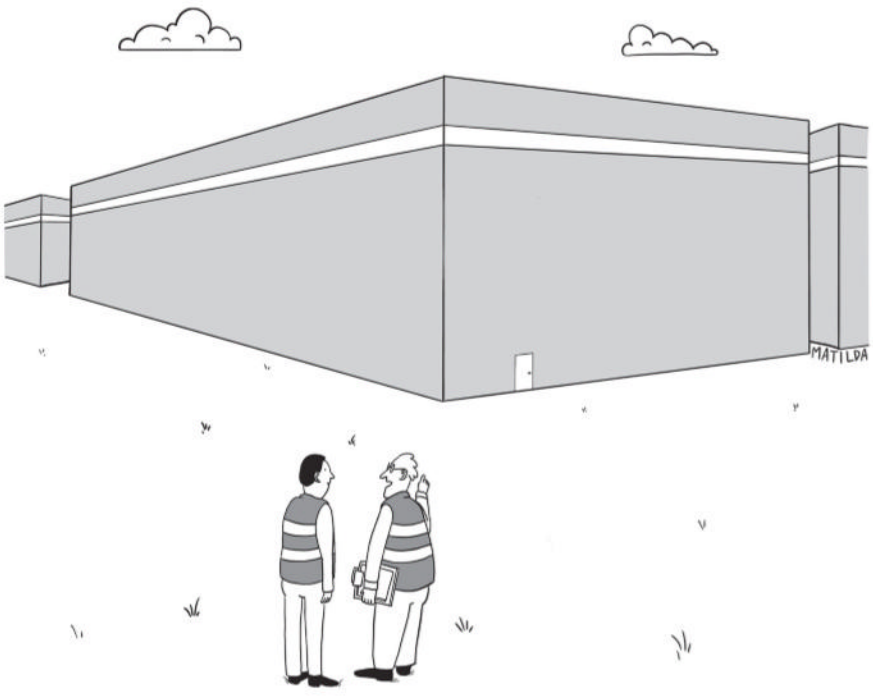
I got into a Chevy Suburban, license plate "GRUCCI," and rode with Phil to a vast, open field where a large buck likes to sleep in the cool sand beneath a pole barn and groundhogs could be seen scampering off into the weeds. Four Grucci employees, led by a young crew chief named Alyson, were ending their workday by test-firing one last hand grenade and one last groundburst simulator. They placed the grenade on a catapult and operated it from within a three-sided safety hut, via a rope threaded through a window. "It's almost like 'Looney Tunes'—go in your little bunker and pull the rope," Alyson told me.

The grenade fell just short of the sandpit and blew up—it passed. An employee named Gary placed the groundburst simulator upright on a metal stand and attached the rope, which they let me pull. *BANG!* went the simulator, leaving shredded cardboard and a plume of smoke.

Grucci fireworks are stored in magazines, which in Radford are cement-block structures hidden by earthen berms and heavy timber. The magazines are well spaced, in case one blows. Phil drove me to one that looked deserted. Three employees were inside, pulling boxes for a July 4th show in Yonkers. Product was organized by effect. As I was looking at a box labelled "Letter shell 'P' White," Phil said, "We have pretty much every letter in the alphabet."

The fireworks and equipment for Vegas had already gone out. The logistics were being managed in another Grucci facility—part office, part warehouse—in nearby Dublin. When I met Phil there, trucks were coming and going, filled with mortars and modular panels. The office's main corridor was lined with large framed photos of Grucci shows. Phil and I stopped in front of a shot of the grand reopening of the Palms, a Las Vegas casino: two high-rise towers that, dressed in fireworks, evoked brightly feathered birds. Phil said, "I get inspired by the architecture of the structures that we work with. How do we emphasize it with fireworks without overwhelming what we're there to honor?" He had envisioned comets coming off the top of the buildings, twenty-foot "fountains" out front, and multicolored mines running up and down the sides, spewing horizontally, like fixed wings. "Then the question is: How do you attach the mines horizontally? How do you make them equidistant? These windows don't open," he said, pointing, "so the only way you can do that is rappel down the side, or lower cables that have preloaded rigging. And then you have to keep it off the building, so you don't damage the building." The Palms show had required a twenty-person crew and four days of setup. "All of the logistics and the production comes together for that ten- or fifteen- or twenty-minute performance," he said. "And the audience roars—hopefully."

Grucci's director of operations, Brenda Albano, oversees logistics for



"This data center is set aside for storing accidental screenshots of your phone's home screen."

a couple of hundred shows per year. Phil said, "It's like moving a small army around." There are permits to secure, protocols to finalize. Barges don't magically cross state lines. Trucks need to be routed, drivers hired. Albano, a native Virginian, has been with the company for twenty-seven years. She started out on the defense side. Before that, she sewed toes onto socks at a factory. She prefers fireworks. Like a lot of Grucci employees, she is also a licensed pyrotechnician. If she were a firework, she would be a flying fish—in constant motion. Phil would be a hornet swarm—all over the place. Chris would be a fountain—steady burning, grounded. Albano is too restless to sit at a desk; she stands. She keeps Skittles and a Costco-size jar of Mt. Olive dill pickles in her office, alongside reflective vests and a book called "Hazardous Materials, Substances & Waste Compliance Guide." A decorative woodblock on her bookshelf reads "BUT DID YOU DOCUMENT IT?" She told me, "I am bossy, and I'm demanding, and I'm loud, and I don't like lazy people."

Grucci employs more than two hundred people full time. Some who transfer from the defense side can't handle the pace in fireworks, which also has hundreds of part-time pyrotechnicians. Full-timers commit with the understanding that no one takes vacation between May 1st and July 15th, and that they may be asked to leave for Las Vegas the day after Christmas, as Chris Grucci does, to prepare for the New Year's Eve show.

Ahead of July 4th, Albano was running near-constant check-ins with staff, while also managing an ailing dog and meeting with the fire marshal, to get cleared for incoming storage pods. I was sitting in on one of her conference calls when someone broke the bad news that Andrew Warby, a chief pyrotechnician who'd been hired to work Vegas, was in the hospital—he'd just fractured a foot while jogging. "Is that rooftop wheelchair accessible?" someone on the call said. Warby, a native Australian who lives in Dallas, showed up in Vegas in a medical boot. By the time I met him, on the roof of a casino called Sunset Station, he'd tossed the boot—it was slowing him down. Limping, he cheerily told me, "Show must go on!," as he's surely said to the media a thousand times before.

The Gruccis have many clients in Las Vegas. They had produced the fireworks that accompanied the drone show at Palace Station. For the Fourth, they were putting on several shows out in the Las Vegas Valley, and the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority had hired them to fire the entire three-and-a-half-mile Strip. Pyrotechnicians were assigned to the rooftops of the Aria, Caesars Palace, the Fontainebleau, the MGM Grand, Planet Hollywood, Resorts World, the Strat, Treasure Island, and the Venetian. Designers and engineers in Dubai had sent bespoke site plans. Joe Sedlock, a chief pyrotechnician from Columbus, Ohio—who would almost work for free, because hearing a crowd's reaction "is like Christmas morning"—showed me color-coded schematics of mortar racks, fallout areas, safety distances, products, and firing times, down to the millisecond. Forty comets, fired from different locations and at a seventy-degree angle, yield what? "A nice, pretty cross," Sedlock said, adding, "We can fill the sky—sort of *paint* it." He was scheduled to fire the MGM Grand, whose twenty-eight-page site plan involved, by my count, at least two thousand five hundred and eighty-one effects: "RED RING W/CRACKLING PISTIL," "TIME RAIN TO GOLD," "SUPER CRACKLE (SALUTE)." The over-all technical director, Oscar Lopez, whose day job entails managing events at Resorts World, hustled crews carefully among setups and sites. Just inside the roof door at Resorts World, where the crew included Benya, Lopez had used a black marker to trace the outline of his large shoes, and to write "CELL SIGNAL," on the cement floor. Stepping into his footprints, he told me, "This is the only place where I can make a phone call."

Large patches of duvetyn, a fire-resistant fabric, had been taped to the Resorts World roof. Benya and other pyrotechnicians were wiring up hundreds of racks of comets—which resembled opaque, oversized test tubes—affixing them to plywood slabs and placing them on the duvetyn. The wiring contained copper, which can short. Benya told me, "It doesn't matter if it's this eighteen-gauge wire carrying twelve volts or a six-aught cable carrying four hundred and eighty—you gotta respect it, you gotta be careful with it, you gotta terminate it properly."

In the operation's command center, Room 38029 in the Masquerade Tower of the Rio, large curved windows overlooked the entire Strip and an eastern sweep of valley. A computer monitor showed real-time weather conditions, including wind speed. Dedicated binders held schedules and protocols—fallout frontages, spotter locations—counting down to "SHOWTIME!!," 21:00 hours. Music: "Born in the U.S.A." (Springsteen), "Waking Up in Vegas" (Katy Perry), "Viva Las Vegas" (Elvis). Chris had conducted a dress rehearsal, to work out kinks in the variously assigned rooftop laptops and firing systems. F.S.K. code fuzzed from a speaker. "That is the underlying heartbeat of *every*thing," he said.

Just before 21:00, a security guard escorted me and a couple of others to the roof of the Rio. Below us, on the terrace of a lounge called VooDoo, several dozen people were dancing, drinks in hand, in front of a live band. An older man kept trying to make a "U.S.A.!" chant happen. Precisely at nine, we heard—*shhhh-prrrrroooo BOOM*. Fireworks appeared simultaneously above all nine Strip locations. Everybody on the VooDoo terrace watched through lifted phones.

The show was so spread out that it felt less personal and powerful than the Palace Station performance, the one with the drones. An even cooler sight, I thought, was in the valley, where lesser shows played out ceaselessly and, from where we stood, silently—a diorama of glitter and spark. The entire landscape seemed alive.

Grucci made its name on finales—when the tempo picks up and the reports intensify. This show ended after eight minutes and four seconds. A few people at the VooDoo went, "Woooooo!" The Las Vegas *Review-Journal's* live stream captured spectators saying, "Look at 'em all!," and "Las Vegas sure knows how to do fireworks, huh?" The written comments were less favorable: "extremely boring," "highly disappointed." That's show biz. As the smoke drifted off, the VooDoo band came back on and Jimi Hendrixed "The Star-Spangled Banner." Nobody seemed to mind that it wasn't the real thing. ♦

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LETTER FROM BEIJING

THE FUTURE, MADE IN CHINA

Beijing is competing with the U.S. for tech supremacy. Who wins will have huge political implications.

BY EVAN OSNOS

Kai-Fu Lee, the C.E.O. of the artificial-intelligence company 01.AI, lives in a mirrored high-rise in Beijing, near a procession of landmarks that emperors considered the center of the cosmos. Lee takes early meetings at a nearby hotel that could be in any country, except that the room service is delivered by robots painted in the livery of butlers and maids. State propaganda hails these robots as emblems of China's ascent; in the hallway, most people sidestep them with the kind of indifference usually reserved for a Roomba.

Over breakfast one recent morning, Lee, wearing a white polo shirt and rimless glasses, spoke about the future with an air of sanguine curiosity. He was born in Taiwan in 1961 and built his career by following the moving frontier of opportunity. He got a degree in computer science from Columbia in the eighties and went on to Carnegie Mellon to study the fledgling field of A.I.—which he described back then as a "most promising science" that would be "men's final step to understand themselves." He ran speech recognition at Apple, and in 1992 appeared on "Good Morning America" to show off a prototype computer that used voice commands to record the news on a VCR. (The host, Joan Lunden, marvelled, "It's almost going to be like a friend.") During a stint at Microsoft, he recalls, he urged Bill Gates to buy an ambitious startup called Google, but Gates declined. Lee later became the head of Google in China.

Lee moved to investing in 2009, and planned to focus on both China and the United States, but eventually he closed his American office. "It's two different universes now," he told me. The countries have diverged not only over such long-standing issues as trade, Taiwan, human rights, and espionage but also, increasingly, over the politics of technology. As Lee has noted, the Obama Administration released the federal government's first major plan for the A.I. age in 2016, but it barely registered: it came out a few days after the "Access Hollywood" tape detonated in the Presidential campaign. When Donald Trump took office, he scrapped the plan and entrusted A.I.

As Trump cut research funds, China took what one investor calls an "all-hands-on-deck approach to national innovation."

strategy largely to Silicon Valley. When China's government issued its own A.I. plan, soon afterward, it was dense with turgid Communist Party jargon, but it also laid out a vast industrial policy, covering applications ranging from agriculture to policing, that promised "major breakthroughs" by 2025 and "world leading" status by 2030. Lee called it an "all-hands-on-deck approach to national innovation."

For a long time, China looked west for visions of the future. These days, it favors its own. The Chinese car company BYD recently surpassed Tesla as the world's largest maker of electric vehicles. A popular clip shows Tesla's C.E.O., Elon Musk, being asked in 2011 about competition from BYD, which was then known mainly for a boxy, undersized sedan; Musk laughed and said, "Have you seen their car?" Fifteen years later, China has more than a hundred automakers, competing for customers with such extravagant features as in-car karaoke, mechanical foot massagers, and video headlights that can project drive-in movies.

Lee, whose social-media posts have attracted more than fifty million followers, has a striking forecast for the two countries in which he has prospered. In his book "AI Superpowers," published in 2018, he predicts a "new world order" with "waves of technology that will soon wash over the global economy and tilt the geopolitical landscape toward China." That kind of prophecy suits the official mood in Beijing, where Xi Jinping, the President and the General Secretary of the Communist Party, calls technology the "main battlefield of international competition" and bluntly asserts that "the East is rising, and the West is declining."

In July, the Chinese firm Moonshot released an A.I. model that performed comparably to its American competitors, at a fraction of the cost. Microchip stocks plunged, on fears that China will dominate A.I., much as it now dominates hardware. China produces at least seventy per cent of the world's drones, electric vehicles, lithium-ion batteries, and solar cells. It deploys more industrial robots than the rest of the world combined, and, in medicine, it has surpassed the United States in the number of registered clinical trials. Its shipbuilding capacity is roughly two hundred times that of the U.S., and some observers in Washington worry that American stockpiles of munitions would not match China's in a war over Taiwan.

Both countries are uneasily preoccupied with their trajectory these days. While the U.S. worries about whether it can continue a century of dominance, China is eager to restore its historical eminence, after two hundred years of what the Party sees as anomalous poverty. Zhou Bo, a retired senior colonel in the People's Liberation Army who is now a fellow at Tsinghua University, told me, "Common sense says countries rise and fall in cycles." But Americans, in his view, have lost that historical awareness. "They have been so strong for so long that every American believes, 'I'm a member of the strongest nation on earth,'" he said. The Chinese are no less convinced of their ascendancy. A European diplomat who has attended meetings with Xi and his advisers told me, "They're feeling like the champions of the world. They think they can contend with anybody."

A decade ago, few people in Beijing would have predicted that China would challenge the U.S. anytime soon. China's decades-long economic boom was slowing, and the government's choke

ILLUSTRATION BY CLEON PETERSON

"The cookies are mediocre, but they have the longest line in the city."

• •

hold on free thought was sending ambitious people abroad. In those days, an American in China who raised the merits of the two countries was likely to have a catechistic exchange. You'd note that China was growing powerful. Your acquaintance would reply, "Not as powerful as America."

The Chinese establishment has abandoned that view in stages. When Brexit was approved, in 2016, the West seemed to be turning inward. The fight over COVID-19 vaccines provided a signal that the U.S. was splintering; the storming of the Capitol offered another. After Trump returned to the White House, his Administration declared, "The days of the United States propping up the entire world order like Atlas are over." His aide Stephen Miller spoke instead of an international order "governed by force," adding, "These are the iron laws of the world that have existed since the beginning of time."

In Beijing, a think tank at Renmin University recently published an assessment titled "Thank Trump," which wryly hailed his efforts to hasten the "twilight of an empire," by undermining America's alliances, civil service, scientific institutions, and democratic credibility. In the past two years, the international approval rating of the U.S. has dropped nearly forty points, according to a worldwide survey by the Alliance of Democracies; in multiple polls, China now rates higher than the U.S.

For China, America's retreat comes just as decades of state investment, industrial policy, and diplomatic planning are paying off. It would be foolhardy to entirely trust China's official statistics; as the economist Gao Shanwen once told an audience in D.C., the official growth rate "will always be around five per cent." But the change is plainly visible. In two decades, China has gone from producing about half as much electricity as the U.S. to generating more than twice as much, at far lower prices; in 2023, it installed more solar power than America has installed in its entire history. Meanwhile, Trump reëmbraced fossil fuels, in what the historian Timothy Snyder called "superpower suicide in perhaps the most basic form."

Trump has promised for years that he would stop China from "raping our country" through unfair trade practices. On "Liberation Day," in April, 2025, he unveiled a program of sweeping tariffs. Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent predicted that Beijing would quickly submit, saying that his counterparts were "playing with a pair of twos." Instead, China retaliated by restricting exports of rare earths and high-powered magnets. Within weeks, Ford was forced to suspend production of Explorers at its plant in Chicago, and automakers were pleading for a deal. Since then, China has not only retained its position as the world's largest trading nation; it also achieved a record trade surplus of $1.2 trillion, as it redirected its exports away from the U.S. In 2001, four out of five countries traded more with America than with China. By 2023, the map had reversed: seven in ten trade more with China.

For the moment, China's rulers have avoided overtly antagonizing America, because they believe that, even in decline, it remains uniquely dangerous. After Trump's interventions in Venezuela and Iran, and his threats to Canada and Greenland, the Beijing *Daily*, a Communist Party mouthpiece, wrote that the U.S. was "dragging the world back to a dark age of plunder and division through superior military might." But that bluster obscures a colder calculation: Chinese leaders believe that Trump's struggle to dominate the world is actually aiding China.

Rush Doshi, a professor at Georgetown and a China specialist at the Council on Foreign Relations, sees in Trump's pursuit of territorial control a recurring historical error. In the eighteenth century, while Russia fixated on conquering Eurasia, Britain developed the steam engine; in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, while Europeans fought over Africa, Americans mastered the assembly line. Today, while the U.S. tries to govern Venezuela and hobble Iran and Cuba, "China is focussed on winning the technologies of the future," Doshi said. If the U.S. were to lose the competition over the next wave of industries—including A.I., biotech, and robotics—as it lost the ones over solar panels, batteries, and electric vehicles, "it would irreversibly change the balance of power."

What kind of world does China imagine? A preview of sorts is provided by its Belt and Road Initiative, which since 2013 has directed about a trillion dollars into scores of countries, building highways, hospitals, mines, ports, and "smart cities" equipped with Chinese technology. To China, Doshi said, "autocracies are considered perfectly legitimate, and technology is used to strengthen them. China increasingly says to autocrats, Would you like to stay in power? I can help you with that." In Nepal, where newly installed facial-recognition systems have been deployed against activists, a photograph from a security headquarters showed a wall of video feeds above a sign that read "With Compliments of the Ministry of Public Security of China."

But the clearest indication of Beijing's global vision may be the current state of China itself. "A country tends to create an external order that looks a lot like its internal order," Doshi said. "China doesn't want you to think too hard about what its ascendance will mean for the world. They want to show you the edge of the future. They have two messages they want to sell everybody. One is 'We are inevitable.' And the other one is 'Don't worry.'"

Beijing is quieter than when I lived there, from 2005 to 2013. The vehicles, many of which are electric now, move silently through the streets, and in any case the residents have fewer reasons to go out; China has the world's busiest e-commerce market, and there isn't much that can't be delivered on the back of a scooter. All day long, people scan each other's QR codes to swap cash on such digital-payment systems as WeChat and Alipay, feeding the algorithms an ever more intricate portrait of their movements and preferences.

There is an awkward serenity to life in the capital of a high-tech, one-party state. "This is one of the safest places in the world, if you're not a dissident," the European diplomat told me. More than a decade into Xi Jinping's campaign to remove unwelcome figures from the Party, the military, and the business élite, the purges have circled back to the highest ranks. (People used to say that the purges evoked an old Chinese saying, "Kill the chickens to scare the monkeys." Now they say that Xi is just killing the monkeys.) One gets oddly accustomed to vanishing acquaintances. Since charges can stay secret for years, a person may simply "disappear into thin air," the diplomat said, adding that it is regarded as a by-product of social maintenance. "The big priority here is the Party machine. People come second."

China's leaders have long believed that technology can help the state overcome the disorder of human affairs. Xi, who has borrowed Stalin's image of ideological tools as "engineers of the human soul," has expanded the government's reach into private life, in the name of promoting "civilized" behavior. In the southern city of Guangzhou, A.I. is helping discipline residents who fail to separate food waste from regular trash, by posting their photos to the "exposure station," a digital screen near trash bins. Other cities use similar systems to expose litterers, jaywalkers, and spitters.

Businesses are taking up the effort, too. At an expo of A.I.-enabled products in Beijing, I came upon a tall white kiosk made by Langxin, a company that applies A.I. to psychology. The machine was marked "Emotion Recognition Training Enhancement System." I stood in front of a camera for an assessment of "micro-gestures" in my face, and the screen produced a pie chart labelled "Positive and Negative Proportions." It informed me that I possess 76.67 per cent positive emotion and 23.33 per cent negative emotion. My negative feelings, it turned out, included 13.33 per cent fear and 6.67 per cent rage.

Langxin markets similar products for teachers, including the Comprehensive Risk Early Warning system, which scans students for signs of disruptive behavior; by combining data from classes, dormitories, spending, and psychological records, it assigns each pupil an "alert" level of red, yellow, or blue. Police have more powerful options. At a trade fair in Beijing, another company marketed software that scans vital signs from a distance and purports to make a personality assessment in fifteen seconds, including emotional stability and "behavioral tendencies."

A.I. has rapidly settled into Chinese work and life. People in China often regard technology with less wariness than Americans do, because living standards have improved so dramatically in the computing era. In the nineteen-seventies, more than seventy per cent of the population worked in agriculture; today, that figure is less than twenty-five per cent. Kai-Fu Lee, the investor, suggested that the Chinese had also been culturally primed for this kind of technology. For Americans, "*always listening* is a scary thing," he said. In China, cameras already cover just about every square inch of occupied space. Lee touted new software from his company which allows him to record every office meeting and analyze the audio with such prompts as "Of the projects I think are going well, which ones really aren't?" The software also tracks verbal commitments in a log called the Promise Ledger, so that staff can be held accountable during performance reviews. I asked if his recordings made anyone less willing to take on commitments. "There is perhaps some chilling effect," he said. "But in China not so much, because people always assume the boss is powerful and has a right to listen." He added, "It's a self-selection process. Those who don't like it won't join my company."

On the south side of Beijing, I visited China's most famous auto plant—the Hyperfactory, a campus the size of a hundred soccer fields that was built in fourteen months. It belongs to Xiaomi, a company that made its name selling smartphones and household goods, such as electric toothbrushes and frying pans, before entering the car business.

In the lobby, I found a delegation of Chinese visitors unfurling a hammer-and-sickle flag for a group portrait. Beyond them was a busy Starbucks counter. Suspended from wires overhead, a sports car was poised as if racing around a Möbius strip, meant to evoke the unending pursuit of improvement.

A guide herded us onto golf carts and drove us into a cavernous site, with so few visible workers that one could be forgiven for thinking that it was a national holiday. The cars are built by some seven hundred robots, packed together in intricate, choreographed formations controlled by thick bundles of wires. Fresh parts arrive aboard a hundred and twenty-seven autonomous carts, which bleat "Make way!" at humans who wander into their path. According

to the company, a finished car rolls off the line every seventy-six seconds.

At the end of the tour, I was directed to a track, where a driver waited in a bright-yellow Xiaomi SU7 Ultra. I climbed into the passenger seat. He smiled, said, "Three, two, one," and jammed the pedal down. I hadn't focussed on the details of what we were doing, which was probably a mistake. The car burst forward with the kind of momentum one rarely experiences without jet propulsion. As I learned later, the SU7 Ultra has 1,548 horsepower and goes from zero to sixty in less than two seconds, faster than a Ferrari. I was pressed into my seat, and a wave of queasiness surged in my chest. As we rounded a curve and burst down a straightaway, I kept my eyes on the horizon and wondered if my life-insurance policy was in order. The driver gamely offered another lap, but I waved it off.

It is not an accident that the factory was built within easy reach of Beijing's luxury-hotel district, rather than in the hinterlands. It is an attraction for foreigners, and for lucky locals who win a lottery to visit. Travel companies have been leading "tech tours" of China's most impressive industrial sites, offering rides on what they hype as "the world's fastest train," access to "A.I. glasses," and coffee breaks during which you can watch "a drone descend with your latte." A succession of Western influencers, investors, and commentators have duly posted awestruck images of bridges and train stations, feeding into such genres as "infrastructure porn" and "Chinamaxxing." Their perceptions are shaped by relentless marketing and propaganda. On the afternoon that I toured the Hyperfactory, the robots were stalled for "adjustments," but the guide rarely paused for more than a few seconds before pointing out the seven-hundred-ton die-casting machine, or the rapid-fire X-ray system that tests whether a cast is a minute fraction off spec. But there are real strengths along with the hype. Jim Farley, the C.E.O. of Ford, recently visited car factories in China and described its automotive progress as "the most humbling thing I've ever seen."

Chinese leaders seem to be betting that, by speeding toward the future, they can outrun the mistakes of the recent past. Across the country, cities are punctuated by *lanweilou*, or "rotten tail" buildings—concrete shells of unfinished towers and villas, whose developers ran out of money. For years, local officials encouraged excess construction because it financed infrastructure, boosted growth, and earned them promotions. Developers sold homes to the public before they were even built. But the property market started to collapse in 2021—eventually slashing sales of new housing by half—and China was left with an estimated ninety million empty homes, enough to house the population of Russia. After bankrupt developers abandoned the rotten-tail buildings, a few of the scrappiest buyers made do—they moved into the unfinished shells and took to cooking over coal stoves and hauling water up the stairs.

China now contains a series of parallel economies: alongside the wreckage of the property crash and the thriving hive of new technologies, there are legions of university graduates who trained for traditional white-collar jobs but entered a labor market increasingly geared toward high-tech manufacturing. (The official rate of youth unemployment rose above twenty-one per cent before the government changed the way it reports the figure.) A study of Chinese public opinion published last year by researchers at Stanford and Harvard offered a rare in-depth look at local attitudes and found a pronounced swing "from optimism to pessimism." The share of citizens who expect their standard of living to improve has dropped to about twenty-eight per cent, roughly half of what it was earlier this century. Xu Zhiyuan, an influential writer, has called this "a profoundly confused era," marked by "an economic downturn, the uncertainty of international geopolitics and the enormous impact of A.I. all at once." Last fall, government censors launched a campaign against "excessively pessimistic sentiment" online, including comments such as "Hard work is useless."

One morning, I wandered over to the house where I used to live in Beijing and was surprised to find the front door wide open. The place was vacant, but people were bustling in and out. By chance, I had arrived as rental agents were taking photos, hoping to find a tenant and collect a commission. I was struck by the number of agents competing over a two-bedroom rental—a totem of the hyper-competition that prevails in China's industries.

A real-estate agent in a gray windbreaker approached me, carrying a scooter helmet. He was sorry to learn that I was not a potential customer, but eager to chat. He spoke English with the earnest formality of someone who has worked hard to learn a language that he rarely has the chance to use. He had adopted the name John, and he peppered his comments with English aphorisms. When I asked how business was going, he said, "Hard, but every coin has two sides."

He was candid about the strains of his profession. The truth was, he hadn't earned a commission in four months. A lot of real-estate agents were bankrupt. "Under twenty per cent are earning money," he said. John was forty-seven and divorced, with a daughter in college. His father and his older sister were helping him pay for food. "It sucks for me at my age," he said. "I still want to find love, but it's really difficult." He had gone on dates, but nothing had worked out. "I think one reason is I don't have enough money," he said. "If I'm a tycoon, they would want to communicate with me." Hoping to reassure him, I said that he seemed to have a good heart. John smiled and straightened up. He had another aphorism at hand: "Life is not easy, but we don't know what will happen tomorrow."

China's desire to engineer the future has long been entwined with its anxiety about the West. In 1872, during the Qing dynasty, Governor-General Li Hongzhang wrote bitterly of a change "not seen in three thousand years": Westerners, relying on their "advanced guns, cannons, and steamships, have been able to run rampant on Chinese soil." China had started casting iron a millennium or so before Europe, but it had grown complacent. Now, he declared, it was time to "learn the superior skills of the barbarians in order to control the barbarians."

But the empire resisted efforts to

modernize, and China's reformers fled into exile. In 1902, one of the leaders of the reform effort, Liang Qichao, published "The Future of New China," a novel that imagined the country decades later, with a constitution, a parliament, and such technological prestige that students flocked there from abroad. When Mao Zedong came to power in 1949, he had other ideas. "Politics and technology must be unified," he declared. It was a disastrous union: Mao's Great Leap Forward, a delusional attempt to vault China past Britain in just fifteen years, produced the worst famine in history, killing an estimated forty-five million people.

Beginning in the late seventies, the illusion of social engineering created another disaster. The Party adopted the goal of reaching annual incomes of eight hundred to a thousand dollars per capita. To get there, it reasoned, it would have to manage the growth of the population. A Chinese rocket scientist named Song Jian helped lead a mission to chart the right path using the nation's most advanced computers. He and his team concluded that the "key to the entire problem" was to limit each family to one child. It was a radical idea, but Song and the group were persuasive; they presented their findings in printed graphs and figures, when many experts were still working by abacus and pocket calculator.

Susan Greenhalgh, an anthropologist and the author of "Just One Child," writes that the engineers were "enclosing everything in a black box that got labeled 'science,'" though the policy rested on unexamined political judgments about the role of government, the sanctity of the human body, and the boundaries of private life. It was also wrong. As Greenhalgh wrote, the engineers had stitched together patchy data and extrapolated it to two decimal points with false precision. Most of all, they were accustomed to dealing with inanimate objects, rather than the mess of human society, and they dismissed warnings from social scientists about the consequences: rapid population aging, labor and military shortages, and the brutal necessities of enforcing the law.

In the next thirty-five years, the one-child policy led to the sterilization of nearly two hundred million citizens and to more than three hundred million abortions. By the time China dropped the policy, in 2015, it had also produced an economic fiasco, shrinking the pool of available workers and acculturating the country to single-child families. The number of children born in China has fallen by almost two-thirds since 1987. Last year, there were fewer than eight million births—resulting in the lowest rate since records began, in 1949. Though America's birth rate has also fallen, to 1.6 births per woman in 2024, China's problem is much more severe. Its fertility rate is now one birth per woman.

To reverse the decline, China has offered child-care coverage, tax breaks, housing incentives, and fertility-treatment subsidies. None of it has worked. Maternity wards and kindergartens are closing. Emma Zang, a Yale sociologist who studies fertility patterns, visited China last year and was startled that young people often asked why she had decided to have children. She concluded that "the real barrier is not the cost of raising children. Rather, it is the conviction that parenthood no longer makes sense in a future that feels uncertain and unworthy of investment."

None of these repercussions have shaken the Party's belief in the transformative power of engineering. In the past decade, Xi has taken to describing the historical moment with a pointed phrase: "great changes unseen in a century." He is echoing 1872, but with a difference. Back then, the "unseen" changes were the new strengths of the West; today, Xi is calling to exploit the West's weaknesses.

In 1978, just as Deng Xiaoping was setting China on the course of reforms, an aspiring scientist named Yi Rao started college. Chinese science was severely underfunded in those years; even the disposable plastic tips on the end of pipettes were nearly impossible for lab workers to get. But Rao knew Chinese scientists in the U.S., who agreed to scrounge them from the trash and send them back. "We could use them many more times," Rao said.

Chinese leaders were determined to "catch up with and surpass" advanced countries in science, and three things mattered above all: talent, money, and infrastructure. To train talent, they sent students abroad; within a decade, the number of Chinese students in the U.S. had grown tenfold. In 1985, Rao moved to San Francisco to study neuroscience and noted that an ordinary kitchen counter was made of better material

"Dearest, It has now been a fortnight since one of our smoke alarms started intermittently beeping. A battery is low. Tensions are high. I fear we may never figure out which one it is. Patience is wearing thin. . . ."

"than any research bench in China," he said. "How could I imagine I'd ever come back?"

But in the mid-two-thousands, when he was a professor at Northwestern, he was offered a job as the dean of Peking University's School of Life Sciences. China was luring scientists back with patriotic appeals and the promise of transforming the nation's scientific prospects. Rao agreed, but he had limited expectations. He recalls that nobody at the university had even published a paper in a top international scientific journal. Professors gave jobs to poorly qualified friends and protégés, and academic fraud was common. Chinese biotech produced little more than cheap generic drugs.

Rao took over, and replaced required courses in botany and zoology with genetics and molecular biology. A turning point arrived in 2015, when China began overhauling its drug-safety laws to meet international standards, allowing local biotech companies to get lucrative foreign contracts. Scientific talent had started to return, drawn by generous lab funding and signing bonuses that could exceed a hundred and fifty thousand dollars.

Then tensions with the U.S. exploded. In 2018, Trump started a trade war, and his Department of Justice created the China Initiative, to root out espionage and trade theft, which targeted more than a hundred scientists and others of Chinese descent. In ways that outsiders did not fully appreciate, Trump tipped the balance of an internal Chinese political debate. The private sector was ascendant, and the influential billionaire Jack Ma was arguing that a university education was overrated. "He said, basically, intellectuals don't produce anything," Rao told me. "China's economy has done well by copying from the West, so why should we put more funding into original research? But, once Trump came in, that side completely collapsed." In 2020, the Party's Central Committee established "scientific and technological self-reliance" as a paramount goal, and last year funding for exploratory basic research hit a record seven per cent of the nation's R. & D. budget.

The effects were startling. By 2024, China had outstripped the U.S. in the number of clinical trials. (Recruiting test subjects there can take less than half the time, and trials cost an estimated forty per cent less.) That fall, an experimental cancer drug from the Chinese firm Akeso outperformed Keytruda, a gold-standard therapy made by the American pharma giant Merck.

Early this year, after the Trump Administration slashed funding to American federal and academic scientific studies, the Chinese government announced another ten-per-cent increase in funding for science and technology. China has overtaken both the U.S. and the European Union in publishing influential research papers, measured by how often they are cited by others. Chinese biotech firms now generate nearly a third of the world's new drug candidates, almost matching the U.S. "People in Washington are worried that biotech is the next E.V.s," an American executive told me. "We've scared all of this fucking talent back to China. If you look at the guys who are doing this, they used to work for Western pharma giants, or they were running a top university department somewhere."

A report by researchers at Princeton, Harvard, and M.I.T. identified almost twenty thousand scientists of Chinese descent who left America between 2010 and 2021. The Canadian scholar David Zweig, who has studied the exodus, told me that at Westlake University, a new Chinese research institute, "there are approximately a hundred new labs set up by returnees, and probably eighty per cent of them are from the United States." He said, "First, it was because they felt alienated. Then the money dried up."

I visited Yi Rao recently, and met him on the top floor of an academic complex, in a corner office overlooking a lake. He showed me a lab filled with world-class equipment available to student researchers. "I have to keep telling them what luxury they are living in," he said.

I asked Rao about the effects of Trump's cuts to science. "It's very stupid," he said. "Invention doesn't come out of the blue." He gave an example: if the U.S. reduces funding for cancer research, "it would now be natural that China might invent a cancer vaccine before the U.S."

Rao is candid about the enduring problems facing Chinese science and tech. For instance, China has never mastered the ultra-precise manufacturing required for commercial jet engines or the highest-performing microchips. He dismisses thirty per cent of the country's biology papers as "garbage," and says that another fifty per cent represent incremental findings, rather than "zero to one" breakthroughs. For now, he says, China excels mostly in the progress from "two to a hundred," but he thinks that the standard will improve. If China becomes known as the place that develops cancer cures, things will

WASPS

how starkly clear you hear them gnawing
at the wood of lawn chairs near the awning
all day in august or july, and not much longer,
till beneath their pincers every bit of fiber
is ground down, and the entire piece of furnishing
was never there. birds sing, birds will have sung;
wind came, wind went on; a gloom weighs on the west
lit up by nothing but their fragile nests:
like bright white lanterns or like swelled-up sails
below the roof ridge, boiled out tomcat skulls,
like paper moons, some froth, a sea-spray guidon.
a buzzing, humming sound above the empty garden.

—Jan Wagner

(Translated, from the German, by David Keplinger.)

be different in a fundamental way. "The current world order was built by a group of geniuses, mainly in the U.S., who hailed from Europe," Rao said. "If Trump had maintained the order effectively, China would find it very hard to get through. Trump really helped us."

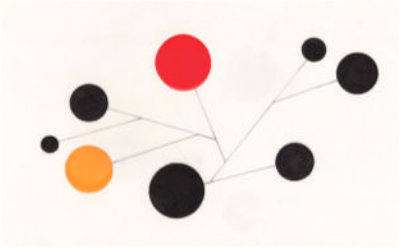
Many of Beijing's tech companies are in the Zhongguancun district, a cluster of office complexes set on land that, during the imperial era, served as a burial ground for palace eunuchs. For a generation, Zhongguancun has evolved with each passing fashion in tech. These days, advertisements for A.I. products are rapidly replacing washed-out ads for the metaverse.

People who have worked in both China and Silicon Valley tend to comment on the similarities: the belief in rapid change, the power of engineers, the odes to humanity that mask impatience with actual humans. At a Peet's Coffee in Zhongguancun, full of twenty-somethings wearing AirPods, it would be easy for a visitor from Palo Alto to feel at home. The big difference between the two countries' A.I. hubs is in how people talk about their intentions. American engineers tend to focus on the transformative potential of reaching artificial general intelligence, and on the utopian (or dystopian) cascade that could follow. Chinese tech firms have more imminent goals; they have less capital and less computing power, owing partly to American export controls on the most advanced chips, so they focus largely on pushing products into everyday commerce. Last year, the Chinese startup DeepSeek released an A.I. model that stunned Silicon Valley. Critics attributed its success to smuggled chips and opaque financing, and OpenAI accused it of cribbing from better models. Chinese observers noted that DeepSeek worked well, and for far less money.

At AInnovation, a firm that integrates A.I. into traditional factories, I met the chief technology officer, Fan Li, who was plucked out of a coal-mining city by a government program for prodigies. He worked at Microsoft and Amazon before returning to China in 2021 to join its A.I. boom. Li walked me over to a machine marked "AI Screw Inspection Equipment." Inside, tiny screws whizzed along a production line as high-resolution cameras scanned them for microscopic problems. Those which passed the test slipped down a chute marked "Good Product." (It called to mind a slogan from the Cultural Revolution which urged each comrade to be a "rustless screw in the revolutionary machine.") Before A.I., the factory needed humans to check the screws, which, Li said, was "not efficient." Now those humans could be replaced.

China's factories still make plenty of cheap toys and shoes, but the country has also made a technological leap. Investments in factory automation and robotics have allowed goods to be produced so cheaply that U.S. tariffs mostly don't matter; even with the fees piled on top, prices are still low.

On a screen, Li pulled up an intricate diagram of a factory for the Tsingtao Brewery, one of his customers. He typed in a prompt: "Have they achieved their energy-saving goal in the past year? If not, why?" It's a deceptively simple question. Not only do you need to know past performance and future goals—"you need to dig deeper into each production line, each machine," he said. After a moment, the system flashed a message: "We have successfully retrieved energy-consumption data, causes of anomalies, and recommended actions for four devices." It noted that "anomalies" were lurking in a pasteurizer and a malt mill, and told us what to do: Look for wet malt or jams at the mill; investigate steam and pump behavior in the pasteurizer. Li said, "It might have taken a human three hours to do the whole process. Now you can finish it in minutes."



China is not immune to fears that A.I. will cause sweeping job losses and social upheaval. Kai-Fu Lee warned in his book that "A.I. risks creating a twenty-first-century caste system." But he predicted that job losses would create more turmoil in the U.S. than in China, because a larger share of American workers hold white-collar jobs. I asked what he made of the news that college graduates in the U.S. were booing commencement speakers who touted A.I. Lee said, "The American way is very understandable. But the Chinese way will cause a proliferation of talent, usage, data—until something horrible happens. Then things might change. But people forget things in the age of social media."

Li, of AInnovation, hears from people who are more worried about the risk. Over sandwiches in a conference room, he told me that he has a fifteen-year-old son, and fellow-parents often ask, What should our kids study? "I ask myself the same question," he said. In recent years, China has sharply scaled back undergraduate majors deemed obsolete, including many in the humanities, while introducing programs in fields like embodied intelligence. Many universities have opened A.I. programs. But, Li said, "three years from now, when my son goes to college, artificial intelligence may not even be a major anymore." Even the people who work on A.I. can't keep up with technology that is changing "probably ten times faster than ten years ago," Li said. "The closer you get to the ecosystem, the more you know the details and what's coming, and you become a little bit concerned."

Cutting down on the need for humans is one way that the Chinese government can make up for its shrinking workforce. Another way is robots. In 2024, China deployed nine industrial robots for every one installed in the United States. The competition between man and machine has even spread to pop culture. In early 2025, Beijing inaugurated a half-marathon that pitted robots against humans, and the humans won easily, as many of the robots overheated. But, a year later, a bright-red humanoid—swinging a pair of spindly arms for balance—beat all twelve thousand human competitors and broke the world record. There was another sprawling display of robotics expertise at the Spring Festival Gala, the most watched television event of the year. Humanoids marched, backflipped, and twirled nunchucks; robotic pandas gambolled. Some Chinese viewers sensed a loss. As one

reportedly wrote online, "We are looking for humans amid all the robots." But the government's goal was to build confidence in the onrush of tomorrow. The head of one of the robotics companies told a reporter that he'd felt intense pressure to "deliver a performance that was significantly better than last year's."

Choreographed spectacle is easier, in some sense, than contending with the messiness of the workaday world. The humanoids on Chinese television were beautifully synchronized, but if something had gone off script—an errant foot, a human who missed a cue—the machines could have turned into a heap of tangled, waving limbs. In Li's office, I watched two employees demonstrate preliminary work that they hope will equip robots to retrieve objects from factory supply closets. One shuffled a selection of bottles, cans, and snacks, while the other, wearing a virtual-reality headset and holding a tracking device in each hand, guided a small yellow humanoid as it haltingly picked up everyday objects. The exercise looked bafflingly difficult.

Robots have improved more slowly than expected, Li said. "ChatGPT was successful because it consumed almost every word ever written in the world," he told me. "There are many tasks people want robots to do, but we don't have enough data." At a nearby table, a pair of slender metallic arms was folding and refolding a blue T-shirt. In tech circles, folding laundry is sometimes called the "holy grail of robotics," because of both the intricacy of the challenge and the public enthusiasm if it works. Li said, "We're looking at two metrics: how fast the robot can finish the job—thirty seconds, one minute—and the failure rate." The failures stemmed from randomness. "You can put the clothes on the table in many ways," Li said. "The shape is different each time."

On my way out, I visited a convenience store off the lobby. The counter was staffed by a humanoid robot with a shiny silver face and powerful arms. To its left, sausages revolved on chrome rollers; to its right, a human attendant in a brightly colored uniform looked patient and quizzical. The robot's manufacturer, Galbot, had an office in the building, and, like so much that I was seeing, the machine seemed to have been installed for both functionality and P.R. value. It greeted me merrily in Mandarin: "I can help you find products, grab some sausages or drinks, or tell you a corny joke to lighten the mood."

As I took a moment to contemplate the scene, the robot urged me along: "What items do you need?" Other customers were filling in behind me, and, before I could reply, the robot added, "You look a little tired." I *was* tired, in fact; I had been trooping from one meeting to another. Before I could ask how the robot had acquired such sensitivity, it posed another question: "Would you like me to grab you a bottle of Vitality Water Balance or fragrant pomelo jasmine tea, to help you recover?"

I chose a sausage instead. "I'll get it for you right away!" the robot said, and maneuvered its left arm into the display case. But the sausage slipped from its grip and plopped back into formation, alongside the others revolving lazily between rollers. The robot hadn't noticed the mishap; it withdrew its arm, deposited the nonexistent cargo in front of me, and announced, "Remember to check out on the left!" The attendant laughed nervously and waved off the request for payment.

I wandered for a while in Zhongguancun. It was a hot afternoon, and a group of delivery drivers had gathered to smoke in the shade of an overpass. As the economy has slowed, more than two hundred million Chinese people have joined the gig economy. Among them are some twenty million delivery drivers, who have become the most visible symbols of the new era.

In 2018, a young man named Hu Anyan found work in Beijing as a courier, after stints as a convenience-store clerk, a bicycle salesman, and a security guard. A typical day involved eleven hours of deliveries, but the shifts were longer when e-commerce sites ran promotions and order volumes spiked. "We still had to deliver all of the day's packages before we clocked out, which often meant fifteen or sixteen hours," he told me. Hu stayed vigilant for obstacles that he could not control—buildings with slow elevators, locked gates where he had to wait for a resident to let him in. To reach his goal of about forty dollars a day, he had to make a delivery every four minutes. Stopping to pee cost him about two minutes, so he drank as little water as possible.

Some employers were better than others, but they shared a culture of the algorithmic era. As one stern boss told Hu, the "platform tells you the deliveries you must make!" and "There's nothing special about you." It bothered Hu, but he realized that the boss, too, was "actually just another cog in the machine." Over time, life in service of the algorithm altered his sense of human affairs. He began to resent colleagues and see their struggles in zero-sum terms. "A few veteran employees will hold on to the easier routes for a long time, while the rookies, who get stuck with the harder ones, often just quit and get replaced," he told me. He became "more impatient and anxious," but what unnerved him most was a creeping numbness. After learning one day that an elderly customer had waited nearly three hours at a market for him, Hu felt no sympathy. "Under normal circumstances, I'd feel guilty," he said. "But at that moment I still had a whole load of packages to deliver, and I couldn't stop for him, even for five minutes."

Hu lasted twenty months as a delivery driver. Then he quit and described his experiences in a plainspoken memoir, "I Deliver Parcels in Beijing." The book became an unlikely best-seller and inspired other recent Chinese memoirs of precarity, including "I Drive a Taxi in Shanghai" and "My Mother Works as a Cleaner."

But, in China, the precarity is never confined to those at the bottom. In March, authorities abruptly barred the two founders of an A.I. startup called Manus from leaving the country. They had made a deal to sell their company to Meta, the American social-media giant, for two billion dollars, and the Chinese government wasn't happy. It was a chilling message to other A.I. firms that some humans were too valuable to the nation to be allowed to leave.

For years, China's rising power has rested on a fragile balance of economic freedom and political control, in what early Party reformers called the "birdcage economy"—airy enough to allow enterprises to thrive, but not capacious enough to sacrifice power. That arrange-

ment has rarely looked more tenuous. Gary Rieschel, an American investor with deep experience in China, told an audience last year that Xi was trying to "tether" the "goose that laid the golden egg of China's extraordinary rise." Rieschel added, "In case you don't know, geese don't like to be tethered." He said, "The critical question becomes, Can this Beijing leadership effectively balance the delicate relationship between control and dynamism?"

In Robert Kagan's book "The World America Made," he enumerates a succession of global powers, all of which were convinced of their own durability: "There has been an Egyptian order, a Roman order, a Greek order, an Islamic order, a Mogul order, an Ottoman order, and many others." Each was born of particular, often fragile circumstances. The American order, Kagan wrote in 2012, would endure "until some yet to be determined moment."

That moment seems to have arrived. Mark Leonard, the director of the European Council on Foreign Relations, told me that the international system the U.S. constructed after the Second World War—and ran, often to its benefit—is "definitely dead and beyond redemption." He said that Trump's dismantling of the country's alliances signalled the end of the "willingness of the American public to play the role America has played for most of the last eight decades."

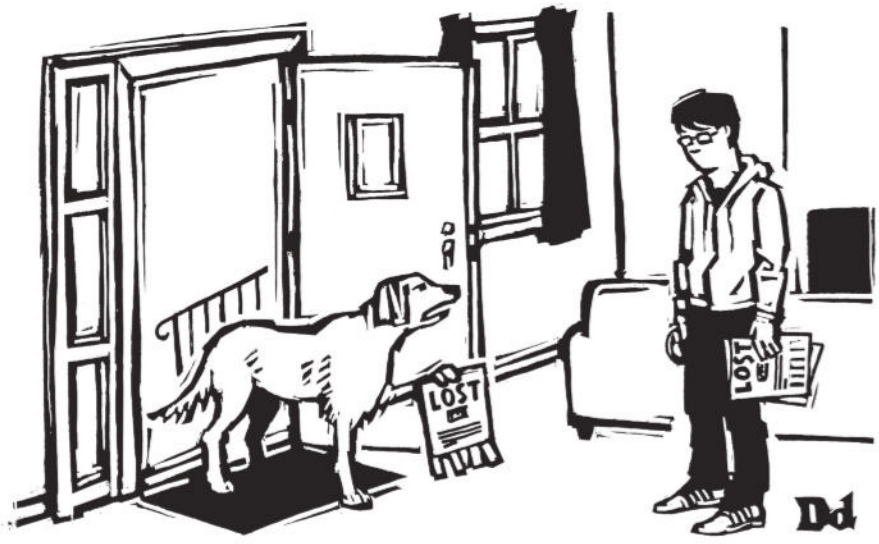
But America's diminished stature does not necessarily clear a path for China. Few people these days are enthusiastic about the prospect of a world dominated by either superpower. In Europe, views of Beijing have hardened since the late twenty-tens, when its envoys experimented with a combative style known as "wolf warrior" diplomacy. After a Swedish prize for persecuted writers was awarded to a Hong Kong dissident, a Chinese ambassador said, "We treat our friends with fine wine, but for our enemies we've got shotguns."

More recently, European anxiety has centered on the economics of trade. As China has devoted itself to dominating global tech manufacturing, it has taken to producing far more than its domestic economy demands—electric vehicles, solar energy, batteries, wind turbines, basic chemicals. In theory, that kind of overcapacity should lead factories to close and the surge to subside. But China's government has kept pushing firms to produce, partly out of fear that rising unemployment could fuel unrest. The surplus gets exported, often at prices low enough to undercut the industrial economy in other countries. "It's systemic, not accidental," Joerg Wuttke, a former head of the European Union Chamber of Commerce in China, told me.

The fear in Europe is increasingly urgent. Volkswagen is considering eliminating as many as a hundred thousand jobs and closing four plants, the biggest cut in the history of the global auto industry. Leonard told me that resentment of China's industrial policy has reached "a fever pitch, particularly in Germany, where there is a sense that China is doubling down on policies leading to the deindustrialization of Europe." He added, "The big fear is that Baden-Württemberg"—the home of Mercedes-Benz—"will turn into Detroit." European politicians, he said, privately describe a feeling of simultaneous assault from Washington, Beijing, and Moscow, and are "waking up to a world where they have to protect themselves from all the big powers."

The responses under discussion have the flavor of emergency improvisation: blocking Chinese firms from building factories or bidding on lucrative contracts, imposing severe tariffs on steel and chemicals, even suspending technology patents—an approach known in aggregate as the "trade bazooka." Some economists argue that Europe could compete more effectively by modernizing. But the feeling of hardening up extends beyond trade. Germany has committed to as much as a trillion dollars in new spending on arms and infrastructure. Wuttke said, "Trump is severing ties, imposing tariffs left and right. The Chinese are not moving. So the decision is not 'Beijing or Washington.' It is building ties with Jakarta and Delhi, and with other countries."

Chinese officials often warn against a lawless world in which "the weak are meat for the strong." But the Party's own tactics are uncompromising, both at home and abroad. Nicholas Burns, a former U.S. Ambassador to China, told me, "China always says, 'The U.S. government is too pugilistic.' That's their rhetorical veneer. The reality is they are competing tooth and nail behind the scenes." Last year, Trump pressured Panama to strip the control of two significant ports from a Hong Kong-based company and give it to an American-led consortium. In the dispute, China reportedly warned foreign executives against "illegal activities that harm the interests of Chinese companies." Such warnings are dangerous to ignore. International businesspeople drawn into



"Ninety pounds? Really?"

• •

"Remember when everyone was, like, really into bronze?"

• •

geopolitical disputes have been barred from leaving China. The message, the European diplomat told me, is " 'We are a great power, and we will retaliate against anyone who hurts our rights or interests.' Behind this is the undisputed rule of the Chinese Communist Party."

Yet China is not rushing to re-create the international order that has recently frayed. Since 1949, Beijing has signed only two formal alliances—with North Korea and the Soviet Union—and both proved costly. Patricia Kim, an expert at the Brookings Institution, calls Beijing's posture a "China first" strategy. "China is happy to put out statements, but it has no interest in stepping in as a crisis manager," she told me. "It wants greater influence, but it also wants to avoid responsibilities." Chinese leaders view "the burdens of U.S. global leadership as a source of American overextension and decline," she said, "and they have no interest in emulating this model."

Zhou Bo, the retired People's Liberation Army officer, made a similar point from a different perspective. "The Trump Administration has walked away from sixty-six international organizations," he told me. "This is a big gap that China simply cannot close."

The likely successor to the American order, then, is not a Chinese order so much as what Leonard calls a period of "un-order": a jungle in which every country hedges, arms, subsidizes, hoards, and searches for choke points to exploit. In the words of Suisheng Zhao, a China scholar at the University of Denver, it is the makings of a "twenty-first-century Hobbesian struggle of all against all."

During the Cold War, as futurists on both sides of the Iron Curtain plotted to control the direction of history, another group coalesced around a more modest idea. Mankind 2000, as it called itself, was made up of European survivors of fascism who were wary of both Communist determinism and American hubris. They warned that man could be "absorbed by his machine" and declared, "The future belongs to all of us, not only to small oligarchic groups."

Spend enough time in Beijing and Washington these days and the rivalry looks less like a clash of competing systems than like a race between small oligarchic groups—tight circles of men with immense power over everyone else's future. In China, Xi is trying to bend technology toward obedience and growth. In America, Trump and his allies in Silicon Valley have put the development of A.I. ahead of concerns about its risks. "We have to grow that baby and let that baby thrive," Trump said, unveiling an A.I. strategy in 2025. "We can't stop it with foolish rules."

In this view, regulation, safety testing, liability, and labor protections are all indulgences that a superpower can no longer afford. David Sacks, an investor and a former White House A.I. czar, recently warned that creating "an F.D.A. for A.I." could mean losing to China. This is an old political maneuver. In 1988, when Japanese carmakers were ascendant, Ronald Reagan's Transportation Secretary derided stricter fuel-economy standards as a "competitive disadvantage" against "the Asians." A year later, under pressure from Wall Street, Bill Clinton repealed the separation between commercial and investment banking, saying that it would help America "compete in global financial markets." That decision was later identified as one of the causes of the Great Recession.

China can, indeed, build with a speed that Americans regard with awe and despair. In the 2025 book "Breakneck," Dan Wang, a research fellow at Stanford's Hoover Institution, popularized an image of the rivalry between the two countries as a contest between an engineering state and a lawyerly society. In fact, the book is subtler than this formulation suggests. (Wang had considered calling it "Move Fast and Break People," but his publisher intervened.) Wang explored the macroeconomic effects of the one-child policy—which, he told me, have become even more concerning since the book came out. Though China can produce "strong outcomes in science and technology," its internal problems are profound, he said. "Shanghai is pretty amazing. It may even be one of the top-three great cities of the world. But how can China be a great civilization if almost no one wants to have kids?" He added, "Young Chinese especially are gripped by this serene discontent. People don't have

that great a hope about an economic boom that basically will elude everyone outside of a few folks working in A.I. or finance."

The engineering state can churn out an electric car every seventy-six seconds, but that carries you only so far if people are so alienated that they decline to bring children into the future being built for them. The Party wants A.I. entrepreneurs who can dazzle the world, but it also wants the power to decide where they can go and what they can become.

The U.S. has a different weakness. So far, the dystopian uses of technology have come less from government facial-recognition systems than from a handful of ultrapowerful companies that exploit data to increase their control over people's lives: insurers that use A.I. to decide which treatments to cover; retailers that deploy "surveillance pricing" to raise costs according to a customer's location, habits, and urgency. But the distinction is eroding, as private defense contractors help merge domestic law enforcement, immigration, and national security into an interlocking apparatus. Even in areas where machines may genuinely make life better, the decisions are being made in secrecy. Waymo reports better safety records than human drivers, but autonomous-vehicle companies have resisted public scrutiny. When Senator Ed Markey asked seven major companies how often remote human operators had to guide vehicles through difficult situations, they refused to answer, with several citing "confidential business information."

The more centralized the system, the further an error can travel. In March, when Baidu, which operates self-driving taxis in more than a dozen Chinese cities, suffered an outage, cars halted on busy highways. We are almost certainly better off without humans at the wheel of cars and trucks, but history warns that we should not let engineers make these decisions alone. The country best equipped to help its people will not be the one that simply races to insinuate A.I. into every aspect of civic life; more likely, it will be the one that shields decisions about deployment from the distortions of ideology and corruption, that finds ways to distribute both the rewards and the losses from A.I., and that makes people feel they have a voice in their future.

America is not functioning well these days, but its political system, by design, gives the public more power to fix problems—if they choose to fix them. As Wuttke put it, "The United States has a knack of going down in flames and then rejuvenating. China does not." The advantage might go to the side that can face its problems most candidly. "You can live in an alternate reality in China, in Russia, or in the United States," he said. "That is always a dangerous proposition, because you might miss the signals of history coming your way."

One afternoon in Beijing, when I found myself with a free hour, I scanned the QR code on a bike share and rode across town, savoring the fresh air. I nearly got creamed by a couple of delivery drivers, but it was a joy to be someplace where I could be free of real-time feedback on my micro-gestures.

For all the assertive calculations and predictions that I'd been served during my interviews, I couldn't shake the feeling that the future is too opaque to predict, let alone to ordain to multiple decimal places. Young Chinese people, like young Americans, are partaking in a new fad for fortune-telling. People are going out for drinks and astrology readings, or using astrology apps. (In Chinese, the term for "fortune-telling" shares a character with the term for "algorithm.")

Beijing has had fortune-tellers for centuries, though the Party opposes what it calls "feudal superstitious activities" and periodically cracks down on them. They always filter back, quietly resuming work in neighborhoods near Buddhist and Confucian temples. I was connected to a man in his early seventies whom I'll call Master Sun. He wasn't around all the time—fortune-tellers are gig workers—but he agreed to meet, and arrived wearing an old-fashioned blue padded jacket and a jade necklace. He was walking beside his bike, with a basket on the front and plastic wrap still protecting the frame, like a sofa guarded against spillage.

Master Sun's office was a block away, and as we walked he asked how I knew Mandarin. I used to live in China, but I'm American, I said. "America is a powerful country," he told me.

"China is also powerful," I replied.

"Not as good as America," he said.

We reached his office, tucked behind a convenience store. On his desk, he had a small shrine, with a ceramic Buddha, an incense burner, three gourds, and a chocolate bar. He studied the lines on my palm, gave me some bronze coins to toss, asked for my birth date, and began calculating on a pad of paper. Watching him work felt faintly radical; he had found a way to survive with dignity against both the Communist Party and the age of algorithms. After a while, he looked over the top of his glasses and told me, "Your fortune says you have a noble destiny."

I liked the sound of that. It reminded me of the jolt of pleasure when ChatGPT applauds your question. I asked, "I want to raise my children well and give them a bright future. What should I do?"

Master Sun thought for a moment and said, "You should give them great wisdom. That's more important than giving them money. Make sure they study well. With that, wealth will come."

This was kind, though I wasn't sure anyone knows the answer anymore. Finally, Master Sun pulled out a stack of folded red cardboard slips and asked me to pick three. He looked at them and announced, "You're destined for either political power or great wealth!" I decided to wrap it up while I was still feeling at least 76.67 per cent positive.

But then he paused and held up one of my three slips. It was labelled "Joy Knocks at the Door." He said that it was the luckiest slip in the deck, and he offered advice: "You should spend a little money to protect that good luck."

Oh? I asked. How much?

"Six hundred and sixty yuan," he said—about ninety-seven dollars.

I wasn't going to argue with the fortune-teller. He accepted multiple payment platforms. We took out our phones and I sent him the money. ♦

AMERICAN CHRONICLES

THE MENTOR

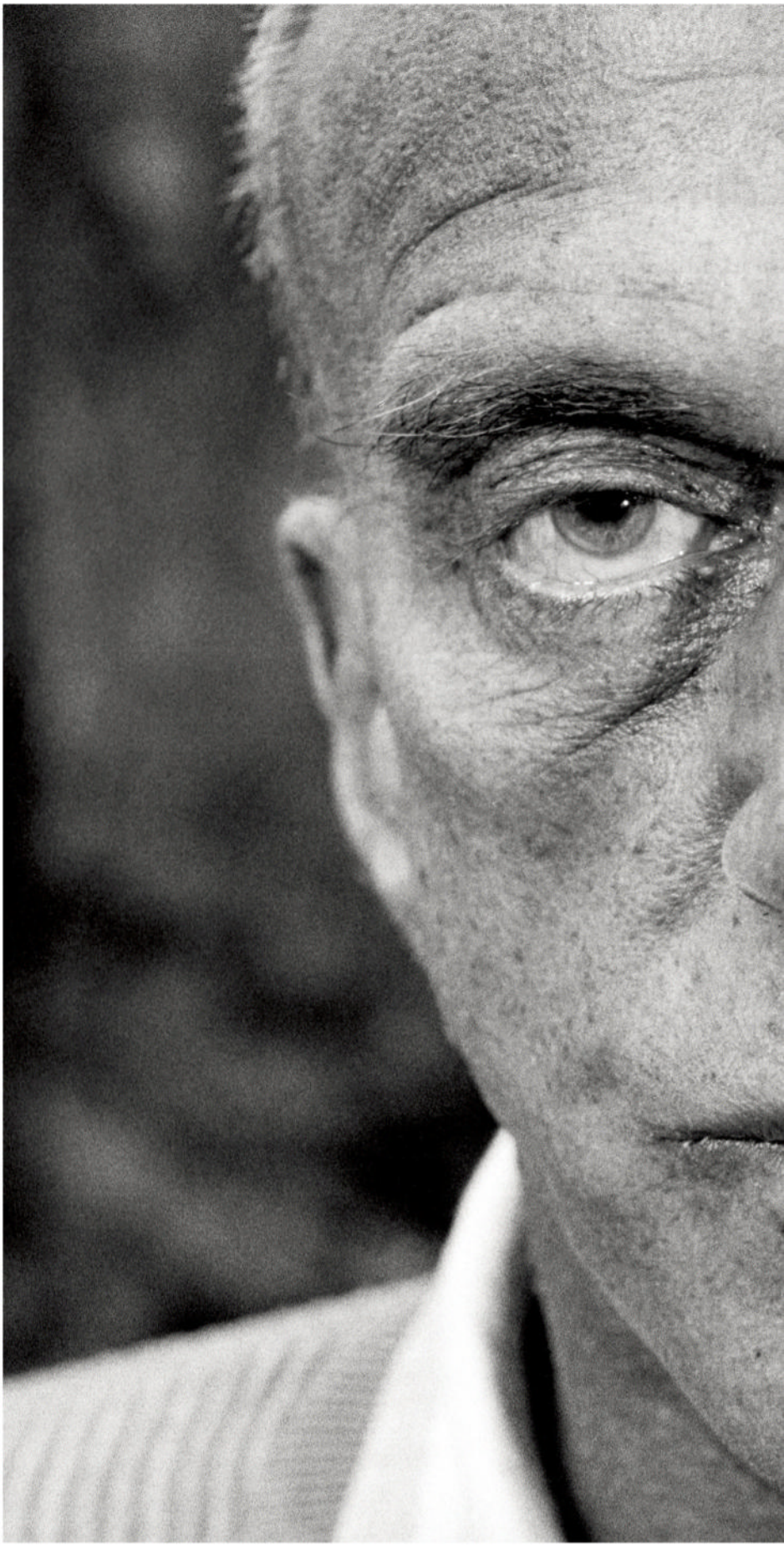
How Roy Cohn taught Donald Trump everything.

BY KAI BIRD
WITH SUSAN GOLDMARK

When President Donald Trump's first Attorney General, Jeff Sessions, recused himself from a federal investigation into ties between the Trump campaign and Russia, in 2017, the President was angry. "Where's my Roy Cohn?" he yelled. But Roy Cohn—an American scoundrel and the lawyer who helped send Julius and Ethel Rosenberg to the electric chair, aided Senator Joseph McCarthy in implementing the Red Scare, and showed Trump the ropes in the real-estate business—was long gone.

Trump and Cohn had met forty-four years earlier, in 1973. The New York *Post* gossip columnist Cindy Adams later reported that her old friend Cohn had introduced her to his new protégé at a dinner party soon after. Trump was not yet thirty, and an ambitious outer-borough real-estate developer. In her column, Adams wrote that Cohn told her, "One day this kid is going to own New York." Cohn, who was a closeted gay man, was invariably attracted to what could be called über-Gentiles—tall, fair-haired, blue-eyed. "Roy loved to surround himself with attractive straight men," Robert S. Cohen, a divorce lawyer who'd worked for him in the sixties, observed. Trump—blond, six feet three—fit the bill.

The scene of their first encounter was Le Club, a private dining venue at 416 East Fifty-fifth Street, half a block from the East River. Cohn was a member. Opened on New Year's Eve, in 1960, Le Club occupied a small white stucco house; a brass plaque reading "Members Only" was its only signage. The place had an international, jet-set atmosphere. Igor Cassini, a former society columnist for the Hearst papers and the brother of Oleg Cassini, Jacqueline Kennedy's favorite couturier,



"Ignore the rules, do what you want to do, don't leave a paper trail," the reporter David

Cay Johnston said, listing the lessons Cohn taught Trump. "And if somebody gets onto you, rat out other people to save yourself."

PHOTOGRAPH BY MARY ELLEN MARK

was the chairman of Le Club's board.

"It was the sort of place where you were likely to see a wealthy seventy-five-year-old guy walk in with three blondes from Sweden," Trump wrote in his 1987 book, "The Art of the Deal." In a few years, Trump would boast about being "a director" of Le Club, but in 1973 he was living in a rent-controlled studio at 196 East Seventy-fifth Street. The "dark, dingy little apartment," as Trump described it, had a view of a water tank. His father, Fred Trump, had named him president of the Trump Management Corporation in 1971. The company owned thousands of rental units in Queens and Brooklyn, but the younger Trump was eager to expand the family empire into Manhattan. He wanted, he wrote, to be "a city guy instead of a kid from the boroughs." He had joined Le Club because he thought it could help him make inroads into Manhattan society. Trump was having dinner there one evening when he spotted Cohn at a nearby table.

In "The Art of the Deal," Trump recalls their meeting, a description that is likely embellished. He claims that, after he got introduced to Cohn, Trump told him, "I don't like lawyers. I think all they do is delay deals, instead of making deals, and every answer they give you is no, and they are always looking to settle instead of fight." He continues, "I'm just not built that way. I'd rather fight than fold, because as soon as you fold once, you get the reputation of being a folder."

In an interview with us last year, Trump relayed a different version of the meeting, claiming that it had been Cohn who'd initiated the conversation. "I was doing very well, I guess people were reading a lot about me," he said. "I remember it very vividly—he was with a whole group of guys, and he came over, he wanted to introduce himself." Trump went on, "He said, 'Maybe we'll do some business—if you ever have a case. I'd love to work with you.' I remember that he didn't have cards. He wasn't a card person. But I called him up."

It's more plausible that Trump, then a virtual unknown, introduced himself to Cohn and nervously explained that he needed some legal advice. In "The Art of the Deal," he describes their conversation: "The government has just filed suit against our company . . . saying that we discriminated against blacks," Trump told Cohn, and asked, "What do you think I should do?"

"Tell them to go to hell and fight the thing in court and let them prove that you discriminated," Cohn snapped. Trump thought that this was splendid advice.

It wasn't long before Cohn began introducing Trump around town. "I got to know everybody," Trump said. In November, 1973, Cohn invited his new protégé to a black-tie dinner at the Biltmore Hotel to celebrate his twenty-fifth anniversary as a practicing attorney. (The event doubled as a fund-raiser for the Cardinal Spellman foundation and the American Jewish League Against Communism.) Cohn's friend William F. Buckley, Jr., paid tribute to him in a speech: "Roy Cohn is a man who has triumphed over his tormentors, and he deserves the credit we are here to give him so enthusiastically." A congratulatory letter from President Richard Nixon was read to the guests, who included the State Supreme Court justice John M. Murtagh and the mayor-elect Abraham Beame. Trump was enthralled. He craved these connections, and he knew that, in Cohn, he had found the kind of tough lawyer he needed to fight the government's discrimination charges.

Trump's father, Fred, appears to have had a long history of racism. On Memorial Day, 1927, when Fred was twenty-one, he was arrested for refusing to disperse during a violent confrontation between police and a band of white-hooded Klansmen in Queens; he was released shortly after. (It's unclear what role he played in the riot.) Almost thirty years later, a tenant living in one of Fred's first major developments, the Beach Haven apartment complex, in Brooklyn, was so disturbed by the racial discrimination he observed from the management that he wrote a song about it. The song was called "Old Man Trump." The tenant was Woody Guthrie.

"Not only are we denying you tenure—we're closing your department and setting the entire university on fire just to be safe."

I suppose that Old Man Trump knows just
how much racial hate
He stirred up in that bloodpot of human
hearts . . .
Beach Haven is Trump's Tower
Where no Black folks come to roam

By 1973, when Trump met Cohn, the evidence that Fred's company had discriminated against Black people seemed undeniable. According to the Justice Department filing, thirty-nine Trump-owned apartment buildings had systematically barred Black people from renting. The Feds had found four Trump superintendents or rental agents willing to confirm that applications were coded by race; the forms would be marked by a large capital "C" to indicate that the applicants were "colored." One Trump employee described the policy to an F.B.I. agent: "Fred Trump told me not to rent to Blacks. He also wanted me to get rid of the Blacks that were in the building by telling them cheap housing was available to them at only five hundred dollars down payment, which Trump would offer to pay himself." These activities would have been a clear violation of the 1968 Fair Housing Act.

The Feds would have been satisfied had the Trumps merely signed a consent decree, agreeing to integrate their approximately fifteen thousand units; there would have been no fine and no admission of guilt. But Cohn encouraged Trump to reject the decree, and to assert that the Feds were pressuring the company to rent to "welfare recipients." Exasperated, the Justice Department filed a formal discrimination suit, whereupon Cohn countersued the government for defamation, seeking a hundred million dollars in damages. Cohn and Trump held a press conference at the New York Hilton to announce their suit. Steven Brill, the founder of *The American Lawyer*, later said that he had been stunned that any reporters had shown up: "You couldn't get through your second day of law school without knowing it was a totally bogus lawsuit."

The stunt, a show of bravado, dominated local headlines, but, a month later, a federal judge dismissed the Trumps' suit as frivolous, scolding Cohn that he was "wasting time and paper." Trump and Cohn refused to back down, and they refused to engage with the accusations of racism. A friend of Cohn's told us that, in private, Cohn routinely referred to Black people as "the Schvartze," a slur he'd picked up from his mother, Dora, and that on at least one occasion he was heard using the N-word. Trump always said that he was color-blind and that his only criterion for tenants was the income of the male head of household: "We don't generally include the wife's income. We like to see it for the male in the family."

Cohn dragged out the litigation for twenty months. He attacked the credibility of the government's key witness, a former Trump employee, claiming that he had been coerced by a "Gestapo-like interrogation." He also filed an affidavit charging that F.B.I. agents had been acting like "stormtroopers." The judge reprimanded Cohn for his statements, which he described as "utterly without foundation." Cohn quickly retracted his remark about stormtroopers. "I have never brought a charge against the F.B.I. in my life. I have personal reasons why I haven't, and I never would," he said, alluding to his close friendship with the former F.B.I. director J. Edgar Hoover. "My relationship [to the F.B.I.] is much too close." But these digressions were great theatre, with Cohn as the ringmaster. The circus antics served to delay the proceedings further.

One day, in court, Cohn filed a contempt motion against a junior member of the prosecution's team, Donna F. Goldstein. He claimed that Goldstein had been calling up prospective witnesses at 4 A.M. and threatening to have them jailed if they didn't testify against Trump. Had this been true, Goldstein could have been disbarred. The accusation was serious enough that the judge halted the main case to hold a hearing to rule on the contempt motion. On the day of the hearing, according to a young trial attorney who was present, Cohn stood up in court and said, "Your Honor, the girl"—Goldstein—"made a mistake, and, if she promises not to do this again, I will withdraw the motion."

The trial attorney was struck by how deferential the judge was to Cohn. On another occasion, this attorney watched as Trump's deposition was being taken. Cohn took the lawyer aside and told him, "Leave Donald alone. He's going to be big one day."

Reflecting on the suit later, in "The Art of the Deal," Trump writes, "The idea of settling drove me crazy." But that's exactly what he did, finally signing, in June, 1975, virtually the same consent decree that he could have signed in 1973. He agreed to initiate a program that required him to advertise his rentals in Black-owned newspapers and to list vacancies with the New York Urban League, a civil-rights organization. He paid no fines and made no admission of guilt. The Justice Department, however, described the decree as "one of the most far-reaching ever negotiated." A headline in the Black-owned New York *Amsterdam News* proclaimed, "MINORITIES WIN HOUSING SUIT," and the accompanying story alerted readers that "qualified Blacks and Puerto Ricans now have the opportunity to rent apartments owned by Trump Management."

Trump and Cohn nevertheless declared victory. Winning, Cohn was fond of saying, was not enough—people needed to know about it. And in the coming years Trump repeatedly claimed that he had won the case.

Three years later, the Feds declared the Trumps to be in contempt of the consent decree, alleging continuing discrimination. Cohn told reporters that the new charges were a "rehash," without "the slightest merit." (He had previously called the government's case "a spit in the ocean.") But the matter fizzled, and the Trumps never admitted wrongdoing. The lesson Trump took from Cohn was that the facts could always be drowned out by strident counterclaims. Trump never incurred any financial consequences for his alleged discriminatory practices.

By then, Trump had moved on to the bigger playing field of Manhattan real estate. He had already learned a lot from Cohn. "I was very young, and Roy was a very political guy," Trump later told the *Times*' Maggie Haberman. "A different kind of guy." Trump

was astonished to see Cohn's name in the tabloids several times a week. Cohn taught him that the pyrotechnics of publicity were more important than the law. What counted was controlling the narrative.

"Roy was a master of situational immorality," Sam Roberts, who covered city politics for the *Daily News* in the seventies, told Matt Tyrnauer, the director of the documentary "Where's My Roy Cohn?" "He had rules about how to exercise power. . . . You would always try to goad your enemies into being the worst they possibly could be and then turn that against them, so that Roy Cohn would actually look like the good guy, which he virtually never was."

Cohn taught Trump not to worry about what other people thought of him. "He would just make light of the fact that people in the family just didn't care about him," David Marcus, whose father was Cohn's cousin, told Tyrnauer. Trump, Marcus said, manifested a different kind of narcissism, "a narcissism combined with insecurity. But in Roy it was a total security in who he was, except for the fact that he didn't want people knowing in public he was gay."

Trump viewed Cohn as a means to meeting influential people. One of the worlds that Cohn initiated him into was Studio 54, whose owners were clients. Trump attended Cohn's fifty-second birthday party at the night club. The comedian Joey Adams (Cindy Adams's husband) served as m.c.; one of his regular gag lines was "If you're indicted, you're invited." Marcus recalled being at Studio 54 with both Trump and Cohn. "Roy's eyes were glued to Trump. . . . He watched everything Trump did." Trump sometimes wandered downstairs to check out the semiprivate V.I.P. rooms. "I saw things happening there that to this day I have never seen again," he told the writer Timothy L. O'Brien. "I would watch supermodels getting screwed, well-known supermodels getting screwed on a bench in the middle of the room."

Until the early seventies, Trump had been basically an errand boy, collecting rents for his demanding, imperious father. It was not a glamorous job. But Trump was deeply ambitious, and he understood that, in the world of commercial real estate, he needed government tax abatements, zoning exceptions, and friendly city regulators in order to make profitable deals. Cohn was a fixer who could pave the way.

That same year, Cohn had played a key role in the election of the city's new mayor, Abraham Beame, whom Cohn had known since he was a young man. By 1973, as the city comptroller, he was running for the Party's mayoral nomination. His leading opponent was the Bronx congressman Mario Biaggi. Cohn leaked a story to the *Times* that Biaggi had pleaded the Fifth the year before when questioned by a federal grand jury, and the controversy helped sink Biaggi's candidacy. Beame was sworn in as New York's first Jewish mayor in early 1974, and Cohn became a trusted adviser. Although Cohn had earned a reputation as a right-wing attack dog for his work with McCarthy, he was now a powerful figure in the Democratic Party clubhouse.

Three weeks after Beame's inauguration, according to the *Village Voice* journalist Wayne Barrett, Trump was trying to persuade Ned Eichler, a businessman who managed some of Penn Central railroad's properties in Manhattan, to partner with him on a real-estate deal in midtown. Eichler asked Trump for proof that he had the political connections to obtain the necessary zoning permits.

"What kind of proof?" Trump asked. Eichler replied that he'd want to talk to the Mayor, to make sure he was on board.

"When do you want to see him?" Trump asked.

"Tomorrow at 2 P.M.," Eichler said.

Trump told Eichler that his limousine would pick him up at one-thirty. The next afternoon, Trump met his new business partner in the Mayor's office. He'd brought along his father, who had contributed to Beame's campaign. The Trumps quickly briefed the Mayor on the deal and why it would benefit the city, and then the five-foot-two Beame stood, reached his arms up to pat the shoulders of the two Trumps, and said, "Whatever Donald and Fred want, they have my complete backing."

Fred may have made a phone call to City Hall, but it's far more likely that Cohn orchestrated the meeting. He would be Trump's legal counsel and fixer on all his Manhattan deals for the remainder of the seventies. In 1975, Trump and Cohn were focussing on a property owned by Penn Central, which was going bankrupt: the dilapidated Commodore Hotel, at East Forty-second Street, adjacent to Grand Central Terminal.

When it was built, in 1919, the hotel was one of the most colossal structures of its kind in New York. The Commodore had been named after Cornelius (the Commodore) Vanderbilt, the railway tycoon who had built Grand Central, in 1871. But by the nineteen-seventies the establishment had become a symbol of the city's financial squalor. The decrepit hotel was barely operating. Half its rooms were empty. Homeless people squatted on the ground floor. A massage parlor occupied one of its storefronts. It was an embarrassing eyesore.

Mayor Beame was eager to sell the hotel to a suitable developer, but there were few prospects. New York was on the brink of bankruptcy, and the Republican-controlled federal government was not sympathetic. After one of the Mayor's visits to Washington, D.C., President Gerald Ford made it clear that no federal money would be forthcoming for a bailout. The *Daily News* reported the President's rebuff with a front-page headline: "FORD TO CITY: DROP DEAD."

Trump was the only developer who showed serious interest in taking on the Commodore. But many in the real-estate business were dubious; they regarded Trump as a blowhard. One banker told the *Times* that Trump was "overrated" and "totally obnoxious."

Trump could be disarmingly frank about his ambitions. Michael Bailkin, who ran Beame's Office of Lower Manhattan Development, began meeting with Trump to discuss the possible deal. After several sessions in a Third Avenue bar, Bailkin blurted out, "You're a very shallow person." Trump replied, "Of course. That's one of my strengths. I never pretend to be anything else."

During the negotiations, it became clear that Trump was having trouble persuading a bank to lend him the seventy million dollars he needed to renovate the hotel. The banks would make the loan only if the city awarded the developer a tax abatement.

Bailkin came up with a novel solution: the Commodore would be given to a municipal agency, making it tax exempt, and Trump would lease it from the agency and develop it. Trump paid

a rock-bottom ten million dollars to acquire the rights to lease the property, and he was given an extraordinary forty-year tax abatement, saving him approximately four million dollars a year in property taxes. He would pay a nominal annual "rent," starting at two hundred and fifty thousand dollars.

Completing the deal took two years, and it was Cohn who finalized the details. He'd approached his good friend Deputy Mayor Stanley M. (Bugsy) Friedman with a proposition. Friedman was already a silent business partner of Cohn's, having arranged for him to lease a half-dozen city-owned parking lots that generated thousands of dollars a week. The parking operation was funnelled through shell companies Cohn operated from his home, and he reported far less revenue than he was earning. In effect, he was regularly stealing hundreds of thousands of dollars from New York.

Friedman played a pivotal role in Trump's Commodore deal, casting the deciding vote in its favor at a 1976 Board of Estimate meeting. He was thus in a position to get the tax abatement approved, days before the Beame administration gave way to Mayor Ed Koch's regime. In turn, Friedman secured for himself a major perk in return for securing the tax break: a lifetime appointment as chairman of the city's Water Board, a position that paid twenty-five thousand dollars a year and included the use of a chauffeured limousine. In addition, Cohn invited Friedman to become a partner at his law firm, Saxe, Bacon & Bolan, and gave Friedman his own spacious office. The *Wall Street Journal*, in its coverage of the Commodore story, called Trump's unprecedented abatement "the tax deal of the century."

In September, 1980, the hotel reopened as the Grand Hyatt. Trump had gutted the Commodore, replacing its brick exterior with bronze-tinted glass and steel. The new hotel had fourteen hundred rooms, a shiny ballroom, and convention facilities.

The Commodore deal was always controversial. Some wondered how a young and inexperienced developer had managed to get such good terms. "Donald Trump runs with the same clique that continues to manipulate things behind the scenes in this city," the city councilman Henry J. Stern told the *Times*, calling the deal "a sweetheart contract." Stern went on, "Roy Cohn is his lawyer. He throws around a lot of money in political campaigns." In response, Cohn told the paper, "Donald wishes he didn't have to give money to politicians, but he knows it's part of the game."

GUY DELORT / GETTY

Cohn: "If the charge is that Donald is unsophisticated, they are in some ways right."

Cohn also encouraged Trump's flair for finding the spotlight. "He is tall, lean and blond, with dazzling white teeth, and he looks ever so much like Robert Redford" read the opening lines of a fawning *Times* profile of Trump, written by Judy Klemesrud and published in November, 1976. "He rides around town in a chauffeured silver Cadillac with his initials, DJT, on the plates. He dates slinky fashion models, belongs to the most elegant clubs and, at only 30 years of age, estimates that he is worth 'more than $200 million.'"

Trump had made a close study of Cohn, from the vanity license plates to the chunky car phone he had installed in his limo. But it was all gloss. Trump was not worth two hundred million dollars. In 1977, he paid $42,386 in taxes on an income of $118,530. In 1978, his salary, less than a hundred thousand a year, was paid by his father.

Another thing Cohn taught Trump was that he should always avoid a paper trail. Cohn, Trump said, "did not take notes." And he didn't want other people taking notes about what he said, either. Trump learned from Cohn to conduct business over the phone.

Wayne Barrett saw Cohn's stamp all over Trump. "Both of them are attack dogs," he said. Trump responded to that characterization in a 2016 interview with the Washington *Post:* "Well, I don't see myself as an attack dog. I see myself as somebody that's made a lot of money and done a great job and put a lot of people to work, but I don't see myself as an attack dog unless I'm attacked."

Trump and Cohn talked on the phone constantly. "Donald calls me fifteen to twenty times a day," Cohn told Marie Brenner, the journalist. "He is

always asking, 'What is the status of this . . . and that?'"

Another trait Trump picked up from Cohn was being cavalier about paying bills. Cohn never had a credit card, and he once said that he'd regularly leave his house "without two cents in my pocket." He ignored the small invoices that piled up on his desk. The trial attorney who worked with Cohn recalled seeing a letter from one of his venders. "Dear Roy," the vender wrote. "I'm still waiting for a payment of $10,000." Cohn scribbled in reply, "Dear Louie—Fuck you, Roy." In 1976, Cohn's law firm was in arrears on bills for office furniture, stationery, travel agents, and locksmith and telegraphic services. It owed $10,121.92 on expenses related to a company plane.

"He would go to restaurants," Pamela Newhouse Mensch, Cohn's friend, said, "and he just ran a tab. I never saw him actually pay. He just didn't care." By the seventies, Cohn had a reputation, as the *Voice* put it, "as a celebrity cheapskate and flimflammer." One creditor told a reporter, "He lives like a millionaire, buys like a millionaire, and pays like a pauper."

In 1976, the I.R.S. insisted that Cohn owed three hundred and seventy thousand dollars in back taxes. He had been under audit for seventeen years. In 1978, he accused the I.R.S. of engaging in a "vendetta." By 1985, the I.R.S. claimed that Cohn owed more than three million dollars. Cohn flaunted his insolence about taxes, once writing an article in *Parade* titled "You Can Beat the IRS." "I am an expert on the subject," he wrote, and even offered tips on how to hide income from the Feds. "Keep one step ahead of them. If there is a problem, change bank accounts so they can't grab your funds by knowing from your records where you bank." He tried to put the I.R.S. off the scent by opening accounts with tiny deposits in rural Connecticut.

Lawsuits from creditors left Cohn's assets untouched because his houses, Rolls-Royce, plane, and yacht were leased or held in the name of shell companies. For a time, in the late seventies, the deed to his town house on East Sixty-eighth Street was mysteriously put in the name of his firm's office manager, Jerry Howard.

"All I own are the clothes on my back and some personal possessions," Cohn said. "I have no assets. I want no assets, and I need no assets. My parents are dead. I am not married, I have no kids. I don't need an estate. If anything happens to me, the law firm has a one-million-dollar policy on my life."

Steven Brill noticed that, during the 2016 Presidential campaign, Trump sounded just like Cohn, using the same idioms and tough-guy language—"If you wanna know the truth" or "*That* I can tell you." Whenever Cohn was about to tell a big lie, Brill recalled, he'd preface it with the phrase "to be absolutely frank." Cohn also taught Trump to talk off the cuff, according to Roger Stone, a friend of Cohn's who met Trump in 1979. "Trump's greatest art form would have to be his ability to improvise," Stone said to Tyrnauer. "This is a man who is working without a net. . . . And he uses the tactics and the strategy of Roy Cohn to be in your face, to attack, to drive the argument." He continued, "Politics is about who dominates the dialogue."

Trump admired Cohn's snarling deportment. Not long after they met, he put a signed photograph of Cohn in his office, and, whenever in-person negotiations with adversaries became tense, he would point to the photo and say, "Would you rather deal with him?" Cohn inspired fear. "The mere sending of a letter from Roy Cohn has saved us a lot of money," Trump told the writer Ken Auletta, who profiled Cohn for *Esquire* in 1978. "When people know that Roy is involved, they'd rather not get involved in the lawsuits." On the other hand, Trump learned that, in an actual courtroom, Cohn had a tendency to wing it. "He could go into a case without any notes," Trump wrote in "The Art of the Deal." "When he was prepared, he was brilliant and almost unbeatable. However, he wasn't always prepared." Trump claimed that he would interrogate Cohn before every court date. "If he wasn't prepared, I'd push for a postponement," Trump said.

He didn't mind that Cohn was controversial. In an interview last year, Trump told us, "He was a wonderful lawyer. He did a very good job." The President went on, "Other people probably would say that they weren't happy with him. But that's the way life goes, right?"

In 1976, Trump started dating Ivana Zelníčková Winklmayr, a twenty-seven-year-old model from Czechoslovakia. They had met at Maxwell's Plum, a stained-glass-encrusted Upper East Side singles bar. In a 2016 interview with the New York *Post*, Ivana described meeting "this tall blond guy with blue eyes. He said, 'I'm Donald Trump, and I see you're looking for a table. I can help you.' I look at my friends and said, 'The good news is, we're going to get a table real fast. The bad news is, this guy is going to be sitting with us.'" The next morning, Trump sent a hundred roses to Ivana's hotel. A fast-tracked courtship followed, with dinners at Le Club, "21," and Tavern on the Green. After five months of dating, Trump broached marriage, on a ski trip in Aspen. (For years, he would brag, falsely, that Ivana had been an alternate for the Czech Olympic ski team.) Back in New York, Trump bought a three-carat diamond engagement ring from Tiffany's. But, when he called Cohn to tell him the news, his friend discouraged him. "You're better off not married," Cohn insisted. "I don't know why you want to do this."

Trump pushed ahead with his engagement, but he did allow Cohn to sell him on getting a prenuptial agreement. An early version of the contract, drafted by Cohn, included a clause providing Ivana with a cash bonus for each child she bore, and another required her to return any gifts from her husband if they divorced. When Ivana saw the draft, she was shocked, and threatened to walk. Trump struck the offending clauses and blamed Cohn for having crafted them. New language was inserted to explicitly provide that, in the event of a divorce, Ivana could retain her clothing and any personal gifts from Trump and others. She got a hundred-thousand-dollar "rainy day" fund deposited in her personal savings account. But Cohn prevailed when it came to potential alimony; the final agreement stipulated that, if the couple divorced before nine years of marriage, Ivana would receive only thirty thousand dollars a year. The

agreement read: "Under no circumstances will Ivana ever be possessed of or attempt to lay claim to any of Donald's holdings or interest in his family business interests."

The prenup was shockingly one-sided. "Donald has explained to Ivana and Ivana warrants that she is aware that Donald's standard of living and lifestyle are neither opulent nor extravagant in that neither he nor the companies in which he has an interest own yachts, planes or the usual appurtenances generally connected with large and substantial businesses," one part of the document reads. "Ivana acknowledges that she is familiar with the fact that Donald's standard of living is basically simple and will continue to be so after the marriage herein contemplated."

Ivana signed the prenup, a decision she regretted in 1990, when the couple split. (The divorce was granted on the ground of "cruel and inhuman treatment.") Her lawyer for the prenup, Lawrence H. Levner, was also Cohn's lawyer, handpicked by him to represent his client's future wife. According to Christine Seymour, the switchboard operator at Cohn's firm, who listened in on conversations, "Larry was a bozo. Roy wouldn't have hired him to referee a dog show. . . . Larry was just there because Roy could control him." Cohn had served his client well. He knew, he acknowledged later, that, by definition, such agreements protect the wealthier spouse: "You are stripping a spouse of a marital right."

The couple married in April, 1977, in a Manhattan church ceremony presided over by Norman Vincent Peale, the radio personality and best-selling author of "The Power of Positive Thinking." The pews were filled with Fred Trump's business and political associates, including Mayor Beame and Cohn. Afterward, Cohn attended the reception at the 21 Club, where he served as toastmaster. The next morning, the newlyweds flew to Acapulco for a quick honeymoon before returning so that Trump could continue his negotiations over the Commodore.

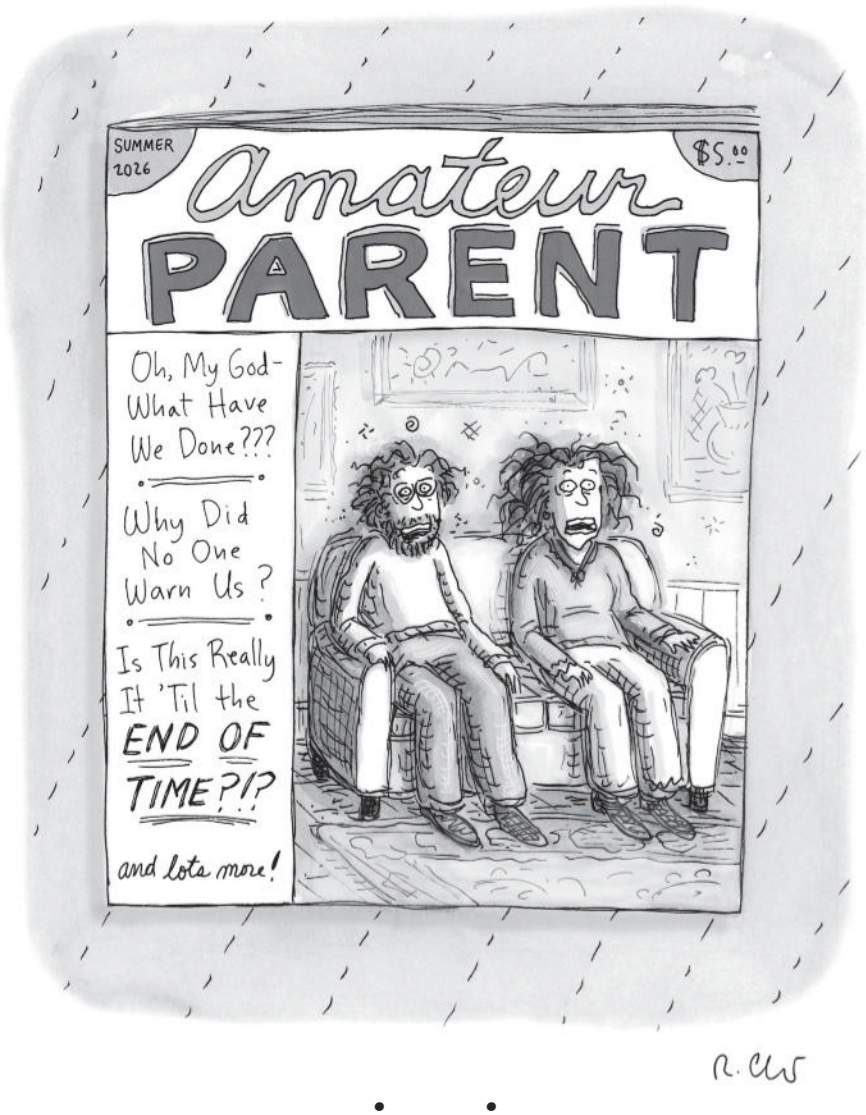
Even before the Grand Hyatt project was completed, Trump began to put together a deal to erect what would become his most emblematic building: Trump Tower. He had his eye on the old Bonwit Teller department store at Fifth Avenue and Fifty-sixth Street. After learning that the store was struggling financially, he acquired a lease on the space and then started negotiating to purchase the air rights above the neighboring building that housed Tiffany & Co.

Trump's aspirations were large. He had in mind a mixed-use skyscraper that would house luxury apartments above and offices and shops on the lower floors. In 1980, he brought Cohn into the project to help him obtain the building permits and zoning exceptions. That spring, crews began demolishing the Bonwit Teller building, a beloved landmark designed by Whitney Warren and Charles Wetmore, the architects of Grand Central Terminal, and soon Trump found himself embroiled in a series of controversies. For one thing, after preservationists sounded an alarm about the demolition, Trump had promised to save a pair of Art Deco bas-relief friezes and a large nickel-plated grille, situated over the store's entrance, and to donate them to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Despite this pledge, the sculptures were jackhammered into rubble. A story about the fracas in *New York* magazine showed Trump utilizing several P.R. tactics learned from Cohn. He called the smashed friezes "worthless" and crowed that the bad publicity had been a windfall: "The morning after the story hit the front pages of the *Times*, I must have gotten two dozen calls from people who wanted apartments in Trump Tower. It was fantastic promotion."

Trump also got into trouble for hiring more than two hundred undocumented Polish laborers to handle the demolition. (They were employed by a firm called Kaszycki and Sons, which mainly did window washing.) Trump paid them substandard wages, and their working conditions were appalling. When the workers threatened to halt the project, Trump called in Cohn, who arranged to hire a different crew from House Wreckers Union Local 95, which was under the control of one of his mobster clients. (Several of the Polish workers sued, and, fifteen years later, Trump paid $1.4 million to settle the case.)

When construction started on Trump Tower, Cohn directed Trump to the mafioso Anthony (Fat Tony) Salerno, an important player in what was known as the Concrete Club, a syndicate that controlled the pouring of cement in Manhattan. This was critical to Trump's project because his architects had persuaded him to build the skyscraper with a concrete skeleton nearly devoid of steel bars. Trump hired S&A Concrete, which was jointly owned by Salerno, the underboss of the Genovese crime family, and Paul Castellano, the boss of the Gambino clan, who would be gunned down at Sparks Steak House, in 1985. When unionized cement workers went on strike in the summer of 1982, the workers at Trump Tower continued to pour cement. "They were unbelievably good contractors in terms of doing the work," Trump later told the *Wall Street Journal*. "But a lot of them were

"Brian, you cannot fall in love every time they take their glasses off."



supposedly associated with the mob."

Not only did Cohn keep the cement flowing at Trump Tower; he also orchestrated the early sales of its unbuilt luxury apartments. His client Robert J. Hopkins, a Lucchese crime family associate, bought two apartments on the fifty-ninth and sixtieth floors for $1.6 million. Such sales helped to create the buzz that enabled Trump to sell the other two hundred and sixty units.

Additionally, when, in 1981, Mayor Koch denied Trump a critical tax abatement for the project, Trump brought in Cohn to get the decision reversed. Trump had expected to qualify for a 421-A tax exemption because his tower was improving the neighborhood and increasing the assessed value of the site. But the law in question, from 1971, had been designed to encourage developers to build low- and middle-income housing. The expected abatement was worth millions of dollars and would have been held for ten years. Koch believed that tax breaks of that magnitude should not be used to subsidize luxury apartments. When Trump learned that the tax break had been nixed, he phoned the Mayor's housing commissioner, Anthony Gliedman, in a rage and warned him, "I want you to know that I am a very rich and powerful person in this town and there is a reason I got that way. I will never forget what you did."

In April, 1981, Cohn filed an appeal before the New York State Supreme Court. More than a year later, the court ruled 7–0 that the Koch administration should reconsider Trump's application. But Trump was turned down once more. Relentless, Cohn refiled the appeal and went through the whole process again. This time, they got a different result.

"My lawyer, Roy Cohn, did a brilliant job," Trump writes in "The Art of the Deal," "arguing before seven justices without so much as a note." In December, 1982, the Appellate Division of the State Supreme Court ordered the city to give Trump the abatement. Cohn gleefully told the *Times*, "A lot of people have been sitting back, afraid to build until this thing was settled. It is a shot in the arm for their proposed buildings." The appeals-court decision was written by Judge Sol M. Wachtler, a Rockefeller Republican. The Koch administration appealed the decision once more, but, in 1984, the state's highest court ruled in Trump's favor.

Koch was annoyed, and he later referred to Trump as "piggy, piggy, piggy." In return, Trump called him a moron. The Mayor, he said, was "extremely nasty, mean-spirited, and very vicious, an extremely disloyal human being."

But Trump had got what he needed. He sent Cohn an effusive thank-you note. "Needless to say, your representation of me with regards to the Trump Tower case was brilliant," he wrote. "Everyone scoffed at our pursuit of this difficult victory saying that 'it could never be won.' The skeptics . . . never saw Roy Cohn in action. . . . Great job! Thanks, See you soon, Donald." Cohn framed the note and put it on his office wall.

Cohn treasured his relationship with Trump. "Dear Donald, Happy Birthday," he wrote in a letter one June, in the late seventies. "As I look back over our close personal and professional relationship over so many years, the memories are among the high points of my life. With all the daily frustrations and unappreciative people we help, you have been a meaningful exception. You have never said no, never failed to be completely supportive, and [have been] the best morale builder I've ever known. Your encouragement and kindness mean more to me than any amount of money—and I will always be proud to be on your team." The note was written on Cohn's personal stationery, imprinted with a scowling caricature of himself.

Cohn claimed that he never asked Trump, whom he liked to call the "young genius, builder, and developer," to pay him for the legal work he did. But Trump apparently paid him anyway. "I've never

sent him a bill in my life," Cohn told the journalist Peter Manso, in 1980. "But there is no check that he has ever sent me that isn't higher than the amount for which I would have billed him." Cohn's relative, David Marcus, believed that Cohn had a genuine affection for Trump: "Roy, I think, really felt this sort of pride of ownership in Trump," Marcus told Tyrnauer. "He'd created Trump. He had saved Trump from ruin after they met. And he felt this odd attraction to him until the end."

Cohn recognized that Trump was vulgar and uncouth, but the younger man's unembarrassed openness about his shallowness was disarming. "If the charge is that Donald is unsophisticated, they are in some ways right," Cohn said. "If you go with Donald to see an art collection, he's not that interested. He'd rather look out the windows at buildings."

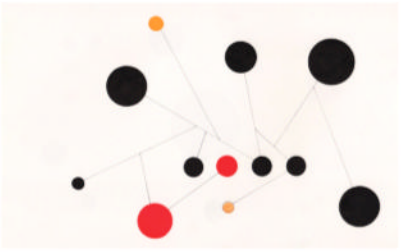
Trump regarded Cohn as a highly entertaining friend. "I got a kick out of Roy Cohn," Trump later told the Washington *Post*. Just as Trump kept a photo of Cohn in his office, Cohn treasured a shot of Trump that hung on his office wall. It was signed "To Roy, My greatest friend. Donald."

Trump liked to draw a contrast between Cohn and all the "respectable" guys who made their careers "boasting about their uncompromising integrity . . . [but] don't think twice about stabbing a friend in the back if the friend has become a problem." He occasionally dropped by Cohn's town house, where Saxe, Bacon & Bolan was based, so he witnessed firsthand some of the chaos in the firm's operations. "He was a man who did a lot of socializing with judges. He liked a lot of judges," Trump told us, speaking about Cohn. "He was a very complex person. He was a very brilliant guy in so many different ways. He was also somebody that got himself into a lot of trouble."

Cohn lived a secret life, hooking up regularly with gay hustlers. Trump was almost certainly aware of this. "Roy had a whole crazy deal going," he told the Washington *Post*. In an interview with us, Trump said, "He enjoyed life. He's a different kind of a guy, but he enjoyed life." Trump went on, "A lot of people didn't know he was gay until toward the end." (When Cohn was dying of AIDS, Trump fell out of daily touch with him. But just before Cohn's death, in 1986, Trump invited him to a dinner party at Mar-a-Lago. Afterward, Trump reportedly ordered his staff to "fumigate" the dishware and cutlery.)

Cohn always understood that, in dealing with Trump, a degree of obsequiousness was required. Trump could be demanding. As the years went by, Cohn functioned less as a mentor than as a fixer, having to dip into his favor bank to take care of Trump's needs. In 1983, Cohn used his many connections in Ronald Reagan's White House to engineer the elevation of Maryanne Trump Barry, Trump's sister, to a federal judgeship. But the Cohn favor bank was nonideological. He didn't care about Maryanne's qualifications. He knew nothing about her politics or legal experience. He just knew that she was Trump's sister.

Trump's father had reared him to have cutthroat ambition. But Cohn taught him tactics. The *Times* reporter David Cay Johnston told Tyrnauer that Cohn had instructed Trump to "ignore the rules, do what you want to do, don't leave a paper trail, don't keep a calendar, never do things in writing, and, if somebody gets onto you, rat out other people to save yourself. Delay, delay, delay, 'cause grand juries have a limited time, and you can run out the clock. And call in the news media. Make up a fantastic story. *We're just honest businessmen who are being attacked by these corrupt New*



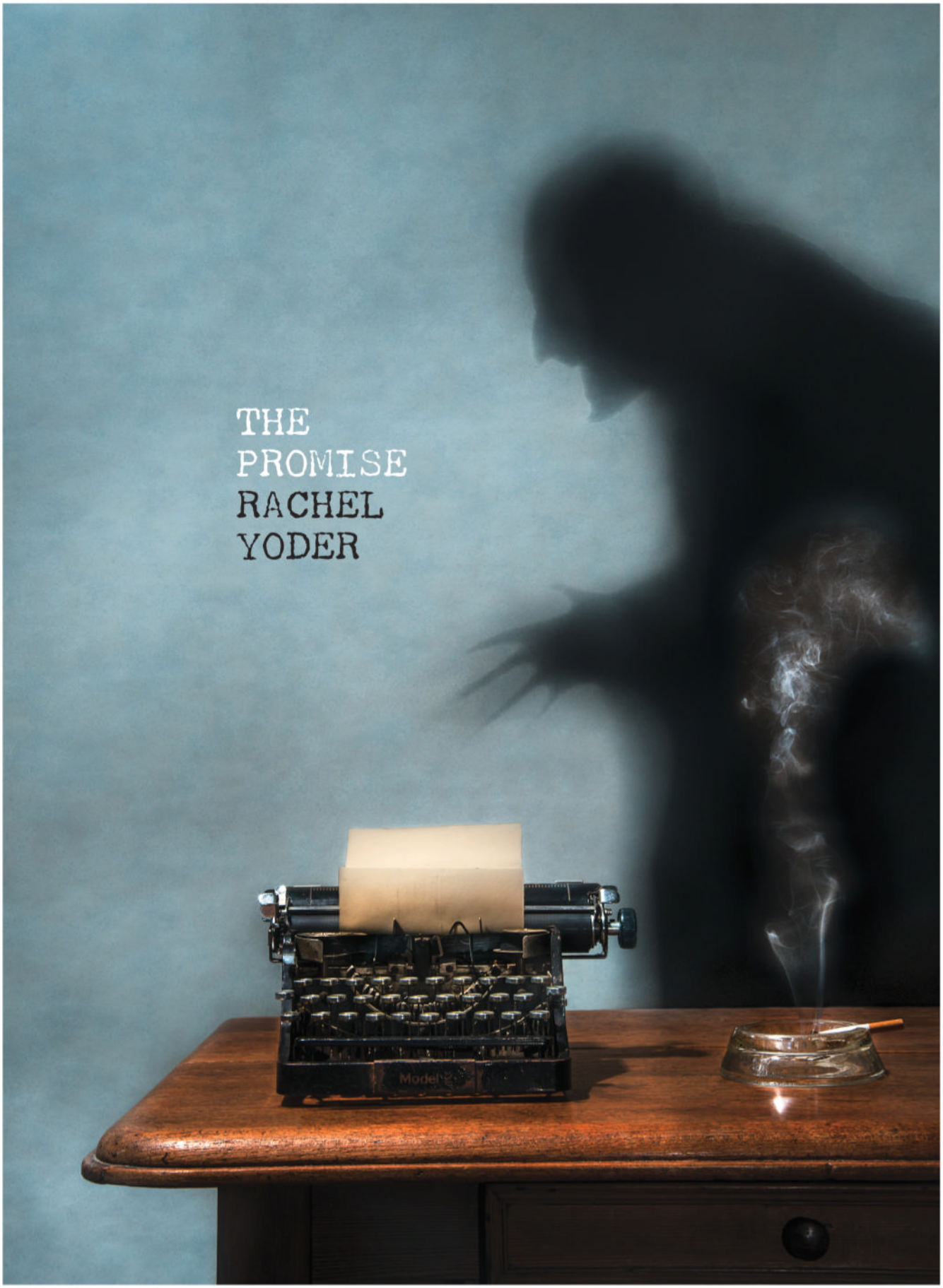
York City police, or F.B.I. agents, or especially the corrupt and heartless I.R.S. agents. And that'll be the news story. It'll put the government on the defensive." Cohn's rules became Trump's rules.

In the spring of 1984, *GQ* put the thirty-eight-year-old real-estate developer on its cover and ran a story by Graydon Carter, with the cover line "Success: How Sweet It Is." The profile opened with Cohn calling Trump one morning with a problem. He needed a hotel room for a client that night: "What's up? Who? Sorry, Roy, I think the Grand Hyatt is full," Trump says. "But how about the Barbizon? Hold on. Let me find out." A moment later: "Okay, I think we can book him into the Barbizon. Only for you, Roy."

Carter captures the young Trump's greed and bravado. "About the only thing that gives away this striver from an outer borough are his cuff links: huge mollusks of gold and stone the size of half-dollars," Carter wrote. The piece makes Trump seem vacuous. "Did you ever pass Trump Tower at night and see the way it glows?" Trump asks. "It almost glows in the dark. That's because I used real bronze. If you get imitations, it doesn't look the same. It looks like nothing." In the profile, Carter notes that Trump has hands that are "small and neatly groomed," an observation that would nettle Trump for decades, even into his Presidency.

Cohn was of New York, but he deeply resented New York's intellectuals, its universities, and its élite law firms. Trump has always felt the same resentment. "I'll never have the good will of the establishment, the tastemakers of New York," Trump said, in 1990. Another time, he remarked, "I love the poorly educated." As Cohn did before him, Trump likes to frame his anti-establishment politics of resentment as empathy for the working class. For both men, that was a charade, yet Trump learned how to effectively deploy the sentiment at campaign rallies.

"He had a lot of respect for me," Trump told us, of Cohn. "He said, 'You're going to be President someday. If you want to.'" He added, "He said that many times." According to *Vanity Fair,* the day after Trump was elected to the Presidency in November, 2016, Roger Stone reached him by telephone to congratulate him. "Mr. President," Stone said. "Oh, please, call me Donald," Trump replied. And then Trump remarked, in a pensive tone, "Wouldn't Roy love to see this moment? Boy, do we miss him." ♦



PHOTOGRAPH BY ELIZA BOURNER

From the kitchen table, it was all sunlight and haze. Through the sliding glass door, the morning mist burned off the green waves of corn. A low red veal barn, far beyond, marked the place where the land rose up, then turned to trees. The girl named Birdie diligently spooned raisin bran into her mouth, cold milk dribbling down her chin, and, against her will, thought of her visit to the veal barn the day before, the tug of the calf's tongue on the mauve nipple of the bottle, the white formula sloshing inside.

After breakfast, she had a stomach ache and sat by the living-room window, watching cars pass at irregular intervals, listening for the growl of motors as they approached, roared, faded away. She went to the cupboard next to the brick fireplace and tapped each wrinkled storybook spine. She rubbed the beige carpet threads with her fingers as she looked at the pictures of a bird, a dog, a loud machine. *Are you my mother*? the story kept asking.

The day before, she had fed a calf with her much older cousin, Angie, a beautiful girl who smiled when she said sad things and was engaged to be married when the leaves turned red. That was how she'd put it to Birdie, as she showed her how to hold the bottle against the calf's tugs. Angie lived on the family farm, just down the hill from their aunts' and grandmother's place, where Birdie was staying. The veal barn had a smell Birdie had never smelled anywhere else—antiseptic, then sweet like a flower and rotten like manure. It reminded her of being in a clean hospital where everyone was dying or already dead, though she'd never been in such a place.

Birdie had found the calves darling, so darling her chest hurt. She liked to rub the rough swirls of hair between their eyes. They tried to lick her wrist when she did this. Their noses and the inside of their ears and their long tongue muscles were delightfully pink, the color of a crayon. Each baby wore a collar with a chain and had a messy bed of straw. Once Birdie and her cousin were back outside, the air hung green and full. She had to walk all the way around the cornfield and along Market Avenue, up the hill, to get back to her aunts' place. She would have preferred to go home to her mother and father, but they weren't there.

At the fireplace's dark mouth sat a small black iron, heavy as a bowling ball, impossibly heavy. She touched the chainmetal curtain gathered at the fireplace's edges, and her fingers came away soot black. She rubbed them on her skirt, ruining its pretty. She picked up an empty ostrich egg, put one eye to the small hole on one end, then quickly set the shell back down, repulsed.

After the living room, Birdie wandered to the dining room, where she was cast into an underwater light, the sun sifting through the plants arranged by the long window. A white lace cloth covered the dining table, and a stiff piece of plastic covered the lace. She climbed onto a chair and reached for the bowl at the center of the table. She took the cluster of purple grapes from it, touched each sticky plastic fruit, then took the too yellow banana in her hands and bit it gently, enough to leave a few small marks. She knocked it lightly against the table to hear the hollow inside.

In the kitchen, her aunt Rebecca kneaded dough on the floured counter. Birdie sat at the little table by the sliding glass door and watched her work the dough forward and back, her shirtsleeves rolled above her elbows, an apron covering her denim skirt. Rebecca wore her simple weekday covering over her hair, which had been pulled back in a ponytail, then braided and pinned up on the back of her head. On Sundays, she wore the lacy covering the girl preferred but put her hair in a simple bun, because that was more godly. Rebecca asked a question in Pennsylvania Dutch, then laughed and tried again: "Birdie, do you want some bread?" Well, of course she wanted some bread. Her aunt gave her a warm piece with margarine melting at the center. "For goodness' sake, Birdie, wash your hands. And it's better not to mess with the fireplace." Rebecca unfolded a little metal stool for her and placed it in front of the kitchen sink.

As Birdie ate her bread at the table, she watched her grandmother carry a blue bucket from the shed to the garden, where she and Birdie's other aunt, Miriam, worked in worshipful ways, bowing down to weed in their flapping skirts. Miriam wore a navy-blue task jacket to ward off the loose chill of the morning. Grandma's white cardigan bloomed like a daisy against the green. Birdie tried to understand her grandma's beige shoes, stiff with a thick sole. Her grandmother left them on a little rug outside the door when she came in from her work. Birdie was still sitting at the table, with just a few crumbs on her plate. The sun was high in the sky now, and, despite Miriam's smile as she slid the glass door open, the girl's chest was full of crying. Her parents had gone to Indiana to visit old friends, other Mennonites they'd volunteered with in Africa. Her older brother and sister were staying with classmates, but she was still so small. It had been easier to leave her with her aunts and grandma at the house on Market Avenue than to take her on the long drive. Tomorrow, a Tuesday, was the first day of second grade.

The kitchen smelled of coffee and yeast. Grandma sat opposite the girl, with her back to the sliding glass door. She smiled and brushed Birdie's hand with her fingertips as the aunts talked and laughed. Grandma spoke—something the girl couldn't understand. The phone on the wall rang, and Rebecca snatched the receiver, then pulled the curly cord down the steps to the basement and shut the door. A battery-powered radio on the counter played tinny gospel songs. The girl grew heavy, heavier. Her head tipped toward the table. Her lips turned. Then Rebecca was there, with bits of tissue stuck up her nose. Birdie laughed but didn't feel happy. The day went on and on. Before long, a little carved cuckoo emerged from the open door of its house on the wall and sang five times.

In the hallway off the kitchen, Miriam pulled a box of games from a high closet shelf. Birdie sat on the cool linoleum, half in the closet and half in the hall. Red, red, blue, yellow, green. Red, red, blue, yellow, blue. A buzzer bleated. She played again. The women's talk in the kitchen rose and fell like a song. A purple melancholy settled into the shadows on the hallway floor. The backs of her legs stuck to the linoleum, and, when she pulled away, her skin sliced with pain. Before long, the night would be there.

After dinner, Rebecca split open a melon from the garden. She scooped the furry seeds from inside the orange flesh. The chunks of fruit were warm and sweet, like cough syrup. The girl sucked on the fruit, and, when she finally bit down, juice

leaked onto her chin. She wiped it with her hands, and then her fingers stuck together. When she pulled her fingers apart, she saw dirt gathered in the hollows between them.

While the girl had a bath, Miriam readied for bed. At the bathroom mirror, she pulled three teeth attached to glinting metal parts from her mouth and scrubbed them with her toothbrush. She turned to the girl.

"Well, what do you think?" she said, smiling a little. Her front teeth were gone. She covered her mouth with one hand, now laughing from the horror of it. She placed one of her partials in the girl's soft, small palm. "Careful with it, little bird," she said. The girl touched the yellowed thing attached to wires. It was a part of Miriam that was already dead. Birdie placed the tooth on the edge of the tub and moved white bubbles around in the water, then pushed her face into the bubbles and further down.

Before Birdie went upstairs to bed, she stood in the doorway of her grandmother's small bedroom. Her grandmother sat on the single bed as Rebecca undid the back of her dress.

"Come see the scar where they cut her breast away," Rebecca said. The girl shrank. "There's nothing to be scared of," Rebecca insisted, tugging at her mother's dress. Birdie shook her head.

"Don't make her if she doesn't want to," Grandma said quietly. Rebecca's hands stilled, and the girl stared at her grandmother, wide-eyed. Her long white hair, normally collected in a bun, trailed down past her shoulders in smooth, pale waves. It was the most beautiful thing the girl had ever seen.

ENJAMBMENT

Listen, it doesn't happen overnight. One day, you
wake up in the blue wreck of the thing, the thing being
your bed, your cool morning, your mug, and suddenly
you are the thing, your thingness apparent to you, you
are a ruled thing, the thing once had a psyche, a libido,
an enigmatic smile, but the thing doesn't need to think
about that now, a thing cannot be safe or unsafe, a thing
cannot speak a safe word and, therefore, does not need
one, a thing thinks and unthinks and is instructed, a
thing can witness but not defend the dying light
frothed out on the Formica table during an argument as
the sun downs, downs, downs and a fist slams, a thing
yells back, but a yelling thing is just a thing, a thinking,
fucking thing, the police come to ask the thing if
the thing is okay, the neighbors are worried about
the thing, the neighbor is an eighty-something-year-old
woman and has seen some things, but this thing is
exasperated, this thing does not talk to cops, thing
cannot believe their thingness, cannot understand how
they, bright-minded, well-loved, are not immune
to becoming a thing, a thing hates the discourse of
trauma, abhors becoming a cliché, the E.R. is now asking
if thing, a grown thing, is sleeping with stuffed animals
after thing passes out on the street, thing cannot bear
to see the way people have been looking at them lately,
lowering their voices in a piteous mist, thing gets drunk
with Aria who tells thing she, too, used to be a thing, oh,
thing, poor thing, little thing, thing thinging, thing is
a beautiful mess, thing walks in Prospect Park, thing
kicks the snow and then apologizes, thing is the snow,
thing bows at the end of her performance of thingness
only to learn that all the world is a stage and there is no
exit thing can see from the theatre, thing calls her
mother but cannot bear to say, *What is happening to me*,
thing calls her sister and tells her partial truths, a few
friends tell thing it's time, thing swears that there will be

It was another era, or even the end of it. Birdie didn't want to get older. She liked being small, except when she was scared. She stayed in Miriam's bedroom because this was the aunt she belonged to. Before, when her father was small, he had belonged to Miriam, too. There were a dozen kids altogether, and Miriam was the third-oldest girl. The eldest girl, Ruth, had raised the middles. The second-oldest girl, Rebecca, did the cooking. And Miriam raised the little ones, Birdie's father included. This had happened in the farmhouse down the hill, where Angie now lived, along with Uncle Abe and Aunt Martha and a trio of her brothers. Angie's bedroom was where Birdie's dad had slept as a boy, and, whenever Birdie went in it, she felt a white spirit pass through her. In which room had her uncle June died when he was seventeen, a brain bleed after he'd collided with someone in the outfield during a baseball game? In what room had her grandfather seen the angel warning him of June's death? She never asked. Her father called Miriam a princess, but Birdie knew she was more than that: a queen. There was nothing better than Miriam, except Birdie's own mother.

Miriam watched soap operas on the little black-and-white television on her hope chest, even though they were forbidden by the girl's parents at home. Birdie puzzled over the woman on the little screen shouting "I hate you!" at a man, and then embracing him, kissing him desperately.

"Well, little bird, there's love and there's hate, and you think they're opposites, but they're almost exactly the same thing," Miriam explained. Even though the girl was only eight, she could understand.

Miriam had pictures on her mirror, one of a man whom Birdie had met a few times, a Hungarian named Zoltan, who had a nice accent and a kind face. He always wore a dark suit.

"He wanted to marry me," Miriam

no poem about these months, thing is both speaker and
beloved, thing reads that June Jordan and Adrienne
Rich had a friendship falling-out but came back
to each other, thing reads William Carlos Williams saw
sixty patients a day during the Spanish flu and lost
a young colleague, thing reads Sonny Rollins practiced
saxophone on the Williamsburg Bridge for up to sixteen
hours a day, thing will stay alive as long as she can read
about the real and the dead, thing packs her lunch,
thing takes the bus to teach poems to women at night
who don't see thing as thing, and thing's color returns a
little bit, every Tuesday, the women ask thing why other
women broke the line in the poem at the moment
that they did, the women are asking about enjambment,
soft landings of the first unstressed iamb sound, hard
landings of a trochee like a trampoline into the heavens,
the women are asking why we break at some words and
not at others, each time that thing has an answer, thing
becomes less thingy, thing has a lot of answers because
before thing was a thing, thing studied very hard, thing
had a good mind before sleeping next to something bad
for thing, thing is not a doll and is not one of those
things that secretly wanted to be a plaything, not one
of those writers who sells books about the half-hearted
"transgression" of being spanked or whipped, cannot relate
to the privilege of writing about being a thing, imagine
making it art, how American, you American thing, you
thing, pinging across the ocean like a downed plane
confessing its last mistakes, pinging like Beckett's short
story called "Ping," how American, how American you
are, Megan, I mean, just look at you, thing watches
"Moonstruck," thing doesn't want to be fair, forgives no
one, is not interested in healing, thing watches Cher say,
I love him something awful, *Ma*, and Cher's mother, with
her silver hair gathering, gathering into a face, into
the years, says, *That's too bad*.

—Megan Fernandes

smiled. "He brought me a very nice set of knives."

"Why didn't you?"

"Oh, it wasn't right. And I suppose I wanted to do what I wanted to do." She paused, then blurted, "He was shorter than I was!"

"Why does that matter?"

Miriam hesitated, the question twisting her mouth and eyes. She looked at Birdie, then laughed.

"Maybe I'm petty," she said. "Plus, I already had a set of good knives."

Miriam was forty, or maybe fifty-five. Birdie wasn't sure. She was older than Birdie's father, at least. She worked at the meat locker, where Birdie's father had once taken her. Miriam had given her a heavy coat and wrenched open the silver door. Inside, bloody pieces of animals hung in the cold. A single bulb illuminated the room, and Birdie wanted to leave as soon as she was inside. She could smell the blood. She watched her white breath blossom and fade in front of her face, while Miriam walked among the bodies, touching each one to make it sway as she explained the cuts.

In bed, Birdie wore a floral nightgown that wrapped her in heat. Her new backpack and folded first-day clothes sat on Miriam's upholstered reading chair. She had wanted to wear a smooth white button-down with her little skirt, but, when she'd tried it on, Rebecca had said it made her look like a boy. She was ashamed for having liked it. Instead, they picked a nice blouse with an itchy lace collar she despised.

Tucked under the quilt, Birdie watched Miriam as she searched her head with her fingers in front of the mirror, pulling pins from her dark hair one by one.

"Would you like to hear a story?" Miriam wondered. "I have a good one from my friend Susie Coblentz." It was something that had happened to Susie's friend, she said.

Across from the bed, the ceiling sloped precipitously, with a dormer cut into it. On either side of the window, a small door opened to a space just the right size for a little girl, where her aunt stored wrapping paper and yard-sale finds. Miriam didn't like for Birdie to play in there, but it was the only place the girl wanted to play. It seemed like a punishment not to let her shut herself in with a flashlight when it was just the right size for her make-believe. At night, though, the doors took on a tinge of terror. They were also the right size for dwarves and goblins, sundry other monsters. You couldn't be certain, in the night, what sort of world they might open onto, were you to turn the knob. People shouldn't have small doors in their houses, Birdie thought. It wasn't right.

"So, the friend of my friend Susie," Miriam continued. This woman was lying in her bed one night when she heard a tap-tap-tapping coming from the living room. She got up to see what was making it, and there, at a little desk her husband used for his bookkeeping, sat the Devil, working away on a typewriter.

Birdie, paralyzed beneath the hot sheets, imagined the living room below them with a little wooden desk and an old-fashioned black typewriter on it. An oil lamp, like the one that Rebecca kept in her room as decoration, illuminated the Devil, who wore dark slacks and a dark vest, an impeccable white shirt. A golden chain glinted against the vest, disappearing into his pocket. His skin was browned and his neck and chin wispy with hair. He wore round, gold-rimmed spectacles. His nose and mouth protruded wolfishly. A cigarette smoldered in the ashtray near his hand.

"Well, of course Susie's friend was

absolutely petrified, but soon enough she found her voice," Miriam said. The story went that Susie's friend asked, "What are you doing here?" And the Devil replied, in a strange accent she couldn't place, "I'm here to write your life story." Smoke wafted from his ears! The woman couldn't breathe. It was as if she were suffocating, just being near him. "I'm here to write your life story," the Devil repeated. "Whatever way you'd like it. Just tell me: Do you accept my offer? If you do, I'll make it so." He waited with his long, sharp fingernails poised above the keys. "I suppose you want my soul in return," the woman said. "Of course," the Devil said, smiling.

His handsome grin bewitched her, and she imagined all the ways her life might go. Maybe she could be a famous jazz singer. Perhaps she could travel around the world on an ocean liner. Or what about living in New York City and running a soup-and-bread restaurant visited by people from all over?

Birdie felt the woman's dreams swell in her own chest. She herself wanted to be an astronaut, or a ballerina. She wanted to live in a city and visit the art museum every day. She wanted to order takeout Chinese food in white cardboard boxes, even though she'd never had Chinese food. Her mother said she was worldly, and her father said she could not, under any circumstances, be an astronaut. Also, they would not drive her across town for something like ballet lessons, but still all she could think about was a pink tutu. Her parents weren't quite sure where she had come from, they'd say, chuckling, but Birdie didn't understand why what she wanted was funny.

"The woman thought long and hard, longer than a good Christian woman should," Miriam said. "And in the end she said, 'I don't. No, I don't accept your offer. No, I don't want you to write anything. I want my soul to go to the Lord. I love my good, simple life as a mother and wife, with my family, and nothing could ever replace that.' As you might imagine, the Devil was furious. He slammed his fists onto the keys and let out a horrible screech. He moaned and grunted as she walked back to her room, got into bed, and easily fell into a restful sleep."

Even though the story was over, the Devil of Birdie's imagination had moved upstairs and was now conducting his business just across the hall, in Rebecca's bedroom. He was in there still, sitting at his desk, as Rebecca slept, in the light of the oil lamp. Birdie feared she would hear the clicking of the keys if she listened hard enough.

Miriam snapped on the bedside lamp and touched the girl on the shoulder.

"Did that frighten you?" she asked with concern. Birdie nodded, though the answer was more complicated than a simple yes. Miriam's face fell. "I should have thought it through more. I'm sorry." Miriam pulled one tooth, then another from her mouth, and clinked them into a porcelain dish on her nightstand.

Miriam rubbed some pink lotion on the girl's little hands and arms, to make her feel better. Then the girl watched her aunt read, willing her eyes to stay open as long as she could manage. The glinting metal of the Devil's watch chain flashed in her mind, his hair and his teeth. She thought of a long, jagged scar cut across her grandmother's chest.

"Why can't the woman have the life she wants," Birdie asked, "without the help of the Devil?"

Miriam paused her reading and stared into a dark corner of the room. Birdie had been tired, nearly asleep, but her aunt's silence kept her awake. She waited, but her aunt said nothing.

Birdie rolled over to stick her feet out from beneath the quilt. Three long shelves of books covered the wall next to the girl's side of the bed. She ran her eyes over each spine, sounding out the words to keep herself awake. She stopped at a book with the word ROOTS on its thick spine. What could it be about? She closed her eyes and imagined roots tunnelling into the soil, anchoring the house to the top of the hill as if it were itself a living thing, then all the plants in the garden and fields, all the distant trees, attaching the landscape above to the earth below. White roots cracking through her grandmother's strange shoes and burrowing down into the dark, soft soil, and then Rebecca's taproot breaking through the kitchen floor, travelling across the expanse of the cool basement, plunging into the concrete floor, and below, below. She imagined Miriam planted outside in the garden with the zucchinis and eggplants, strong like a tree. She thought of the roots that kept a person in one place, a place where people looked like they were related and smelled the way her parents smelled. Where they brought in wooden baskets of gnarled tomatoes and laughed about the humidity, instead

"And we can start talking about them in three, two, one…"

of complaining, and pruned the rosebushes so that they bloomed exuberantly. Where people were happy, and happy, and happy. But, in her imagination, Birdie herself didn't grow roots. She grew wings and flew above them all. And it was as she flew that, against her will, she fell asleep.

In the years to come, Birdie asked her mother and father, her brother and sister, even some cousins, whether Miriam had ever told them the story about the Devil and the typewriter, if it was the sort of story that was passed around, part of the culture, so to speak, or a Mennonite version of an urban myth, but she never found anyone else who had heard it or could help her remember precisely how it went. It obsessed her because the story seemed like some sort of prophecy, or key.

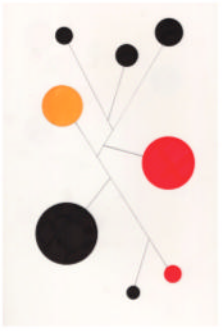
Birdie woke before dawn. Pain throbbed deep in her head. Sweat dampened her nightgown. She moaned, and Miriam woke, touching the girl's face.

"You're aflame," she murmured. The girl couldn't hear out of one ear. Miriam rose and returned with a cold washcloth, which she placed on Birdie's forehead. The girl closed her eyes, and, when she opened them again, the room flared white with day. Miriam put warm oil in her deaf ear. She brought Birdie a tall glass of water with ice. The little girl cried because she was missing the first day of school and was worried, worried about what her mother would think, worried that she had done something wrong by getting sick, that she should have behaved better and not been interested in the Devil, that she was now being punished, and rightly so.

"Poor thing is delirious," Rebecca said, bent over the bed and holding the girl's hot hand. Birdie cried and slept and cried, then woke to an oily splotch on the pillowcase. She took off her nightgown and slept in just her underwear.

Later, much later, as she thought back to the story about the Devil, it seemed as if the story itself had been the earliest symptom of her fever. She incorporated the story into her sickness, into her absence from school on the first day of second grade, her parents in a faraway state. She had not merely been scared of the Devil. She had wanted to sit on his lap and kiss his hairy cheek. She had wanted to clickety-clack on his black keys. For this, she had been struck with fever, made deaf in one ear—a warning. Her fever dreams were of floating untethered in an infinite black space, of being trapped in a blinding spotlight on an empty stage, not knowing how or where to move.

In what felt like the late afternoon, Birdie rose and stuck her head out the bedroom door, listened to be sure her aunts weren't nearby, then opened one of the small doors beneath the slanted ceiling, and went inside where it was cool. Just inside the door, Miriam kept a flashlight. Its ray illuminated a case of wrapping-paper rolls, a wooden stool, a broken box full of old picture frames. Behind the wrapping paper, under a piece of gauzy fabric with frayed edges—she was sure that was where the Devil's black typewriter would be. It was as real to her as her own heart. She pulled away the piece of cloth to reveal a wooden knife block, black handles neatly tucked into every slot. She touched the biggest hilt just to be sure it was real. Her fever glowed orange all around her, outlining her hand. She slid the big knife from the block and held it in front of her face, tilted the blade back and forth. She saw a man in a black suit. He spoke lovingly, with a strange accent, to Miriam, before lowering himself to one knee and handing her six knives plunged into a wooden cube. Birdie blinked slowly to clear her eyes, then carefully pressed the cold metal of the knife against her cheek.



Crouched in the darkness like that, the knife a comfort, quite suddenly—or maybe after a long, long while—she was the goblin beyond the little door whom she had once feared. She made raspy little grunts and snorts and flicked her tongue against her lips. She rubbed her palms back and forth against her scalp until her hair was in knots, then dragged her nails down her cheeks. She picked her nose and wiped it into the carpet, then peed through her underpants, the urine flaming hot as it ran down her thighs and splattered on her feet.

She emerged from the little door into moonlight. How could that be, she wondered. Out the dormer window, the garden overflowed its small plot, an unfettered grotesquerie of florid kales and chards, the tomato plants baroque with late-summer wandering, tendrils crawling up and out of their cages, the squash plants making beds with their elaborate arms. Lie down in that garden and it will take you over, the little girl thought. It will wrap you up and you'll never leave. As she tilted it back and forth, the knife blade flashed blue, then white.

The story Miriam would tell the girl's parents upon their return was that she had found the girl standing in the dark hallway late at night, underwear sopping, a length of gauzy fabric draped over her head. They would all laugh, Birdie included. What Miriam would not tell Birdie's parents was that, when she found her, Birdie held in her hand a butcher knife. This was when Birdie learned from her aunt that sometimes lying was a necessary sin, though she wasn't certain this was the lesson her aunt had meant to teach.

In the hallway that night, Miriam had moved close to touch Birdie's flushed cheek, damp and hot with the sickness. She pulled the veil from Birdie's head. The girl's eyes were black, pinpricked with silver light.

"Little bird," she murmured. "You've given me a fright. Come, let's clean you up. What are you doing out here? And with that knife, no less."

On her own June wedding day, decades later—the ceremony under a young maple tree, the reception in a red barn, hot as a fever—Birdie would remember what she had said that night. She would remember how she said to her aunt in the hallway, "I am the bride," as she held out the knife, "and this is my promise." A man slips a golden ring on her finger. The cornfield rises up around them like a fortifying wall, a defense protecting what from what? She remembered for all those years the promise she made with the knife in her hand, and then, after she said *I do*, she forgot. ♦

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BOOKS

THE QUIET LIFE

A cultural history of silence.

BY ANTHONY LANE

One of the virtues of John Bunyan, the author of "The Pilgrim's Progress," is how little he bothered with the high and mighty. He preferred the low and ordinary, in his discourse as in the company he kept. In "Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners"—his spiritual autobiography, which went through many editions after first being published, in 1666—revelations tumble upon him when he is least expecting them. "I was walking to and fro in a good man's shop, bemoaning of myself in my sad and doleful state," he writes. We've all been there. Suddenly, mid-shopping, he hears the word of the Lord:

> It brought light with it, and commanded a silence in my heart, of all those tumultuous thoughts, that did before use, like masterless hell-hounds, to roar and bellow, and make an hideous noise within me.

The storm is nothing, it seems, compared with the eye at its core. Often added to the end of "Grace Abounding" is Bunyan's account of his arrest, in 1660, for preaching in public. He was torn from his wife and children (an act that he likens to "pulling the flesh from the bones") and imprisoned. When a magistrate proposed that he hold his tongue and leave the country, warning that he would "stretch by the neck for it" if he disobeyed, Bunyan replied simply that, if released, he would carry on preaching. An illustration in an American edition of the book from 1905 bears the caption "Bunyan refuses to be silenced." So, there you have it. Silence is the holy hush that descends upon you, amid the clatter of a sinful world, *and* the gag that you have to rip off if truth is to be told. How can it be both?

Puzzles of this kind are strewn throughout "Silence: A Literary History" (Oxford), a new book by Kate McLoughlin. It's a shame that Bunyan doesn't rate a mention in her survey, because he has much to say about not saying much; it's also a surprise, because the book is, to say the least, accommodating. It runs to six hundred and ninety-six pages, two hundred and twenty-one of which are consumed by notes, in a typeface so tiny that your intraocular muscles may file suit against your brain. Dropping the volume on your foot would cause an agonized and very non-silent yelp.

To be fair, McLoughlin has her hands full. Silence is one of those spillover themes, like desire or faith or sickness, to which it is difficult to set a limit. So irrepressible is her hunt for evidence that she does not falter even when it leads to the bathroom door:

> The Anti-Noise League, founded in 1933, led efforts literally to turn down the volume of everyday life. In 1935, the League held an exhibition at the Science Museum in South Kensington, featuring exhibits such as the 'Silent Symphonic W.C. Suite', a lavatory with a 'very silent' flush.

Where, you wonder, will the quest conceivably end? I was hoping that McLoughlin, who teaches English literature at Oxford, might round things out by attending a thrash-metal festival, or a campanology contest, or maybe a resounding royal flush, but even then she would, I suspect, be moved to explore the quivering silence that succeeds an extremity of sound. As it happens, she reserves her most elegant chapter for last, guiding us through the witty winding down of Haydn's Symphony No. 45, the "Farewell," in which "the score directs the musicians, section by section, to snuff out the candles on their music stands and leave the stage."

Chronologically, "Silence: A Literary History" covers everything from the empty halls of "Beowulf" to COVID lockdowns and beyond. (There are glances even further back, too; I like to think of Harvard professors turning deep green with envy at the news that Pythagoras required his pupils to keep quiet for *five years* before they could presume to pipe up.) Space is found not only for "the twelfth-century Premonstratensian abbot Philip of Harveng" but also for the BBC show "Strictly Come Dancing," which, in 2021, cut the music mid-routine, thus allowing the audience to share, however briefly, in the silence to which the dancing competitor—an actress, deaf since birth—was accustomed. The result was, for prime-time TV, something to marvel at. Pythagoras would have given it a ten out of ten.

As the book rolls on, we pass familiar monuments. McLoughlin lingers to pay her respects to Donne, Milton, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats—who writes of "the silence when some rhymes are coming out," as if they were snails emerging after the rain—and a mustering of major novelists, including Samuel Richardson (whose epistolary epic "Clarissa," not far short of a million words long, teems nonetheless with the unspoken), George Eliot, Henry James, and

ABOVE: MIGUEL PORLAN

Pythagoras reportedly required his students to remain silent for five full years before they could presume to speak.

ILLUSTRATION BY BEN HICKEY

Thomas Hardy. The last of these keeps presenting us with couples who can't, won't, or feel no need to say what they mean, let alone what they mean to each other, even as they carry on conversing. "Jude the Obscure" is a case in point:

> When they talked on an indifferent subject, as now, there was ever a second silent conversation passing between their emotions, so perfect was the reciprocity between them.

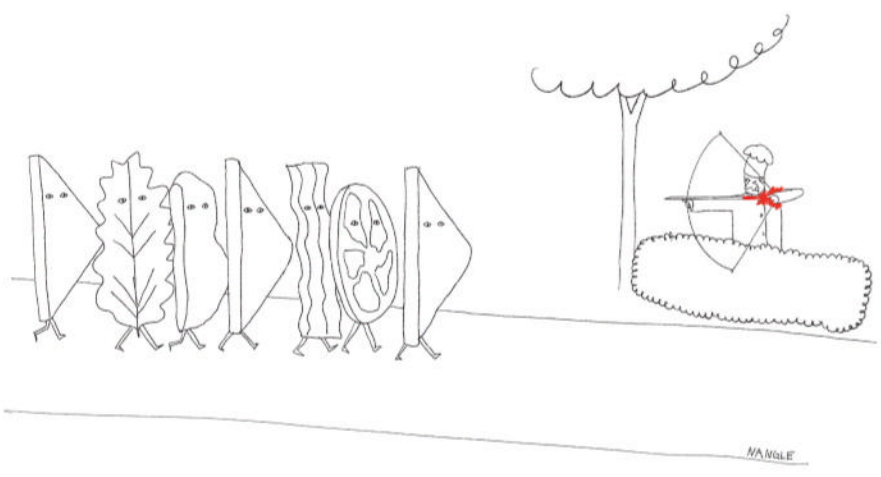
It is typical of Hardy that he should move from such parlor drama to the vast and exhausted quiet that followed the Armistice, at the end of the First World War. In a poem titled "And There Was a Great Calm," from 1920, he writes of bewildered soldiers murmuring, "Strange, this! How? All firing stopped." McLoughlin quotes those words and backs them up by reproducing a graphic of an audio recording made by the U.S. Army Signal Corps at that exact time, in 1918. Stuttering lines, on the left, jerking up and down, denote the rattle of guns; on the right, the lines are all but flat, as silence descends. (Can an official document become a work of art, by dint of what it gravely represents?) In memory of that hour and in honor of the dead, a two-minute silence is still observed across the United Kingdom at 11 A.M., on the eleventh day of the eleventh month, every year.

As customs go, a nationwide suspension of normal activity is unusual. (I was once at a British airport, trudging through security, when the two-minute silence struck; the expression on the faces of the travellers around me, as the conveyor belts shuddered to a halt, was one of international bafflement.) Only once, though, in passing, does McLoughlin refer to the two-minute silence, as if discomforted by its state-sponsored formality. On the whole, she leans toward more radical forms of reticence, born of protest or despair down the centuries. "In the 2020s, as in the 1600s and 1700s, political upheavals have a silencing effect," she writes. Of the three components of the quiet life that she cites—"traumatised silences, Stoic silences, and happy silences"—the third tends to get muscled out, at least within this book, by the other two. Thanks to McLoughlin, we are introduced to "the silences that surround transness—hiddenness, rejection, defiance of conventional categories" and to "the terrifying silences of the climate crisis." And don't forget the kind of silence that "fosters careful attentiveness to other non-human life-forms." In other words, if you shout at your dog, you're barking up the wrong tree.

There is something in "Silence: A Literary History" to suit all tastes. Whatever flavor you fancy, take a lick. "Here are embarrassing silences, controlling silences, silences that provoke outrage and sympathy, silences that shift and slip away," McLoughlin writes. The temptation to sniff the pages for a vanilla silence or a strawberry silence is almost overwhelming. On a single page, silences are described as "variously breath-taking, poignant, consternating, hilarious and self-evidently true," and then, a few lines on, as "saddening, breath-taking, soothing, demanding, difficult to understand and awe-inspiring." That's a lot of breath to take.

In terms of latitude, much of what McLoughlin chooses to investigate is silence-adjacent, as it were, rather than the genuine article. The craving for solitude and serenity, say, may be intense, but it doesn't logically imply the shutting of one's trap. Not all retreats are monastic, and seclusion can easily nourish a hothouse of gossip. Also, gratifying though it is that the book should avert its gaze from the literary A-list in favor of lesser-known figures, there is a discernible sleight of hand, or a hefty wrench, as they are levered into place. The most entertaining of these is undoubtedly Margaret Cavendish, the Duchess of Newcastle, who died in 1673, at the age of fifty, leaving more than twenty volumes of poems, plays, and essays. It's true that she called herself "a Monster for Silence," and that she wrote a play titled "The Lady Contemplation" (1662), but she was, in the flesh, the quintessence of volubility—one of those people who, by her own account, gabble "so Much, and Fast, as none can Understand what they Say, or would Say, Indeed, so Fast, as they make neither Stop, nor Distinction." Hark to the gulping of those commas. "Cavendish had chutzpah," McLoughlin declares, and it's hard to disagree, but let's be frank: one thing the Duchess did *not* possess was a talent for keeping mum.

With Shakespeare, predictably, McLoughlin is on firmer ground. We are alerted to the startling scene in "Coriolanus" when the hero addresses his wife as if she were an abstract noun: "My gracious silence, hail!" She does not reply. (Think of the options for an actress here. Should she modestly lower her gaze, obeying the salutation, or flinch, or freeze the guy with a fierce glare?) McLoughlin's most searching work is inspired by "The Winter's Tale," whose concluding scene unfolds on a plane of the miraculous. Years after Leontes, a king contorted by jealousy, has ordered that his wife, the blameless Hermione, be put to death, a curtain is drawn back to reveal what appears to be a statue of her. It stirs, and mutely comes to life. "If this be magic, let it be an art / Lawful as eating," Leontes says. When Hermione speaks at last, it is pointedly not to him but to their daughter. All the more delightful, therefore, to learn from McLoughlin of an early-nineteenth-century production of the play in which Leontes was dressed as Napoleon—boo, hiss!—and his marmoreal queen as an English



lady, nobly greeting him with a diss.

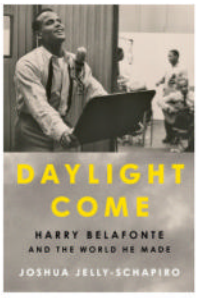
But how, pray, can you concoct a literary history of silence and not spare even a sentence for "Henry IV, Part 2," which features a character *called* Silence? During the orchard scene in the fifth act, a little the worse—or, this being Shakespeare, the better—for drink, Silence, a minor country magistrate, grows untrue to his name and begins to sing. Falstaff, listening to these scraps of ditties, remarks, "I did not think Master Silence had been a man of this mettle." Silence's answer is both woozy and bridling: "Who, I? I have been merry twice and once ere now." In 1945, there was a celebrated staging of the play at London's Old Vic, starring Laurence Olivier and Ralph Richardson. The critic Kenneth Tynan reviewed it in this magazine, and wrote of the ripened scenes in the orchard, "If I had only half an hour more to spend in theatres, and could choose at large, no question but I would have these." The breaking of silence in a tipsy twilight, if only for the sake of comical nonsense, can be as blessed as the break of dawn.

It is unfair, perhaps, to chide the author of "Silence: A Literary History" for her omissions, but her decision to plumb the religious depths of her subject and leave untouched the legal ramifications—the use and abuse of Miranda rights, for one thing, which are a staple of much crime fiction—may strike some readers as perverse. McLoughlin herself is nicely alive to such charges, kicking off her final chapter thus: "Despite its length, readers may pounce on what *isn't* in this book." Pouncing, of course, is one of the eternal joys of reading, just as sports fans know no keener pleasure than that of kvetching about the players who weren't picked for a vital game and who would have surely made all the difference. Hence my belief that Nietzsche, who shows up only fitfully in McLoughlin's book, is the tight end that she needs. Here he is, sounding off in "Ecce Homo":

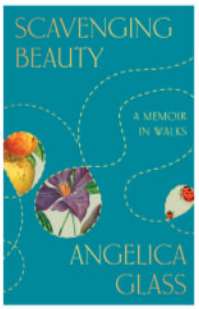
> The rudest word, the rudest letter, are more good-natured, more honest than silence. Those who keep silent almost always lack subtlety and politeness of the heart; silence is an objection, swallowing down necessarily produces a bad character—it even ruins the stomach. All those given to silence are dyspeptic.

As so often, Nietzsche throws down a gauntlet that we didn't realize was

BRIEFLY NOTED

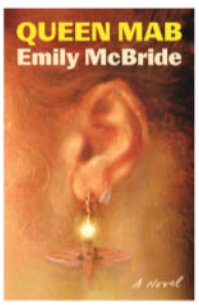


Daylight Come, *by Joshua Jelly-Schapiro (Penguin Press)*. This biography of Harry Belafonte, who died in 2023, paints the singer and civil-rights activist as "our first post-racial pop star." In his music, Belafonte sought to honor his Caribbean heritage—he was born in Harlem to Jamaican parents in 1927—without being reduced to a mere exotic persona. Throughout his career, he merged his work as an entertainer with his political convictions (he refused to perform in segregated venues, for instance), a pursuit that required him to square his fame "with his anger at the society that gave it to him." Jelly-Schapiro draws on a range of sources, including conversations with Belafonte, presenting a portrait of a formidable figure who, as Belafonte's son puts it, "was serving two families: us and the family of Man."



Scavenging Beauty, *by Angelica Glass (Riverhead)*. Memories of a childhood marked by economic hardship and abuse intertwine with the natural world in this graceful début memoir, which is structured around the author's seven-year project of walking every street in Santa Cruz County, in California. Glass, a former child-welfare social worker, writes with quiet precision about growing up as one of eight children with a mother whose love often turned into violence, and a father whose failures cast an equally enduring shadow. Encounters with shifting coastlines, towering redwoods, and mycelial networks spark meditations on inheritance, resilience, and the work of remaking a life.

Dooneen, *by Keith Ridgway (New Directions)*. This strange, ambitious novel is set in a version of Dublin where cars have been banned and people enter the country by teleportation. Bartholomew Port, an Irish writer living in London, returns to his homeland to participate in a literary festival, and arrives on the eve of a populist uprising. Dublin, he observes, has become a machine "for enriching the rich" and "impoverishing the poor," a place where "life is not as important as money." As Port falls in with a group of conspirators preparing for the insurrection, the book takes on a hallucinatory, digressive quality, blurring the lines between life and death, reality and illusion. Ultimately, Ridgway asks what responsibility bystanders must take for the injustices around them.



Queen Mab, *by Emily McBride (Farrar, Straus & Giroux)*. Madeleine is a "*promising*" twenty-three-year-old graduate student who decides, to the shock of other academic women in her life, to have a baby. ("They all say congrats, by the way, and better you than them," one colleague says.) The body horror of birth gives way to the fairy-tale horror of early motherhood, which McBride, a translator based in Barcelona, strews with literary Easter eggs from folktales and Victorian poetry. Is the baby really a baby, or has it been replaced by a changeling? Is Madeleine still herself, or has she been stolen away, too? Can her husband be trusted? The result is an agile, unsettling novel about the unwinding of a mind, set in a world of women who view motherhood as a curious affectation.

there for the throwing. His emphasis is not, like McLoughlin's, on types of silence, multifarious as they are, but on the disorder—the basic psychological ill health—that underlies them all. Such an approach would come in handy, I reckon, if you were prepping for your first viewing of "Persona," Ingmar Bergman's unsparing two-hander of 1966, in which one character prattles incessantly and the other says nothing whatsoever, having lapsed into self-cloistering silence in the midst of performing a Greek tragedy. There is no better illustration of speechlessness being deployed as a weapon, forcing the loquacious, as if at gunpoint, to fill the void with words. Alas, "Persona" earns not even a footnote from McLoughlin, who, apart from a nod to Harpo Marx, seems oddly un-enticed by cinema, despite the fact that it's the only dramatic art form that was born and grew up in silence. How can tribute not be paid to the delicious joke in Mel Brooks's "Silent Movie" (1976), in which the only audible word is "*Non!*," uttered by Marcel Marceau, the world's most famous mime? To be fair, McLoughlin does offer compensation, providing an extraordinary detail from Marceau's early life of which I was unaware:

> Marcel began to teach the Jewish children he helped smuggle from France into Switzerland how to communicate silently at times of danger by moving their bodies rather than opening their mouths.

For whom is "Silence: A Literary History" intended? To judge by the vocabulary deployed in its pages, the book belongs in the inner sanctum of literary theory, where the walls are hung with gnarly rhetorical tropes. If you can tell your adynatons from your asyndetons; if you know that an anacoluthon refers to a snapping off or veering away in the grammatical structure of a sentence and not to a snake that will slowly squeeze the verbs out of you; if you can say the word "ecthlipsis" without spitting on the person beside you, and the phrase "problematically anthropomorphic" without blowing bubbles; if that feels like child's play, congratulations.

And what to make of this?

> In 2016, the 16,141,241 people who voted Remain in the UK's Brexit referendum, myself included, got to know what it felt like to be on a losing side in an historical turning-point. Disbelief, anger, grief, shame, denial. After the US presidential election later that year, I deleted my Facebook and Twitter accounts. Part of me knew it was more important than ever to keep fighting; another part needed to turn off the noise.

That is McLoughlin, baring her political all. Even if you agree with her (and somewhere, flowing beneath her book, is the assumption that no Brexiteer, or reactionary of any stripe, could possibly want to read it, or feel at home with literary finesse), it is nevertheless peculiar to see her break cover in this fashion. It could be argued that academic writing in the humanities has never seemed more dangerously adrift from common parlance, and that scholars like McLoughlin, sensing that risk, are right and brave to reach for a chatty personal candor, now and then, in order to snag their readers' sympathy and keep them engaged. The trouble comes when, having ventured on such a tangent, the critic has to lurch back on track. Here is McLoughlin, turning her attention to the long wake of the English Civil War, when a circumspect rural retirement was à la mode:

> Being a Remainer after the Brexit vote was a taste of what was a widespread experience in the second half of the seventeenth century and early eighteenth century.

Hmm. I may be wrong, but I don't *think* that David Cameron, who led the Remain campaign, was exhumed and hanged in chains by the victorious Leavers, or that his dead head was cut off and stuck on a spike for more than twenty years—the punishment meted out in 1661 to Oliver Cromwell, or, at any rate, to his guilty corpse, after King Charles II was restored to the throne. Nor is it quite clear what this excursion into historical parallels has to do with silence. Uncoupling from social media, as McLoughlin did, may be a wise move, but to what degree does it muffle the universal racket? Never having joined Facebook, Twitter, X, Instagram, TikTok, or any of the other treats from Pandora's app store, I'm unqualified to comment. All I know is that I have yet to attain the tough tranquillity of a Trappist.

In spite of—or, to be charitable, because of—these and other eccentricities, "Silence: A Literary History" is worth your time, whether or not you have the stamina to plow straight through. It functions best as a trigger book. Open it at random, pick a chapter, and you are pretty much guaranteed to be launched upon a trajectory of unfamiliar thought. Who knew that Thoreau wrote something with the natty title of "Some Scraps from an Essay on 'Sound And Silence' Written in the Latter Half of this Month,—December, 1838," in which he instinctively alludes to his subject as female? ("It were vain for me to interpret the Silence. She cannot be done into English.") Likewise, shortly before urging us to try Anne Brontë's "Agnes Grey," with its combative vision of silence as a kind of armor—"I was used to wearing a placid smiling countenance when my heart was bitter within me"—McLoughlin informs us that, when Thackeray threw a party for Charlotte Brontë, her taciturnity "unnerved her host so much that he actually slipped out of his own house and spent the evening at his club." Trust the Brontës to be a squadron of Shtumtroopers, silencing people to bits.

Most appealing of all are those moments at which McLoughlin turns into an eager chatelaine, not so much dropping names as introducing them to one another, in the hope of a giddy intellectual chemistry. Where else could Alfred, Lord Tennyson, share a parenthesis with Ed Sheeran and the Foo Fighters? Who but McLoughlin could cram Jane Austen, Jack Benny, *and* Immanuel Kant into a single sentence? And what of Pink Dandelion—neither a folk-rock group, as you might imagine, nor a refreshing cordial but the name of a professor at the University of Birmingham, in England, who specializes in the history of Quakerism? The whole book is noisy with noiselessness; you can practically hear the clink and fizz of glasses being refilled. As the party winds down, you are left with a cheerful irony: so dense has been the crowd of creatives advising us, through the ages, on the essential art of silence that by the end you've had enough. You just want them to shut up. ♦

THE LONELIEST NUMBER

An uncompromising Belgian novelist's digital afterlife.

BY KATY WALDMAN

SOPHIE BASSOULS / GETTY

Jacqueline Harpman's fiction explores themes of entrapment, isolation, and exile.

Go to any brick-and-mortar bookstore and you'll probably see at least one table dedicated to titles that "pop on BookTok." Since around 2020, the literary precinct of the social-media platform TikTok seems to have usurped older marketing and publicity strategies as a primary driver of sales. The hashtag's more than fifty-two million videos tend to feature telegenic young people emoting in front of brightly colored shelves; the recommendations flow into each other, a self-replenishing stream. Many of the books the platform uplifts belong to commercial genres, such as romance and romantasy. But BookTok has also surfaced classics, including doorstops such as "Lonesome Dove" and "East of Eden" and short, lesser-known works in an emotional and lovelorn key, such as "White Nights," from 1848, by Fyodor Dostoyevsky, and "No Longer Human," from 1948, by the Japanese novelist Osamu Dazai.

If there's an overlooked treasure that BookTok most deserves credit for rediscovering, it might be "I Who Have Never Known Men," a slender novel by the Belgian Jewish author Jacqueline Harpman, which first appeared in English in 1997. In 2022, the nonprofit publisher Transit Books reissued the novel in a revised translation, from the French, by Ros Schwartz. Largely thanks to social media, it has since sold more than eight hundred thousand copies in North America alone; Harpman, who died in 2012, has attained a posthumous internet celebrity, replete with honorary Google Doodle. This summer, Transit published a trio of her short stories, never before seen in English, under the title "We Were Forbidden."

BookTok's preferences may skew toward familiar beats and blunt-force sensation, but in Harpman the hive mind has alighted on something more capacious and slippery. "I Who Have Never Known Men" is a stubbornly unillusioned study of how isolation shapes and misshapes the human psyche. The book takes the form of a testimony that its nameless protagonist, the last survivor of an unknown catastrophe, is writing down as she dies of uterine cancer. Her earliest memories are of an underground bunker, patrolled by male guards with whips, where she was imprisoned with thirty-nine older women. She is innocent of parents, love, sex, what coffee tastes like, what an orange smells like, what the sky looks like.

Not quite halfway through the novel, the soldiers vanish, leaving a door unlocked, and the prisoners climb a hundred stairs to find a world of neutral plains and unremittingly mild weather. They never learn why they were jailed, what happened during their internment, or even whether they're on Earth or some other planet. They wander, encountering groups of dead captives, male and female, in bunkers like their own, but no living people. They build houses with stones and mud, cook communal meals, and forage for food and supplies. And then, one by one, they die, leaving the protagonist alone.

Harpman's picture of stripped-down desolation has resonated with many social-media users, who have praised the book's "haunting" story and likened it to "staring into a void." There's an incongruity to the fact that an austere twentieth-century work of dystopian science fiction, which was admired when it was released for its philosophical rigor and inward focus, is finding new life on a social platform built out of clips that are disposable by design. But "I Who Have

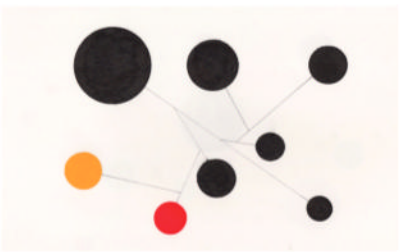
Never Known Men" has a fruitful vagueness. The narrator, purged of identifiers except for her yearning, her rational faculties, and her sense of unbelonging, is counterintuitively relatable—a portrait of rudimentary, universal humanity. (A whiff of melodrama to Harpman's vision probably plays well online, too.)

It might also matter that "I Who Have Never Known Men" is preoccupied with many of the same questions that BookTokers, with their ephemeral medium and their new role as cultural conservators, have reason to care about. What are the creative forms that persist after you've disappeared? What enables an art work to transcend the stream? Harpman was writing in a different era, but the elegiac loneliness of her fiction anticipates our own solitary and screen-bound present. Is there anyone out there? her book seems to ask. How do I find you?

Harpman was born in Etterbeek, Belgium, in 1929. During the Nazi occupation, she and her family fled to Morocco, where they lived until the end of the war, escaping the fate of several relatives on her father's side, who died in Auschwitz. Back in her home country, Harpman began studying medicine, but had to stop after she contracted tuberculosis. She convalesced in a sanatorium for two years—an experience that, like the nightmare still fresh in the memory of European Jews, may have filtered into her prison plot. Her first book, "Love and Acacia," was published in 1958, when she was nearing thirty, but she composed the majority of her fourteen novels in her fifties, sixties, and seventies. In the interim, she trained in psychology, and in 1980 she qualified as a psychoanalyst. (Her undergraduate dissertation was on Rorschach tests.) Appreciated but not idolized in her lifetime, she won a handful of prizes, including the Prix Médicis for "Orlanda," from 1996, about a woman whose tomboyish tendencies split off from the rest of her psyche and jump into the body of a music journalist.

Most of Harpman's work that has so far been translated into English circles feelings of entrapment, disorientation, and exile. Psychoanalytic concepts—projection, attachment, wishes and wish fulfillment—loom large. Harpman portrays sexual fantasy, and its relation to writing, with startling frankness. Isolation becomes both an affliction and a muse in "I Who Have Never Known Men," as the narrator spins out a sequence of erotic stories in her head. They star her youngest jailer, who, like his fellows, is forbidden to interact with his charges. (In a rare, sly note of comedy, she also stares at him incessantly, telling another woman that this is a form of resistance, and that she's "invented something unexpected.") Each fantasy, the girl says, produces "an extraordinary burst of light exploding inside me." In pursuit of this "eruption," she tells herself "increasingly long and complicated stories," trying to outsmart her "inner audience" and retain the element of surprise. "My imagination developed," she reports. "I had to exercise rigorous discipline." Sometimes one part of her wants to get to the finale, but another part, "entranced by the pleasure of listening," would prefer that the narrative keep going.

As the girl's process evolves, the fictions themselves become at least as important as their physical effects, and a series of recurring characters turn into "old friends." Her wistful hope is that a good enough story might yield companions so detailed



and lively that they can satisfy her hunger for connection. She doesn't realize how limited these friends are until she discovers books.

Poignantly, given that all the living men in the novel are incarcerators, the narrator directs little hostility toward traditional masculine ideals. In fact, her account often seems suffused with longing for heterosexual relationships—for the husbands and the lovers that she, unlike the elder women in the bunker, will never have. "How could I consider myself a human being, I who have only known thirty-nine people and all of them women?" she asks. By this point, she no longer experiences eruptions, but she's still conjuring up men. When death comes for her, she writes, "I will take my last ten steps to go and put these sheets of paper on the table . . . an emaciated old woman whose eyes, which no hand will close, will always be looking toward the door."

Yet is it really a man she's waiting for, or some other type of partner? "Perhaps I have tried to create time" with the memoir project, the woman speculates. She is writing "for some unknown reader," she continues, who will admit her work into their mind: "The reader and I thus mingled will constitute something living, that will not be me, because I will be dead, and will not be that person as they were before." It's an erotic fantasy that morphs into a metaphor of literary generation as sexual reproduction. Writing creates a life that will sustain the woman's legacy—as long as someone is there to apprehend it. "Most likely no one will come," she concludes.

As potent as Harpman's novel is, there's an adolescent quality to "I Who Have Never Known Men," which broods on its themes like a teen-ager who has just discovered existentialism. The book's post-apocalyptic setting ennobles its meditations on selfhood and finitude; the narrator's search for perpetuity is lent an unshakable gravity by her circumstances.

For readers who first met Harpman via her melancholic digital afterlife, "We Were Forbidden" will arrive as a revelation. The gem of the collection is its longest story, "The Broom Closet," a sex farce that wrangles its author's ideas about artistic permanence into a more prosaic form. The tale begins with a successful novelist in late middle age boarding a train after a publishing event. When her gaze falls on a stranger in the dining car, she's overtaken by a fantasy involving a dashing army officer in Central Europe in the nineteen-twenties. In the daydream, she is a young and beautiful judge's wife in "long suede gloves that buttoned up to the elbows," and the

artilleryman seduces her at the magistrates' ball. They have sex in the titular closet ("We toppled over together among the feather dusters"); she's been so sheltered in her marriage that, somewhat implausibly, she has never seen a penis. But she's a quick study, and is soon plotting her husband's murder, enlisting the aid of an assassin whom he has recently sentenced to death.

Unlike the unremittingly bleak and occasionally self-serious "I Who Have Never Known Men," "The Broom Closet" is arch, light-fingered, and very funny. But its narrator follows the same progression from fantasy to fiction-making. Her adultery story initially evokes the imprisoned girl's compensatory reveries, but over time its focus shifts. She grows increasingly invested in her side characters, lavishing attention and energy on scenes that have little to do with the original seduction. In the most affecting subplot, the assassin the wife has hired to kill her husband appears at the husband's bedside, unaware that he is already dying (the diagnosis is "acute appendicitis, with necrotic enterocolitis"). Nature takes its course while the would-be murderer watches. "Poor us, little souls wandering through the chaos of our lives," the author cries, in a voice that might be the husband's, or the hit man's, or her own. She's gone from dreaming up person-shaped sex toys to mourning a supporting cast member, extending her imaginative empathy so far that she can't bring herself to allow one of her creations to be offed without ceremony.

The narrator of "The Broom Closet" can claim firsthand, intimate knowledge of men: she mentions a husband. But she doesn't seem especially enamored of the guy, though she apparently lacks her alter ego's taste for maritice. What capacity she has for deep connection is expressed in her fiction. Like the child in "I Who Have Never Known Men," she is preoccupied with her historical impact and pessimistic about the chance that her words will outlast her (albeit for reasons of literary fashion rather than planetary catastrophe). "I wanted to be loved, respected, and appreciated," she writes, "but I will be forgotten." She thinks that, if she's lucky, a novel of hers "will be lying in the bookcase of one of my great-grandchildren, yellowing, dried up, likely to crumble to the touch . . . and my great-grandson's new girlfriend will open it, read a few lines, and say: 'Whoa! That style of writing is so outdated.' Which will bury me once and for all." Alienation may have acquired a kind of tragic glamour in Harpman's best-known novel, but "The Broom Closet" renders it unremarkable, a function of quotidian human differences and difficulties rather than the end of the world.

At one point in "I Who Have Never Known Men," the narrator stumbles upon an abandoned home and, as BookTok might put it, is "utterly ruined" by what she discovers: walls "covered in a beautiful wood with a dark sheen," carpets, paintings, vases, "a small carving." The museumlike "interplay of lines, shapes and harmonious colours" brings her to tears.

The scene enlarges the nature of the narrator's quest: she's not looking for just a romantic partner or even a reader who will preserve her memory. What she has been starving for, more than individual people, is what people create together. Her profound loneliness stems from her lack of access to human culture, a set of shared traditions that survives one's particular life and links it to the past and the future. If Harpman's work has jumped from her time into our own, it may be because she appreciates the fragility of this emergent property of existence but honors it anyway. Her books attest to the potential for solitary selves to meet, merge, and multiply, producing something more beautiful and enduring than they can alone. ♦

"I have ways of finding out if you're mad at me."

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Correction of the Week

From the (Portland, Ore.) Willamette Week.

Last week's interview with the founder of Portland State University's "Students for Trump" group ("Four Questions for Vologymyr Kolychev," *WW*, April 13, 2016) misquoted his characterization of his political opponents. He described them as "aspiring Bolshevik commissars," not "aspiring bullshit commissars." *WW* regrets the errors.

THE ART WORLD

THE ANOMALY

Fairfield Porter's strange, stranded vision of the world.

BY ZACHARY FINE

In works like "Islands" (1968), Porter used color to evoke inner experience.

The poet John Ashbery, in 1983, said that Fairfield Porter was "perhaps the major American artist of the century." It's not praise you can take at face value—Ashbery and Porter were good friends—but it's a tempting thought. How might a painter of limited technical skill, who mostly depicted coastal landscapes and living rooms in the nineteen-fifties and sixties, be considered a major American artist? "Perhaps" is the key word in Ashbery's phrase, a little escape hatch that admits how improbable the judgment is while conveying the ambivalence felt by those of us who admire Porter and can't always say why. I think if you saw a lone painting of his in a junk shop, unsigned and unframed, you'd find it perfectly pleasing and mediocre.

The new exhibition at the Art Students League, "Fairfield Porter: What Everyone Knows," has the ideal selection to show why he's often better than his individual pieces. Porter studied at the League under Thomas Hart Benton—one of his classmates was a fellow named Jackson Pollock—and the experience of seeing his work here, as students hustle by with their backpacks and the perfume of turpentine wafts through the air, feels organic and just right. The gallery is evenly and fluorescently lit, and all thirty-five or so of Porter's featured paintings are in a single room, concentrating his palette of lime greens and creamy yellows and oxblood reds into one bright, soul-cleansing burst.

Everything happened for Porter when he was about forty-five. After flopping around for a few decades and getting zero traction as a painter, he was invited, in 1951, on the recommendation of Elaine de Kooning, to be a critic for *ARTnews*. The following year, on the recommendation of Elaine's husband, Willem de Kooning, he had a solo show at Tibor de Nagy Gallery. The gallery's director, John Bernard Myers, gave Porter the show without even looking at his work, and was baffled when Porter showed up with half a dozen still-lifes and landscapes. In the fifties, to paint anything but a full-throttle abstraction was an efficient way to derail your career. But Porter's art grew on Myers, a not uncommon experience. Let the paintings breathe for a while, let them interact with one another and with your thoughts, and they'll meld together with salt breeze and summer light.

An unusually late bloomer, Porter did his best work in the last decade of his life, from the mid-sixties to 1975. Until then, he was still processing his influences. Sometimes he'd channel a bit of Edward Hopper, albeit with a looser wrist—see the lonely house in a field in "Landscape" (1956)—or borrow some lumpy shapes from Marsden Hartley, but the main hurdles were two Frenchmen, Pierre Bonnard and Édouard Vuillard. Porter saw their work in an exhibition in Chicago, in 1938, and never let them go. Like his forebears, Porter painted bourgeois interiors with flat areas of color and dancing floral patterns on wallpaper and furniture. The problem is that, in much of his early work, the colors are drab. Sometimes a dark mustard or pale green sinks a painting, but often there's a dampening effect applied to everything, so that in a piece like "Armchair on Porch" (1955) all optical sensation is dulled to a minimum.

Thankfully, in the sixties, a light flips on. An extreme case is "Oak Tree" (1969), where sunlight crashes through the branches onto the grass and becomes its own radioactive organism. There's a whole subgenre of these high-contrast works in Porter's late style, but my favorites are pieces like "Untitled (View Outside Southampton Studio)" (1968) and "Amherst Campus No. 1" (1969), with their cartographic splotches of foliage. It hadn't occurred to me until seeing "Amherst" at the

FAIRFIELD PORTER / COURTESY © ESTATE OF FAIRFIELD PORTER / ARS / STEVENS COLLECTION

Parrish Art Museum, a decade ago, that a painter could use color as a chronological instrument. In "Untitled," a row of yellow-green trees are painted so phosphorescently on top of the other layers that they effectively chirp: *Look here first!* Only then can your eye move to the brick-red house, the pale sky, the pockets of shadow. The effect is to re-create not the trees but the flow of the painter's own aesthetic experience.

Porter credited the Impressionists with being the first to use color as a vehicle of subjectivity, and Bonnard and Vuillard with intensifying that subjectivity, painting their private lives with an anything-goes palette. But the colorist who gave Porter an extra edge was Willem de Kooning. In the fifties, when de Kooning started doing his big, slashing abstractions with wide housepainter's brushes, Porter said they recalled landscapes in which the colors are "intensely themselves, as if each color had been freed to be." Colors didn't have to represent reality or make concessions to it; they were packets of immediate sensation. Porter said he found his own feelings in de Kooning's hues: a patch of blue expressed the delight of a Maine summer; pink was the way he felt on the seacoast; a harmony of warm tones bottled up the sensation of autumn. He once compared de Kooning's use of paint to the "perfect orgasm."

Most artists enchanted with de Kooning try to paint like him. But Porter somehow passed through the needle's eye of abstraction and returned to his own eccentric realism on the other side, churning out images of starched Southampton interiors and Penobscot Bay. There are pieces in the show, like "Islands" (1968) and "View from the Front" (ca. 1969), where you can see Porter using what he called the "dry speed" of de Kooning's brushwork. In "Islands," there's an excellent sky-blue brushstroke that horizontally slices the green bush (or is it a tree?) near the middle of the painting. That single stroke implies either that the water is *behind* the shrub, visible only in patches through the leaves, or that we're looking at a retinal afterimage of the water *over* the shrub, as the painter swivels his head between the landscape and the canvas. There's also a little geyser on the far left, shooting upward like the vertical blast of paint through de Kooning's "Merritt Parkway" (1959). Ocean spray doesn't look that way, but it feels like it.

Good painters rarely make good critics, but Porter was both. His writing was rhetorically pungent and had a rare jargon-free poetry. His most exotic idea was to delete fiftyish years of art history and suggest that Impressionism—not Cubism or Surrealism or any other stylistic eruption—was the real forerunner of Abstract Expressionism. A painting obtained reality just by transmitting the artist's own "kinetic and visual sense of the world," Porter wrote. This was an indirect jab at his favorite nemesis, the critic Clement Greenberg, whose lockjawed aesthetic program presented Ab Ex as an expression of History itself, which marched in only one direction: from figuration and depth to abstraction and flatness. Greenberg represented the greatest sin for Porter—letting ideas overrule experience. Ideas made painters and critics impervious to seeing what was in front of them. Porter's mission was to make people see again.

For whatever reason, Porter couldn't see people. His portraits are almost comically bad. The painter Larry Rivers described Porter's portrait of him as "flat and rather empty," and that applies to pretty much all of them. (For the comic element, consider his painting of Frank O'Hara, who looks a bit like a salami sliding off a couch.) None of Porter's talent for shadow, light, and air transfers to bodies and faces. With "The Screen Porch" (1964), a large group portrait that desperately wants to be a masterpiece—it has a number of auteur touches, like a cannister of turpentine in the bottom left which signals "the painter was here"—Porter's family had the right idea, nicknaming it "The Four Ugly People." The only portrait in the exhibition with a spark is "Jimmy and John" (1957-58), of the poets James Schuyler and John Ashbery. Their friendship isn't visible, nor are their personalities, but the way their bodies are angled away from each other evokes two ships crossing in open water. Just that simple arrangement makes the distance between them ache.

Although Porter was kept at arm's length by most of the Abstract Expressionists, he was embraced by the New York School poets—in particular Ashbery, Schuyler, O'Hara, and Kenneth Koch—who, almost twenty years his junior, adopted him as a mixed-use transferential figure. To Schuyler, whose relationship with him was the most complicated, Porter was a father figure, a lover, a caretaker, a friend, and a rather sullen, insecure man who needed cheering up. The phrase "conflict of interest" doesn't begin to describe the kinds of transactions that took place, as Schuyler boosted Porter's paintings in exhibition reviews even while he was staying at the painter's house in Southampton, with Porter's wife and children, and living on his dime. Porter's family wealth came from land around the present-day Chicago Loop, and he spent much of his life supported by a trust. From the late forties on, he shuttled between his family's private island in Maine, Great Spruce Head, and the chilly, Federal-style house in Southampton, along with frequent stays in New York City. His wealth worked like a "cotton padding" between him and the world, a friend once said.

Porter didn't disagree. By some accounts, he was an odd guy. Pleasantries eluded him. If he wasn't silent altogether, he might start talking intensely about one subject or another, and then fall silent again. He had a kind of estranged personality, with thick walls separating him from different parts of himself and from other people, and it can be felt in not just the portraits but the landscapes. Whether it's "Looking Through the House" (1961), a darkened interior with a window facing a bay, or "A Day Indoors" (1962), with three sitters in the house on Great Spruce Head, siloed in their own worlds, everything and everyone feels just slightly out of reach. There is a landscape you want to see, as if for the first time, or a person you want to speak to, and for some reason can't. So much of the feeling in Porter's work comes from this stuckness. It's one of the most difficult emotions to convey in art—the emotion that hasn't yet found its expression—but Porter mastered it. ♦

ON TELEVISION

VICTIM COMPLEX

"Furious," on Hulu.

BY INKOO KANG

The first episode of "Furious" ends with a date from hell. It's a late night in Manhattan, and Oliver (Rob Delaney) is a wealthy, middle-aged lawyer and a walking assemblage of red flags. Between lines of coke, he yammers on to Catherine (Lola Petticrew), the young server he's just picked up, about how his ex-wife's incessant chatter led to the end of their marriage, and how she should've made more allowances for his sex addiction. When Catherine leans in to kiss him, he presents her with an N.D.A. It's a relief to know that the only reason this tiny, sharp-eyed woman is putting up with his nonsense is that she plans to kill him. Even when forcibly injecting him with fentanyl, she's the more sympathetic figure: their first sexual encounter, she explains, took place years ago, when she was a fifteen-year-old trafficking victim. Catherine remembers that he brought her a glass of water afterward, so she returns the favor, offering him a few sips. Just before finishing him off, she coaxes him to repeat a phrase that helped her endure: "I'm not here."

Catherine's homicidal pursuit of the men involved in the most calamitous night of her life composes one half of the new Hulu crime drama; the other half traces the investigation into the murders by two female F.B.I. agents, who gradually realize that the dead men are connected via a pedophilic network. Alice (Emmy Rossum), an N.Y.P.D. detective turned Bureau rookie, and Nora (Quincy Tyler Bernstine), a veteran of the sex-crimes unit, recognize the case for the career-maker it could be. Eager as the women are to nab a serial killer, going after the network's Epstein-like billionaire ringleader proves even more tempting. Having spent decades watching powerful men evade justice, Nora is doubly determined to bring this one down, and regards Catherine's vigilantism as an obstacle to a larger victory. But, given the slow pace and compromised priorities of the legal system, there are limits to what the agents can accomplish within the Bureau's bounds.

"Furious," which débuted last week, initially recalls the 2019 Netflix miniseries "Unbelievable," about two female detectives' extraordinary efforts to catch a serial rapist. Based on real-life events, "Unbelievable" depicts a male-dominated police force in which indifference to, if not outright hostility toward, survivors of sexual assault enables a predator to find more victims. The new series, too, features a law-enforcement culture where disinterest in gendered violence is the norm, and cops knowingly patronize establishments that traffic underage girls. But in "Furious," unlike its predecessor, the grim subject matter isn't accompanied by respectful solemnity—nor are Alice and Nora beacons of benevolence, like the heroine of "Mare of Easttown," a policewoman who serves as a de-facto social worker for the struggling members of her town. After a conventional start, "Furious" comes to feel alive and delightfully contradictory: at once cerebral and pulpy, compassionate and unhinged. Catherine's story line evokes a feverish what-if scenario in which a survivor musters the requisite recklessness, talent for murder, and wig collection to mete out retribution. The season is streaked with mordant humor, and the show's greatest achievement is its balance of genre-savvy thrills and seriousness of purpose.

The tonal volatility complements the show's central theme: that survival is inevitably messy. This empathetic impulse is a signature of "Furious"'s creator, Elizabeth Meriwether, who's established herself as a TV auteur to follow. Still best known for the Zooey Deschanel

"Furious" morphs from a conventional crime drama into something livelier.

ILLUSTRATION BY KATHERINE LAM

sitcom "New Girl," which aired from 2011 to 2018, Meriwether has since pivoted to darker fare. "The Dropout," her 2022 miniseries about the biotech scammer Elizabeth Holmes, and "Dying for Sex," last year's dramedy about a Stage IV cancer patient's final journey of sensual soul-searching, were both shows about real-life women driven by unusual wants, with scripts that reflected Meriwether's diligent research and interest in procedure. Her tendency toward didacticism lent "Dying for Sex" a clinical quality, but it's a welcome feature in "Furious," where the exposition shines a necessary light on a murky world. Nora instructs Alice in why so many trafficking cases fall apart, how to interrogate young people with shock-induced memory gaps, and why it's sometimes worth it, prosecutorially speaking, to threaten a teen-age victim with legal consequences. (That teen, Nora says, may already be recruiting other vulnerable girls into the sex trade, if only to lighten her own workload.) To fully humanize survivors, the series contends, it's necessary to resist the assumption that suffering confers goodness.

"Furious" sometimes risks overstating its argument: Nora's musings that "victims of violence are the most violent" and that "being a victim just makes you colder, more calculating" can feel pitiless, even when describing a serial killer. But those observations are more compelling when applied to Alice, a former teen-age runaway who, in another life, might have ended up where Catherine is now. Alice is the show's emotional center of gravity, and her relationships with the rest of the ensemble are suitably nuanced. Though the reappearance of her abusive ex-boyfriend, Marshall (Jake Lacy), triggers symptoms of P.T.S.D., her gratitude toward his mother, who helped raise her, is deep-rooted enough that she attempts a reconciliation of sorts. Marshall's presence also complicates Alice's will-they, won't-they dynamic with her old partner on the force, Danny (Scoot McNairy), a sensitive outlier within the N.Y.P.D. who nurses her back to functionality. (Meriwether's knack for crafting rumpled, swoon-worthy male love interests may be the biggest carryover from her "New Girl" days.) But the heart of the series is the tentative alliance between Alice and Nora, who are drawn to each other even as they're acutely aware of the other's shortcomings. Alice craves mentorship but can't help noting how often Nora drinks on the job; Nora, who discovers Alice having a panic attack in the bathroom, wonders whether the newbie stands a chance of making it in the Bureau. Both have found ways of coping within misogynistic institutions that have actively sidelined them. But they truly bond as survivors who can acknowledge the unexpected forms desire and resilience can take. On an after-hours drive, a visibly bruised Alice confesses to Nora that she asks her hookups to strike her. To her surprise, Nora is unruffled. "You think I've never asked someone to smack me around a little in the throes of a passionate embrace?" the older woman asks. "You think I've never let someone take a few whacks at this piñata?"

The show is less successful at fleshing out its killer, who too often comes across as a cinematic contrivance: a sexy-creepy seductress with trauma-prompted mood swings and selective, narratively convenient amnesia about the night that haunts her. Even in her character's hokiest moments—as when she recites a nursery rhyme to Oliver's sleeping form—Petticrew is a mesmerizing presence, moving fluidly between übercompetent steeliness and self-doubting softness. But Catherine's essential loneliness makes her difficult to know; she seldom lets the mask fall, and her sense of self is riddled with holes. When she finally finds a confidant, she says, with heartbreaking casualness, "My memory sucks. It's 'cause I got strangled so much."

Given the circumstances, it becomes hard not to root against Alice and Nora's efforts to arrest the billionaire—far more satisfying to see him dead by Catherine's hand. But, if Catherine can feel like a cipher, the dramatization of the criminal coterie she pursues is genuinely persuasive. Far from the chumminess on display in the Epstein files, her targets express fear of and even disdain for one another. Each man has seemingly convinced himself that, whatever his flaws, *he's* not the group's most depraved member. Catherine doesn't discriminate between direct perpetrators and silent bystanders, but her totalizing quest reveals a more subtle truth: there are many ways to be complicit. ♦

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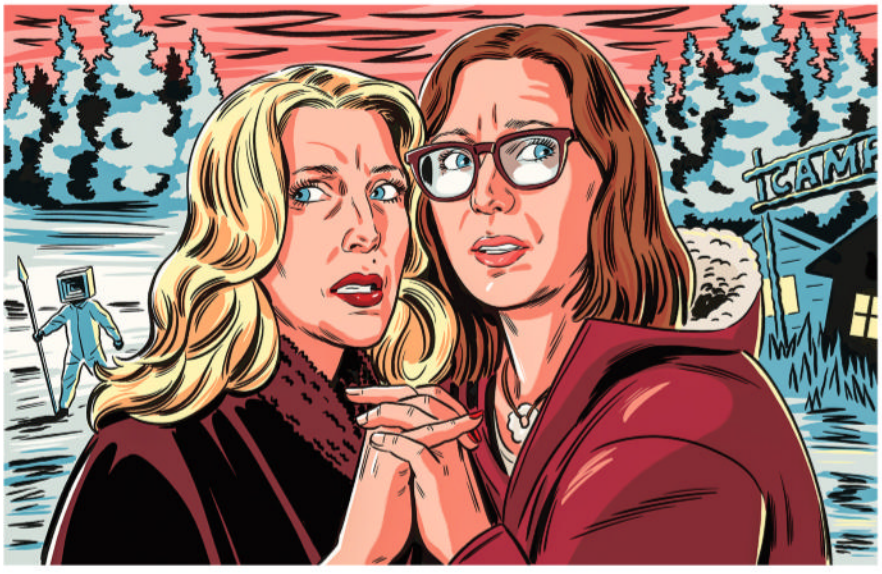
THE CURRENT CINEMA

DIRECTOR'S CUTS

"Teenage Sex and Death at Camp Miasma."

BY RICHARD BRODY

When a director makes a film about filmmaking, pay attention: it's a sign that the movie, however grand or stylized it may be, is also deeply personal, tapping into the nerve center of the maker's creative drive and self-image. That's true of such movies as Clint Eastwood's "White Hunter Black Heart," Sofia Coppola's "Somewhere," Jordan Peele's "Nope," and the latest entry in the genre, Jane Schoenbrun's "Teenage Sex and Death at Camp Miasma." No less worthy than its predecessors, Schoenbrun's film is indeed the richest of them in terms of the multiple dimensions of cinematic experience that it dramatizes, critiques, and illuminates.



Gillian Anderson and Hannah Einbinder star in Jane Schoenbrun's film.

This is Schoenbrun's third dramatic feature as writer-director, and it marks a bold yet logical advance from the two that came before. In "We're All Going to the World's Fair" (2021), an adolescent girl gets drawn into a macabre online role-playing game; "I Saw the TV Glow" (2024) is about teen-agers who are obsessed with a "Buffy the Vampire Slayer"-style series. "Teenage Sex and Death" is likewise a tale of media consumption—it revolves around a horror-movie franchise—but, in examining the fan experience, it also considers what goes into creating objects of fandom, including the emotional price that creators may end up paying. The result is a cinemanifesto, displaying Schoenbrun's relationship to the art and a vision of a creative ideal.

The story is simple: Kris Williams (Hannah Einbinder), a critically acclaimed twenty-nine-year-old independent filmmaker, has been tapped by a studio to reboot a slasher franchise that was launched in the nineteen-eighties, with the film "Camp Miasma," and gave rise to many sequels and spinoffs, an arcade game, a comic book, and a slew of merchandise. In its day, the franchise drew protests from the religious right, but lately it's been criticized as transphobic. Kris, who identifies as queer and whose previous film included a reënactment of the famous murder scene in "Psycho" from the perspective of the shower curtain, has been hired to reconfigure the premise to reflect current sensibilities. As her agent (Sarah Sherman) puts it, the studio wants her to make it "elevated, a.k.a. woke."

Kris's interest in the job is more than just professional. She's been obsessed with "Camp Miasma" since she was eight, especially with a character in the first installment, a teen-age camp counsellor called Squeak. Squeak was played by a young actress named Billy Presley (Amanda Fix), who refused roles in the sequels, never appeared in another movie, and has no public presence at all. While sketching out the studio reboot, Kris has made contact with Billy, now in her sixties (played by Gillian Anderson), who invites her to a remote compound in the Pacific Northwest where she lives in self-imposed isolation. The inevitable directorial dance of seduction to lure the reluctant actor to sign on to the project turns into an actual seduction, in ways that prove personally and artistically consequential for both women.

From this straightforward setup, Schoenbrun unleashes an outpouring of imagination and invention that places the film on a level of intricacy and extravagance comparable to that of Wes Anderson's "Asteroid City" and Greta Gerwig's "Barbie." Scenes from across the "Camp Miasma" franchise play as films within the film, realized in elaborate detail. The result is gleefully gory: one victim is cut in half at the waist, their legs still standing as blood spurts; another is impaled on a spear and shattered to mist against a tetherball pole. But these scenes are filmed with such playfulness that the shock value is completely dissipated. (I say this as a squeamish, gore-averse viewer.)

"Teenage Sex and Death" opens on the set of the original movie, as seen from the point of view of the killer, a figure known as Little Death (Jack Haven), whose most striking feature is a kind of helmet made from a cubic metal air vent, which masks the face behind a pattern of concentric squares and gives the character's breathing a distinctive labored sound. The glimpse of "Camp Miasma" and its production functions as backstory for Kris's trip, and sets the tone for the odd encounters that follow. At Kris's hotel, the desk

ILLUSTRATION BY KRISTIAN HAMMERSTAD

clerk turns out to be one of the locals who were recruited to act in "Camp Miasma, Part VI" (which Kris watches in her room), and it emerges that Billy's compound, a former sleepaway camp, was the location for the shooting of "Camp Miasma." Prowling the grounds, Kris finds a building labelled "CINEMA," and inside is a projector with a film reel cued up to the scene in "Camp Miasma" that most captivates her—Little Death entering a room where Squeak is losing her virginity.

"Desire," Kris writes in her notebook while watching "Part VI," and it is Squeak's mix of desire and terror in the first movie that makes Kris's encounter with Billy so erotically charged. Kris's partner, Mari (Jasmin Savoy Brown), suspects that the reclusive Billy will resemble Norma Desmond, the delusional ex-star in "Sunset Boulevard," but Billy (who's well aware of the comparison) is funny, candid, insightful, and intensely sympathetic. She notes that Kris has been approaching her project "academically" and urges her to speak freely. Kris opens up about her sexual inhibitions while worrying that such candor is unprofessional. Billy responds that these personal revelations are intrinsically part of the work, and that their collaboration has already begun.

Much of "Teenage Sex and Death at Camp Miasma" is a classic two-hander, sharply written with plenty of scope for the two leads to shine. For all the movie's self-awareness, it's filled with tenderness and humor. Einbinder endows Kris with pent-up intellectual energy awaiting explosive release, and Anderson's Billy is a kaleidoscopic showcase of emotional vitality and natural, florid theatricality. Among the movie's daring inspirations is the ample screen time given to movie-watching, whether by Kris alone or by her and Billy together. Each one of these viewing sessions is more than merely an opportunity for ingenious film-within-a-film evocations of "Camp Miasma." They're dramatic scenes punctuated by significant surprises: an accidental interruption, a trenchant observation, a raucous gag, a cathartic gaze. This built-in doubleness—of the watchers and the watched—lends "Teenage Sex and Death" a complexity that Schoenbrun amplifies in surreal, symbolic, and allegorical ways.

Throughout, Schoenbrun revels in the ambiguous fusion of artifice and realism. The foremost innovation is the evocation of Little Death's perspective, by means of an unusual kind of camera movement—wavering and wandering, somewhere between smooth and jittery—which catches the viewer in the limbic system, going beyond disgust to the uncanny. The ostensibly transphobic element of "Camp Miasma" is that Little Death was gender-fluid, a cruelly bullied former camper whose killing sprees are displaced revenge. Schoenbrun, a trans filmmaker who explicitly addressed the trans experience in "I Saw the TV Glow," here conceives something even more radical: a cinematic trans gaze, one that is visually distinctive in its tone while extruding violence endured into violent fantasy.

At the end of Kris's time with Billy, she has to video-conference with a group of studio executives to give them a story outline for the reboot. Her pitch, deeply informed by Billy's sensibility and ideas and by the course of their encounter, is a brilliantly strange narrative that puts the character and vantage point of Little Death at the center of a film-within-a-film origin story. The executives (deftly lampooned by actors including Dylan Baker and Jess McLeod) are predictably aghast. For Schoenbrun, though, Kris's professional setback is an opportunity for her artistic and personal renewal, in the form of radical independence.

Alongside the fundamental dichotomy of the watchers and the watched, "Teenage Sex and Death" explores a related one—that of the director and the actor. As Kris and Billy view more and more of "Camp Miasma" together, Kris realizes that what she has always loved and feared about Billy's performance in the original film comes from the real-life trauma and ecstasy that the actress experienced during its filming, which left her with a lifetime of material to work through (and to work with, too). Billy's main creative outlet in her years of solitude has been visual art, and her work—abstractions dominated by the geometric forms of Little Death's air-vent face—seems like a closed circuit of self-therapy. With Kris, Billy is delivered from these visual abstractions, just as Kris, with Billy, is freed from her intellectual ones. Together, each of them becomes both director and actor, observing and observed, controlling and controlled, self-motivated and mutually determined, launched into a higher plane of artistic collaboration—into a cinematic redemption. ♦

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CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Lynn Hsu, must be received by Sunday, August 9th. The finalists in the July 27th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the August 24th & 31st issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST

“ ”

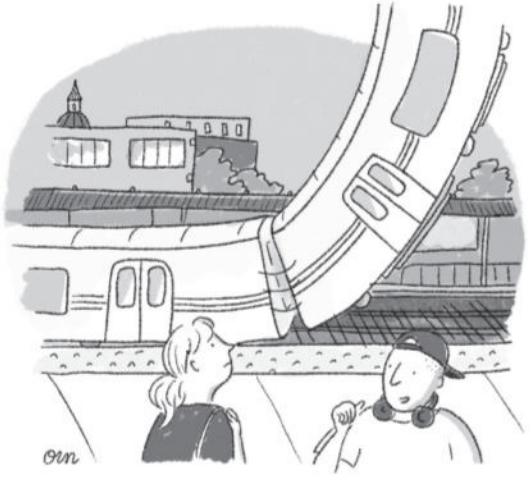
THE FINALISTS

"I think it's time we addressed the room itself."
Pao Roy, New Orleans, La.

"The door—he remembers everything but the door."
Daniel Leshner, Seattle, Wash.

"I guess the laser pointer was a bad idea."
Trevor Pritchard, Ottawa, Ont.

THE WINNING CAPTION



"I understand that service has been partially suspended."
Jeff Van Wagenen, Middlebury, Conn.

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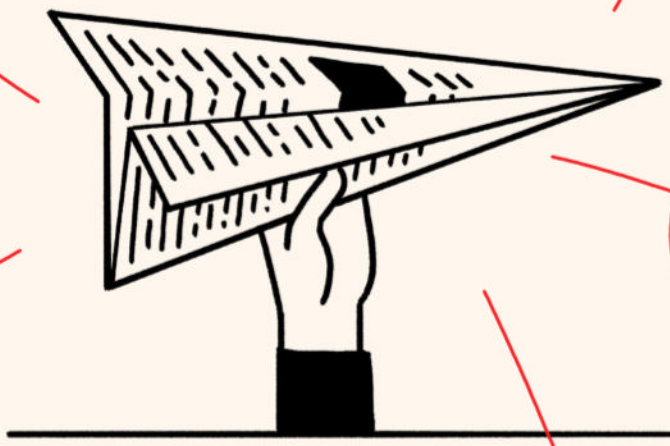

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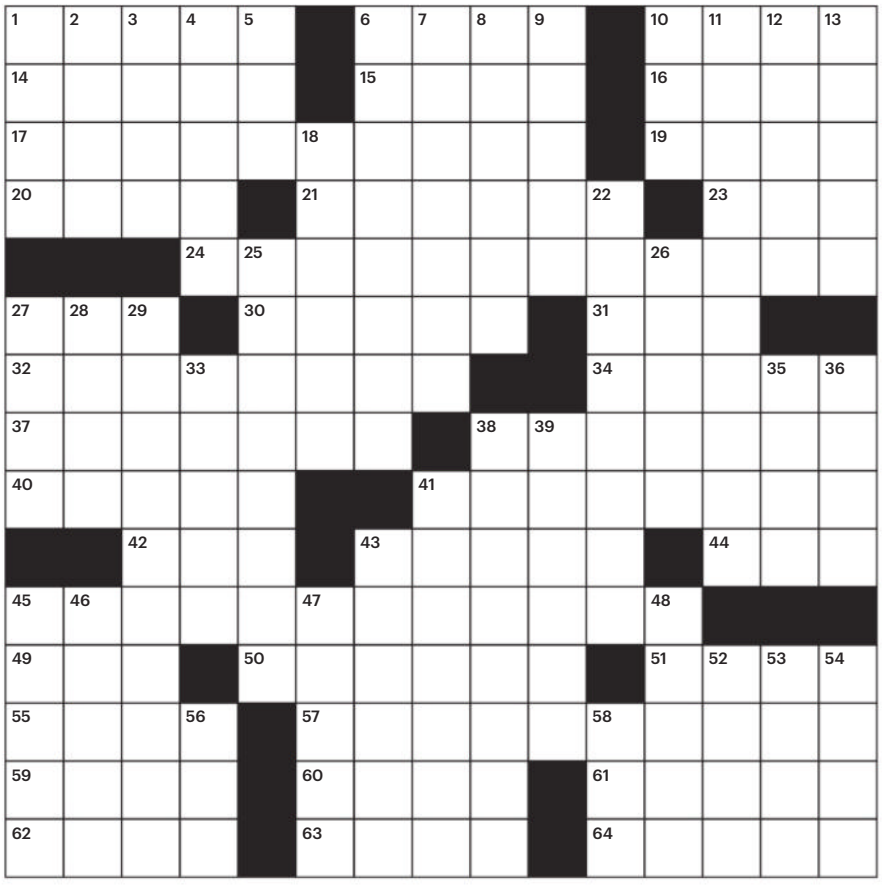
PUZZLES & GAMES DEPT.

THE CROSSWORD

A challenging puzzle.

BY NATAN LAST



ACROSS

1 Indicator of a pause
6 Piece of work
10 "Indentured: The Inside Story of the Rebellion Against the ___" (2017 book that won the PEN/ESPN Award)
14 Maker of some trailers
15 Mediterranean peak
16 Rules infraction
17 Classroom in which one might use an oscilloscope
19 Whole thing
20 Emphatic response to "*¿Quieres más*?"
21 Dashingly?
23 Poet Chen with the 2010 collection "Juvenilia"
24 Standup comedian with a bit about the snacks at Trader Joe's that only women can see
27 Curl targets, briefly
30 Weapons related to rapiers
31 What Ras al-Khaimah is part of, for short
32 "But that's enough of that . . ."
34 "The Sirens of ___" (Kurt Vonnegut novel)
37 Philosopher Daniel who co-edited the 1981 anthology "The Mind's I" with Douglas Hofstadter
38 Minister and advocate ___ A. King
40 Long-winded stories
41 Like summer days in Spain?
42 "Oh, also . . . ," in a text
43 Sequence of three nucleotides
44 Meier who created the Civilization video-game series
45 Very short stories
49 Suggestion, in brief
50 Busybodies
51 Wastes
55 Members of the beech family
57 "No one to blame but myself"
59 Motivate
60 Clutter-free
61 Horse girl?
62 Spot
63 "O.K., you make a good point"
64 Big name in pads

DOWN

1 Coffeehouse supply
2 "Didn't expect to see you here!"
3 Giant with a legendary over-the-shoulder catch in the 1954 World Series
4 "How sour sweet ___ is / When time is broke and no proportion kept": Shakespeare
5 Palestinian cartoonist Naji al-___
6 Most prone to annoyance
7 Cartographic collections
8 Gobbles (down)
9 World capital where Pashto and Dari are spoken
10 Certain digital asset, briefly
11 Reusable metal containers
12 Poet who wrote "In Memory of W. B. Yeats"
13 Word following string or tag
18 Form a layer over
22 By-product of beta decay
25 "Let me spell it out for you"
26 Only monosyllabic U.S. state
27 Offers
28 Creative spark
29 Provide supportive notes?
33 Midges and blackflies, e.g.
35 It follows a curtain's rise
36 Scholarship criterion
38 Cardinal sin of aesthetics
39 Bookish Bridgerton sibling
41 "Le Livre Blanc" author Jean
43 Remnant in a fireplace
45 Slushy wine-based beverage
46 Bounds
47 Deceptive maneuver
48 Boyfriend, to Bad Bunny
52 Sensed
53 Document, e.g.
54 Mythical river
56 "My b"
58 Sixties U.S. senator whose middle name was Francis, not Fitzgerald

Solution to the previous puzzle:

■	C	U	R	E	S	■	M	A	J	O	R	■		
■	B	O	P	E	E	P	■	I	N	A	W	A	Y	■
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S	K	A	T	E	■	S	T	A	R	■	D	A	R	N
T	O	M	■	D	E	L	A	Y	■	P	O	I	N	T
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■	■	■	R	I	N	G	A	B	E	L	L	■	■	■
S	A	H	A	R	A	■	D	O	E	■	S	O	B	S
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E	A	T	S	■	M	A	D	E	■	O	M	E	G	A
P	B	S	■	M	E	R	E	■	S	C	O	R	E	S
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