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JUNE 8, 2026

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THE NEW YORKER

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JUNE 8, 2026

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OUR LOCAL CORRESPONDENTS



When Should a Child Be Taken from Her Parents Without a Warrant?

By Larissa MacFarquhar

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GOINGS ON

JUNE 3 – 9, 2026



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

The latest installment of MOMA PS1's quinquennial exhibition "**Greater New York**" features the work of fifty-three artists living and working in New York City. The galleries display the emotional range of the city, from ebullience to alienation: a dishevelled, confetti-strewn, found-object sculpture installation by Louis Osmosis; Piero Penizzotto's life-size papier-mâché sculptures of women sitting in lawn chairs; Kameron Neal's two-channel video (a still is pictured), recruited from the N.Y.P.D.'s archive, of pedestrians realizing that they're being surveilled; Kenneth Tam's videos following taxi-drivers struggling in the wake of rideshare apps. The show aptly reflects our moment's oppositional realities by showcasing artists who continue to turn over the mercurial stone of curiosity, finding yet more questions underneath it.—*Zoë Hopkins (MOMA PS1; through Aug. 17.)*



ABOUT TOWN

DANCE | In her first season as the artistic director of **Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre**, Alicia Graf Mack is still finding her footing. The program for the company's spring engagement at BAM centers on a revival of "Hymn," a 1993 tribute to the troupe's founder created by one of Mack's predecessors, Judith Jamison. Text assembled by the playwright Anna Deavere Smith voices the sentiments of past dancers while the current Ailey crew demonstrates its strength. Medhi Walerski's "Blink of an Eye," an import set to Bach, is, in contrast, a flashy but shallow specimen of recent trends. And then, as ever, there's Ailey's "Revelations."—*Brian Seibert (Howard Gilman Opera House; June 4-7.)*

FOLK | The singer-songwriter **Anjimile** budded in 2020 with the gentle, ruminative "Giver Taker." Largely written while in rehab for drug and alcohol abuse, it's an album about coming out as trans and nonbinary, weaving both journeys into a folk story of self-realization. After signing to the label 4AD, in 2021, they underwent yet another transformation for "The King" (2023), which brought the solitary, inward-looking acoustic music of its predecessor into a more dramatic context with a tenser, more imposing sound, robust in its expression of pent-up exasperation. The most recent Anjimile album, "You're Free to Go," is composed of resilient yet restrained songs teeming with activity beneath the surface.—*Sheldon Pearce (Union Pool; June 5.)*

HIP-HOP | **Baby Keem** was well on his way long before he made it known that he was kin to Kendrick Lamar, one of the defining rappers of his generation, but, since the Pulitzer winner has thrown his weight behind his talented little cousin, who joined Lamar's pgLang creative production company in 2020, Keem has levelled up to star in the making. His breakthrough album, "The Melodic Blue," from 2021, loosely outlined a technicolor style powered by its creator's megawatt personality and flashy performance sense, as a chaos agent who sees variability as his primary artistic ethic. After a five-year absence, the Las Vegas native's new album, "Ca\$ino," brings narrative focus to a neon sound, assessing the Strip's emotional fallout to sobering effect.—*S.P. (Brooklyn Paramount; June 4.)*

ART | Over thirty years ago, the American maverick **David Hammons** and the Greek-born visual poet **Jannis Kounellis** (1936-2017) developed a friendship at the American Academy in Rome. This show works to understand how those two minds—both devoted to upending the art market by making work that's not easily categorizable—entertain certain themes simultaneously. Although each creator is devoted to irony, especially Hammons, that love of play is often integral to their discussions of political theory, and of race. How and where do you assign value to any of this, the artists ask, a point driven home when we see a clear bowl containing water—a reference to Hammons's famous snowballs—and a note from potential buyers, saying that no insurance company would cover the now melted object.—*Hilton Als (White Cube; through June 13.)*

DANCE | In the past few years, **Scottish Ballet** has generated some buzz in Europe with its contemporary reimaginings of period narratives—"Coppélia," "The Crucible"—choreographed by women. The first to arrive in New York is "Mary, Queen of Scots," by the company's resident choreographer, Sophie Laplane. She and the director, James Bonas (who was partly responsible for the murk of American Ballet Theatre's 2024 "Crime and Punishment"), have conceived the ballet as the fractured memories of Elizabeth I. Much of it is purposely anachronistic and self-seriously quirky, with a dancer on stilts and a baby represented by a balloon.—*B.S. (David H. Koch Theatre; June 4-7.)*

MOVIES | The backstory of the Palestinian filmmaker Kamal Aljafari's documentary "**With Hasan in Gaza**" is built into its simple but far-reaching action. In Gaza, in November, 2001, Aljafari used a small video camera to record his search for a man he'd met in 1989, while he was imprisoned in Israel. The footage, which he only recently rediscovered, is an exploration of the daily lives of Gaza residents under occupation, as artillery fire from Israeli forces shatters homes and stokes fear. Amid his voyage, in cars and on foot, through markets and at beaches, visiting homes and perched in locations deemed safe during attacks, Aljafari creates what he described, to residents, as a time capsule meant to be seen in the distant future. The result is an audiovisual restoration of places and ways of life obliterated by Israel's war of destruction.—*Richard Brody (Metrograph.)*



TABLES FOR TWO

Dean's

213 Sixth Ave.

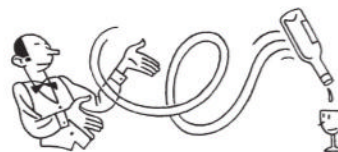
The stargazy pie at the British-ish, pub-ish Dean's is, in a word, freaky. The head of a fish, cooked and glossy gray, emerges from a latticed crust, regarding the ceiling with an unnerving, dull-eyed serenity. A tail protrudes, too, at an opposite angle, giving the illusion of a flexed body hidden beneath the surface of the pastry sea. This Cornwall specialty looks wondrously bizarre, but the filling, a creamy stew of fish and potato, is hot and heartening—not freaky at all.

Dean's is the latest restaurant from Jess Shadbolt and Annie Shi, whose other New York spots include King, the elegant restaurant with which Dean's shares a wall. A lot of people adore King, with its ladylike European simplicity, but I have to admit I've never been among them: it's always felt a little timid, interested in restraint almost to the point of absence. So I was shocked by how much I adored the food at Dean's, how walloped I felt. Shadbolt, who is the chef, grew up north of London, and Dean's wears its Britishness unapologetically, embracing brown and beige and self-confidently off-putting menu descriptions. The "boiled ham," for instance, is heaven: two slices pink as tongues and served with a parsley bechamel dotted with tiny, tender favas and a buttery mass of rough-mashed

potatoes. Cold roast beef comes with properly sinus-clearing horseradish cream, with a pickled black walnut like the cherry on a sundae.

The dining room is wood-clad, sleek, and handsome—and tiny, and very crowded, and awfully loud. Nearly every table seems to have at least one platter of fish and chips, the battered hake sizzled to a pleasing medium gold. After one of my meals, I marvelled to a friend about the relatively decent cost of a large, boozy dinner for two, which came in at under three hundred dollars. My friend all but laughed in my face: it's a pub, she scoffed. She's right, in the sense that pubs are supposed to be cheap absolutely, not relatively. But she's also wrong, in the sense that Dean's isn't really a pub; it's a watering hole for the working man in much the same way that a truffle is a mushroom. It joins a wave of restaurants—Sailor, Lord's, Dame—that have pointedly reframed British gastronomy for a New York audience, and turned unfussy, posh-adjacent Britishness into the aesthetic mode of the moment. In that sense, Shadbolt's food doesn't have to argue for British cooking so much as simply to practice it, excellently. The restaurant will be launching lunch eventually—with, naturally, Sunday roasts, a pub trapping as proper and totemic as pastry with a piscine head sticking out. What was it that Oscar Wilde said? We are all in a fish chowder, but some of us are gazing at the stars. (*Dishes \$12–\$45.*)

—Helen Rosner



BAR TAB

The Library

7 Avenue A

The advice "don't judge a book by its cover" has never really applied to dive bars. In fact, the inverse logic is usually true: what you see is pretty much what you get. The Library, a delightfully ratty East Village hole-in-the-wall, is no exception. Recently, a newcomer locked eyes with a faux-bronze unicorn standing behind the bar's glass façade, its neck bow-tied, its rump draped with a pride flag. The guest's entrance was soundtracked by the home-town wails of the Ramones' "Blitzkrieg Bop," the de-facto national anthem for such establishments. Inside, the place was nearly empty, save for a half dozen tattooed regulars sporting the millennial-hipster uniform of thick-framed eyeglasses and scruffy beards in varying degrees of neglect. Joining them at the bar, the newcomer was confronted by a dizzying array of curios: a Darth Vader helmet, a miniature sasquatch, yellowing human skulls, a pastel painting of Jesus in his crown of thorns. A homemade sign advertising pickleback shots hung mere inches from a flyer warning against drinking while pregnant. The guest opted for a Guinness; it was served alongside a toy Brontosaurus, which, the bartender explained, was good for a free drink. On shelves in the back piled with tattered books, the newcomer was thrilled to find "The Complete Poems of D. H. Lawrence" in close proximity to the 2005 classic "Bob Greene's Total Body Makeover." Elsewhere, "Fundamentals of Tibetan Buddhism" and "The Communist Futures Trading Guide" collected dust. Pint glass empty, the guest cashed in his Jurassic friend as Motörhead's "Stone Deaf in the U.S.A." began to play: "Oh Lord, thou who has seen the trouserless, and had compassion . . . thank you." Nursing his beer, the newcomer glanced around the room. Not one person, he realized, had yet picked up a book.—Taran Dugal

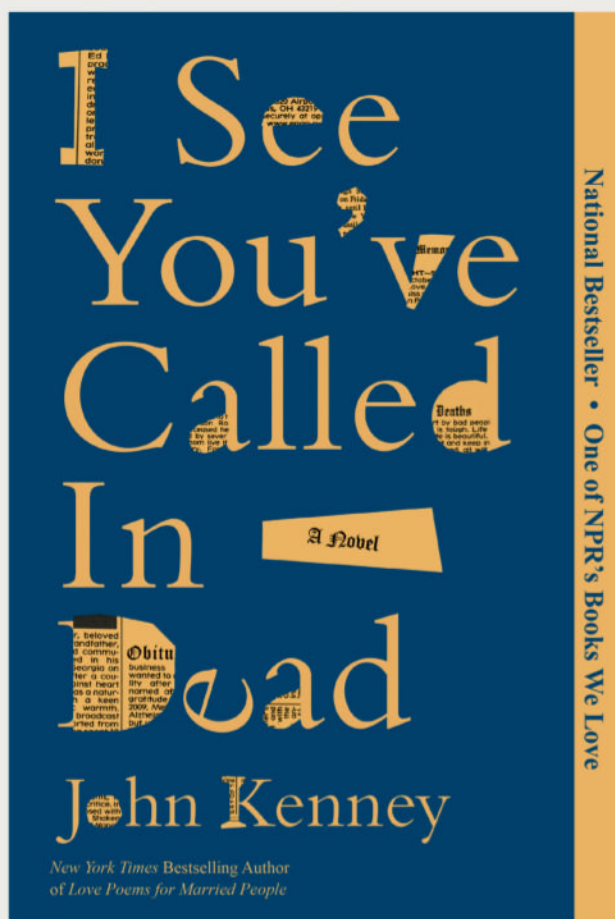


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THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT

THE ONLY GAME IN TOWN

At the risk of deepening the polarization that has rent our precarious democracy to the point of collapse, it must be said, categorically, that the most triumphant moment in the post-war history of New York sports came on the night of May 8, 1970, when the Knicks' captain and center, Willis Reed, his injured right leg numbed with cortisone and Carbocaine, limped onto the court at Madison Square Garden and, with two precise yet floor-bound "jumpers," ripped the heart out of the Los Angeles Lakers and propelled his team to victory in the deciding game of the N.B.A. Finals. Reed, who had been listed as "doubtful" for the contest by the medical authorities, drew reasonable comparison that glorious night to the fallen El Cid, the medieval Castilian warrior, whose corpse, according to legend, was strapped onto his steed by his soldiers as they rode into battle outside Valencia.

The Lakers, despite the presence of three immortals in their lineup—Wilt Chamberlain, Jerry West, and Elgin Baylor—had been spiritually vanquished by Reed's display of courage before they could break a sweat. And, as the Knicks widened their lead, Reed hobbled off the court, never to return, leaving the inevitabilities to the ball handler, ball thief, and sharpshooter Walt Frazier, who went on to register thirty-six points and nineteen assists. That championship team, which soon added yet another star, Earl (the Pearl) Monroe, to its roster, won a second title

(against the Lakers, again) in 1973. The Knicks of that era also featured Bill Bradley, Dave DeBusschere, Dick ("Fall back, baby") Barnett, Phil (Action) Jackson, Cazzie Russell, and a lunch-bucket guard named Mike Riordan, whose job it was to go into a game to commit a deliberate foul. (We all have our purpose in life.) Coached by the unflappable Red Holzman, it was a unit as exquisitely coordinated as a school of barracuda or the 1965 Miles Davis Quintet.

Now, it is well understood that some scholars partial to the ancients will attempt to elevate the 1927 Yankees, led by the stoical Lou Gehrig and the epicurean Babe Ruth, as the finest of all teams to play in the city. Gridiron-minded boomers will assert that, in 1969, Joe Namath's Jets scored, in Super Bowl III, the greatest of all Gotham miracles. (Or maybe it was the Amazin' Mets of 1969. Or the Bill Buckner-assisted Mets of

1986.) Surely, the two Ali-Frazier fights of the seventies at the Garden were the most glamorous of all New York sporting events—for the first bout, *Life* sent Norman Mailer to write and Frank Sinatra to be ringside photographer—but it was the decisive third, held in Manila, that was the most memorable. Millennials will propose the Jeter-Rivera-Williams Yankees teams as the best thing since Katz's pastrami. Whatever. Basketball is the city game. The Garden is its Mecca. May 8, 1970, was the night of all sporting New York nights. *Bliss it was in that dawn to be alive!* So proclaimed the voices of the Knicks: John F.X. Condon at the Garden, Marv Albert on the air. Case closed.

For Knicks fans, the half century since those two titles has been a prolonged excruciation with intermittent periods of thwarted hope. Ask Spike Lee, who, as a kid, attended the radiant 1970 finale and signed up for season tickets when the Knicks drafted Patrick Ewing, in 1985. A number of stars have worn blue, orange, and white over the years—Ewing, Bernard King, Carmelo Anthony, to say nothing of the fleeting excitement of "Linsanity" more than a decade ago. But, despite the team's trips to the Finals in 1994 (a seven-game tragedy against the Rockets) and 1999 (a five-game bust against the Spurs), the mind of the loyal fan is tortured by a string of agonizing images: among them, Reggie Miller, of the Pacers, burying threes in Spike Lee's face, Larry Bird trash-talking all comers, and, well, Michael Jordan, always. The only time the Knicks beat the Jordan-era Bulls in the playoffs was when he



went on his baseball Wanderjahr with the Birmingham Barons. The one unsullied triumph for New York pro-hoops fans came in 2024, when the Liberty prevailed over the Minnesota Lynx to win the W.N.B.A. title.

Here we are again, a season on the brink. The Knicks, fuelled by the magical play of their point guard, Jalen Brunson, have made the N.B.A. Finals. Brunson is six-two, diminutive in today's league, and yet, night after night, he has played with ever greater flair, and with far more velocity and power, than Walt Frazier did. Scoring nearly twenty-seven points a game in the playoffs so far, he slashes and spins his way toward the basket, shooting from seemingly impossible angles to the rim. In Game One of the Eastern Conference Finals, he almost single-handedly erased a twenty-two-point lead in the fourth quarter to force the Cleveland Cavaliers into overtime and eventual defeat. Time and again,

he went one-on-one against the rabbinically bearded Cavs star, James Harden, driving, shifting direction, then suddenly lofting the ball against the top of the backboard and through the hoop. On the rare occasions when Brunson could find no way to score, he sent screaming passes to the corners, where his teammates lasered three-pointers at will. That late-game run—forty-four points to the Cavs' eleven—was as soul-crushing to Cleveland as the apparition of Willis Reed, hobbling to center court, had been to the Lakers fifty-six years ago.

Brunson is hardly a lonely talent. Karl-Anthony Towns, who seems to crash to the hardwood every time he scores on the drive, is a wildly determined presence. No less thrilling, OG Anunoby, Mikal Bridges, Josh Hart, Landry Shamet, and Miles (Deuce) McBride are all capable of lighting it up on a given night, and God bless Mitchell Robinson, who might not be

able to make half his foul shots but throws his big body against his opponents with admirable will.

Jittery courtside kibbitzers, first-time-longtimers, and Vegas savants are guarded in their evaluation of the Knicks' chances. The defending champions, the Oklahoma City Thunder, are, admittedly, a superior collection of athletes, and the very sight of the Spurs' spindly and preternaturally composed and gifted center, Victor Wembanyama de Fautereau-Vassel (a.k.a. Wemby, a.k.a. the future of the N.B.A.), calmly sinking threes from mid-court will cast a shadow from San Antonio for years to come.

But, as another New York team instructs the city from its home in Flushing, "Ya gotta believe." The Knicks are on an astonishing run. Unselfish and undaunted, they are putting on a magnificent show. This is what joy feels like. You remember joy, don't you?

—David Remnick

DEPT. OF MATRIMONY BUT SOFT



Wedding season has begun, doubly so in Central Park, where the Public Theatre's Shakespeare in the Park season is kicking off with "Romeo and Juliet." The star-crossed lovers have a wedding, of course, but their marriage is clandestine and tragically brief. Saheem Ali, who directs the Park production, wants to send the audience out with a little hope. So, each night, the play will end with a real couple tying the knot onstage after the performance. "Let's demonstrate that we have the capacity to overcome tragedy, to overcome our worst impulses," Ali said the other day. "And what better way than to end the first half of the show with the fictional marriage and the second half with an actual marriage?"

Ali's production is set at the U.S.-Mexico border, with a Latino Romeo and a gringa Juliet; the stage at the Delacorte is dominated by an ominous slab of border wall. Before rehearsals, Ali took a research trip to Laredo, Texas,

to see the actual wall nearby. At a coffee shop, he met an artist who makes collages out of paper money, including a dollar-bill Jesus. The artist and his fiancée showed him videos of border marriages, and Ali invited the pair to New York to get married onstage one night. "Then we decided to expand the idea and do it every night," he said at the theatre, just before the first preview.

The production had already booked couples for thirty of the thirty-two performances—mostly weddings, with a few vow renewals, including for the actors playing Benvolio and Pedro. The Public didn't want to advertise online, fearing a deluge, so it found couples by word of mouth. Francis Jue, the actor playing Friar Lawrence, became an ordained officiant through the Universal Life Church. (So did his understudy, just in case.) Like any good wedding planner, the theatre has a rainy-day backup—a backstage area where the weddings can go on even if the show doesn't.

The Public also hired a wedding coordinator, Carla Perez, who ushered in the inaugural couple, Kay Wasil and Teague Hollister. Both are trans, and they wore matching suits—Wasil's white, Hollister's jade—which they'd spent the week embroidering. Wasil, who has a neon-

green mullet, adjusted the beaded boutonniere on Hollister's lapel. Both perform as drag kings, Wasil under the name Chevy Lace and Hollister as Hugh Mann Race. They met at a drag show in Brooklyn in 2021. "I was, like, Wow, this person's so cute," Hollister recalled. "We started hanging out, and Kay gave an impassioned speech about how you should never date within the drag community. I was, like, *Heard*."

But they grew close on subway rides home from shows—"A lot of late nights



Teague Hollister and Kay Wasil

taking the Q from Manhattan all the way to deep Flatbush, me half in drag makeup,” Wasil said—and started dating. They got engaged last fall, lakeside, in Prospect Park. “I kept waiting to propose to you, and boaters kept getting stuck in the algae,” Hollister recalled. Wasil counter-proposed during a weekend upstate, and they celebrated with a trip to a haunted house. They were thinking City Hall, but then Hollister, who’s done crew work at the Public, got Perez’s e-mail looking for couples. The play’s tragic ending didn’t deter them. “I hope that’s not an omen,” Wasil said.

Growing up on opposite ends of Pennsylvania, both had read “Romeo and Juliet” as teens. “When I was in eighth grade, my mom looked at me and went, ‘True love is for thirteen-year-olds and mental patients,’” Hollister said. “I’ve always thought of ‘Romeo and Juliet’ in that light, until I started reevaluating it more recently. It’s not just, like, ‘Look at these crazy kids!’ It’s ‘Look at these systemic forces that are making two people choose to die rather than love and exist.’”

At seven o’clock, Perez and Jue walked the couple through a “wedding call”: they’d sit separately, get miked at intermission, and come onstage before curtain call. “I’m not using any binary terms like ‘husband’ or ‘wife,’” Jue told them.

“That’s the ideal,” Wasil said.

Hours later, the show was over, and Jue, in his friar costume, turned to the audience and announced, “Romeo and Juliet didn’t get their lifetime together, but tonight there is a couple here who would like to commit to their lifetime together, with all of you as their witnesses.” The crowd gasped, then erupted in cheers. Jue brought up Wasil and Hollister, who knelt facing each other, as Romeo and Juliet had in Act II. Repeating after Jue, they pledged their love “for all the risings and settings of the sun” and exchanged rings.

They bowed with the cast and exited stage right, where they signed the marriage license beneath a trellis overlooking Turtle Pond. Ecstatic friends greeted them backstage. (The Public had set aside seats, but some had waited in line for free tickets that day.) “Fucking betrothed!” one yelled. The group formed a tunnel with their arms for the couple to run through, and they took

photos outside the theatre, in front of a statue of Romeo and Juliet leaning in for a kiss.

—Michael Schulman

DEPT. OF ENERGY HANGING OUT



The baseball legend Dusty Baker, who once wanted to be a journalist, has always had a knack for being in the right place at the right time. Age nineteen: Baker spots Jimi Hendrix on the streets of San Francisco, and the two share a joint. In his twenties: stands in the batter’s box as his Atlanta Braves teammate Hank Aaron hits his seven-hundred-and-fifteenth homer. Thirties: takes cover in Candlestick Park when the World Series earthquake strikes. Fifties: manages Barry Bonds when Bonds hits his seventy-third single-season homer. Sixties: manages Max Scherzer when Scherzer throws twenty strikeouts in an outing. Not that Baker merely beheld greatness. In 2022, four decades after winning the World Series as a Dodger outfielder, Baker, at seventy-three, became the oldest manager to win

it. The toothpick he chewed that day in the Astros dugout is now in Coopers-town, and Baker may soon follow.

His citation in the National Baseball Hall of Fame would likely mention another accomplishment—co-inventing the high five with Glenn Burke—which Baker plays down in “Crossroads,” his new memoir. “I just reached my hand up and hit his hand,” Baker writes. “I just reacted to Glenn.” Burke, a Dodgers teammate, had provided the setup for the pioneering hand slap, a spontaneous response to a homer that Baker hit in 1977.

“It just seemed like the natural thing to do,” Baker added, the other day, during a conversation at his Spanish Revival house, near Sacramento, California. His mustache is graying, but his eyes remain mischievous. He had the Knicks-Cavs series on TV, next to a wall lined with guitars signed by John Lee Hooker, Carlos Santana, B. B. King, Tom Petty, Buddy Guy, and, he said, “Elvin Bishop, my fishing partner.” Takeout from Visconti’s Ristorante waited on the counter. Baker sprawled across a leather couch. Basketball is his favorite game to play and watch, and he was rooting for the Knicks—mostly because their coach, Mike Brown, once coached the Sacramento Kings. “I’m more amazed by basketball,” Baker said, comparing it with baseball. “The



“I had a horrible dream that you read all the good books and read me the boring books just to put me to sleep.”

best athletes play basketball and football now. But, come on, you telling me Nikola Jokić couldn't be a pitcher? Allen Iverson couldn't play shortstop? It's, like, Dude!"

The last time Baker managed a pro club was in 2023, with Houston. But he surmised that he would return to the dugout—"if I could manage half the games for all the salary." He always managed more by feel than by analytics. "You spend enough time hanging out around baseball, you feel the game," he said.

Baker likes hanging out. He calls it a "lost art." He suggested hanging out in the Sacramento sun. Walking outside, he passed his pointers, Gracie and Rylie, barking in a pen. Nearby was a freshly dug mole hole. "Fucker," Baker said, of the pest. "I gotta put some smoke bombs out here tomorrow." He motioned toward two stone turtles ("sign of long life") and a pool fed by a waterfall made from rocks delivered to him, he explained, by "some hippies who said the rocks whispered to them."

There was also a rose garden dedicated to his father, plum trees, boxes planted with onions, a few rows of Syrah grapes, and seats plucked from five baseball stadiums sitting beside a batting cage used by his son, Darren, a second baseman in the minors. He arrived at a chunk of Sierra gray granite, about four feet tall. Benches surrounded it. "This is my Dobie Gillis Think Rock," Baker explained. "Dobie was this dude that was a beatnik in this sitcom when I was a kid. That was before the hippies." In the credits, Dobie posed by Rodin's "The Thinker." "I put it here when I built my house," Baker said. "It changes colors with the sun. It changes with the rain."

He touched the warm rock. "Dude, that's what it's about," he said. "Energy. There are points on earth I've found that are points of energy—Mexico, Venezuela, Hawaii, Montana." In the memoir, Baker notes that he once tried mescaline and hated it. He once tried mushrooms as well ("you laugh a lot") and uses weed on occasion, although he said that he'll never try gummies again. "One gummy wasn't doing nothing, so I took another," he recalled. "I was out of control."

Hanging out, as Baker defines it, means that "you don't have any time or place. You're just kind of there, wherever you are." He lingered with his hand

on his think rock. "It's like Satchel Paige said, 'Sometimes I sits and thinks, and sometimes I just sits.'" Paige, an early mentor to Baker, always called him Daffy. Baker never knew exactly why. He ambled off toward some plum trees, stooping to pull a few weeds. He plucked a plum from a branch and took a bite. "Almost there," he said.

—Charles Bethea

THE PICTURES AN AUDITORY PERSON



The life of a piano tuner is not glamorous. Unpredictable hours, loud noises, finicky clients, wrenches, needles. Tuners can work on as many as five pianos a day. But, in a world of "I know a guy," it's hard to get your flowers.

"I didn't know how much went *into* it," the actor Leo Woodall said the other day, standing by an open grand piano at the Faust Harrison showroom, near Columbus Circle. He peered into the instrument's belly, silver strings laid out methodically like the web of a type-A spider. "It boggles me how intricate it is."

Woodall was in town for his new movie, "Tuner," directed by Daniel Roher, about a wunderkind pianist named Niki who becomes a technician after developing hyperacusis—painfully low tolerance for sound. "There was so much training," Woodall said, wearing a white polo and black shorts. "I was constantly tuning the piano the best I could, just to pass the time on set." In real life, Woodall has no musical background. "I went to a school where learning instruments—well, learning at all—was not really encouraged. So it was never really on my radar."

That day, Woodall was joined by Kevin Busse, Faust Harrison's East Coast head technician. "When pianos are tuned a certain way, it's like staring at a beautiful mountain," Busse said wistfully. He, like Niki, started as a pianist and then made the turn to tech. "I was, like, 'Is this guy playing me in real life?'" Busse said. "I don't have hyperacusis, but I do walk very quietly because I'm an auditory person."

Woodall eyed Busse's tools on the ground, clocking some familiar devices. "Apart from the . . .," he trailed off uncertainly.

"The lever?" Busse offered.

"The lever. Where is it?" Woodall stepped closer to the piano. "Oh, it's already set up! This is beautiful." He reached into the belly and fondled a shiny wooden crank, which adjusts string tension, before sitting down on the bench. He leaned one arm on the lid, his other hand aimlessly poking at keys. Busse flinched at every note.

"It's sitting above 440, because we've entered the more humid months, so the pitch floats upward," Busse said.

"I don't know what '440' means," Woodall said.

"It's the standard pitch."

"Right," Woodall said. "And I had two technicians who never told me that." He'd started prepping for the role months before filming began, with help from the movie's piano consultant, the tuner Peter White.

"The first lesson Peter taught me was the *wah-wah-wah-wah*," Woodall said.

"The beats?" Busse asked.

Woodall lit up. "Beats! That's what I would try to listen for."

Busse, who wore a black polo, got to work tuning, pulling the lever ever so slightly on an A.

"How often is it just this, compared with taking out the keys?" Woodall said.

"A lot of your work should be regulating," Busse said, playing two notes together. "The thing with piano tun-



Leo Woodall

ing is you need to go fast.” In the film, Niki tells a client that a session could take more than two hours. “If I took two to three hours, I’d never get paid,” Busse said.

“There’s at least one sequence in the film where I completely take it apart,” Woodall said. In the scene, Niki is trying to save the piano of his love interest, Ruthie, from water damage. He dismantles the instrument and borrows Ruthie’s hair dryer to get rid of the moisture.

“Don’t say that, don’t say that,” Busse said, shaking his head. “That would *certainly* change the tuning.”

“In the movie, we get asked to fix toilets,” Woodall said. “Have you ever been asked?”

“Maybe not plumbing, but fixing someone’s internet,” Busse said. “I try to stay in my lane.”

The film starts as a buddy comedy, with Niki helping out his elderly mentor, Harry, played by Dustin Hoffman, on tuning gigs. During a solo house job, Niki gets roped into using his hyperacusic to help a group of criminals break into a safe. He can hear the clicks.

“I’ve never had any luck cracking safes,” Busse said. “But I’ve picked the lock to my own house, because I needed to get in. That’s more of a mechanical skill.”

Busse pointed to red felt strips and protruding metal loops: “That’s for the temperament area, from which you tune the rest of the piano.”

Woodall nodded. “I remember using the felts to numb either side of each string, or whatever,” he said. He stood to look over Busse’s shoulder. “It still fascinates me how each key has three strings.” (Some have one or two.)

Busse started tuning a low B-flat.

“Do you have perfect pitch?” Woodall asked.

“When it comes to saxophones,” Busse replied.

“That’s amazing.”

Woodall stepped away to examine Busse’s tools again. “I’m looking for the needle one,” he said. He picked up a wooden stick with a prickly end.

“That’s for voicing,” Busse said.

“Yeah, we did a bit of that,” Woodall said. “Take it apart, flip it upside down, and just really get in there.”

—Jane Bua

POSTSCRIPT DONALD NEWHOUSE



If the contemporary media scene has proved anything of late, it is that a reliably supportive proprietor is as rare as a cool breeze in August. The political and financial costs of backing journalism that challenges the honesty or the competence of the powerful can be distinctly . . . inconvenient. Some owners show their mettle for a spell, then find adequate reason to knuckle under; others have no intention of even pretending to do what is hard or what is right. Donald Newhouse, who died last week, at the age of ninety-six, was among the exceptions. He understood the value of editorial independence. For decades, he was a stalwart supporter of the many publications owned by the Newhouse family, including *The New Yorker*.

Donald and his older brother, S. I. Newhouse, Jr., who died in 2017, were born to a newspaper family. Their father created an empire of print that began in earnest with the purchase of the Staten Island *Advance*, in 1922, then extended to Newark, Cleveland, New Orleans, Portland, and many places beyond; in 1959, he bought Condé Nast, a struggling enterprise in those days which was anchored mainly by *Vogue*. It may be difficult in the current era to imagine what it once was to have a passion for newspapers. Donald and Si’s father was so enamored of newsprint that he spurned a chance to buy the New York Yankees and purchased newspapers in the Syracuse area instead.

Both Donald and Si attended Syracuse University for a while but leaped impatiently into the family business well before graduation. The brothers were close, trading confidences all week long, then meeting for dinner on Sunday nights at Sette Mezzo, an Italian restaurant on the Upper East Side. Together, over the years, they steadily expanded the family’s privately owned company.

Donald and Si were in some ways distinctly different. Si, who ran Condé Nast as his primary business passion, was, despite his innate shyness, a high-

profile figure in New York, a risk-taking publisher, who pursued the unlikely revival of *Vanity Fair*, and the acquisition of *The New Yorker* from the Fleischmann family, in 1985, largely because of his love for magazines. Donald was immersed in newspapers, not only the editorial process but also the stuff of print—typesetting, the quality of ink, the various grades of paper. While Si worked in Manhattan, Donald spent much of his time in Newark, at the offices of the *Star-Ledger*. Both men arrived at work hours before anyone else. As his editors knew, the best way to reach Donald was to call him at the office at around five or six in the morning. Under Donald, the family’s newspapers won numerous Pulitzer Prizes. The *Patriot-News*, in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, won for local reporting, in 2012, after it broke the Jerry Sandusky sexual-abuse scandal at Penn State; the *Times-Picayune*, in New Orleans, won for both public service and breaking-news reporting, in 2006, for its online and print coverage of Hurricane Katrina; and, between 2001 and 2011, the *Star-Ledger* won three times.

Donald Newhouse was an unpretentious, even joyful, personality, the rare person of great means who knew how lucky he was while never thinking he was better than anyone less fortunate. Into his eighties and nineties, he enjoyed three-mile-long walks and ocean sailing with his family. And yet he knew profound grief as well, losing both his brother, Si, and his wife, Susan, to dementia. After Susan Newhouse died, in 2015, Donald became an active and generous supporter of the Association for Frontotemporal Degeneration, which is devoted to finding a cure for the disease and lending support to caregivers. At an annual fundraising dinner called Hope Rising, he would always close the proceedings by joining one Broadway singer or another in a version of Eddie Cantor’s “If You Knew Susie (Like I Know Susie)” — an unabashed show of love and devotion.

Donald Newhouse spent his last days at his home in New Jersey, surrounded by his family, and is survived by his sons, Steven and Michael, and his daughter, Katherine Mele, their spouses, and six grandchildren. He also got to see his first great-grandchild, Zev. That, too, was part of his great good fortune.

—David Remnick



Fiction

STORIES

By Annie Ernaux

The return to school after Easter break fell at the end of April that year. The classrooms were already overheated by the sun, and at half past eleven we sang “*Regina coeli laetare alleluia*” at the top of our lungs, eager to race down the stairs into the fresh air. We could put on our summer dresses and play dodgeball or hopscotch again. Soon it would be the Month of Mary, and we’d recite the decade of the rosary outside, in the leafy grotto, in front of the statue of the Virgin. A small celebration before going upstairs to work.

The start of the term after Easter was often the time that families chose to introduce their little girls to school by sending them to Mademoiselle Goudié’s afternoon kindergarten class. Mothers who worked, or had too many children underfoot to accompany their daughters themselves, would ask an older girl from the neighborhood to do them the favor. Sometimes they asked

several girls, but it was better to have just one. Girls laugh and roughhouse when they’re together, and accidents can happen so quickly.

Marie-Paule, the eldest of four children, was five years old. When her mother brought her to me in the kitchen around one o’clock, in spite of the fine weather the girl was wearing a brown raglan coat that reminded me of the one I had worn for several years, bought in a very large size so that it would last. Marie-Paule had straight blond hair, cut in a bob with a clip on one side, and was clutching a miniature schoolbag. I took her by the hand, and we set off for school under the approving gaze of the parents. My father seemed proud that I, too, had become a responsible little girl; when I had first started out, an older student, a mechanic’s daughter, had taken me to school. The top of my head had been level with the bulging briefcase the girl had tucked under her arm. At the end

of the day, she would return in the company of another girl her age and they’d talk together in hushed tones, laughing. The ordeal continued until the last day of school, when prizes were handed out. By the following year, the mechanic had sold his business, so my parents took turns walking me to school.

I was only in fifth grade. Marie-Paule should not have been afraid of me. She stared straight ahead as she walked. Looking down, I saw the part in her hair, darkened by cradle cap. I asked her a lot of questions. All she did was nod or shake her head, yes or no, and continue to stare straight ahead, stiff and tense. “Cat got your tongue?” At school, I quickly handed her over to Mademoiselle Goudié and ran off to play dodgeball.

When I went to pick her up at the end of the day, she was waiting on the bench in the courtyard with the other little girls, her hand on her schoolbag, which was propped upright on her knees. She rushed toward me, holding out her free hand trustingly. I asked her what she had done in class, but she didn’t seem to remember. Drawings. Her mother wanted to know whether she’d listened to me properly. I had no complaints.

She’d arrive during the radio-news hour, just after lunch, with her buttoned-up coat and her schoolbag. My mother would give her an apple, some wafers, or whatever was left over from dessert. She’d say thank you, adding “Madame” with conviction. “She has such nice manners!” my mother said in wonder, because Marie-Paule’s family were not the kind to fuss about such things, and always spent beyond their means, exactly the opposite of us.

On the way, we took Rue de la République, so that I could walk with a friend from my class for the last hundred metres, and Rue Roger-Salengro on the way back. The Month of Mary had begun. The Mother Superior’s reedy voice calmly recited, “Hail, Mary, full of grace,” and the pupils replied, in unison, “Holy Mary, Mother of God.” Sometimes there was laughter from girls who were pinching or tickling each other. The kindergarten class was not entitled to this distraction. At half past one, I left Marie-Paule in the schoolyard and didn’t think of her again until the end of the day.

Rue Roger-Salengro was quiet, almost deserted, lined by warehouse walls and the blind backs of houses whose façades looked onto the parallel street, Rue de la République. There was only a café that had just been shut down because of an “ugly sex scandal,” and a dentist’s office. Marie-Paule expressed her delight at going home by proceeding at a brisk, purposeful trot. She hardly ever spoke, not even when I teased her a little. She was not entertaining company, and she prevented me from daydreaming, which I was accustomed to doing while walking home from school.

I don’t know how or on what day it all started, but I remember the place: in front of the café, whose windows were smeared with a white substance that made it impossible to see inside. I may have used a different voice as I began, the way the teacher did. But, unlike the teacher, I did not warn her that I was going to be telling stories. It was interesting only if Marie-Paule believed everything I said. The abandoned café inspired me to imagine a young girl dying of hunger inside it, locked in by bandits and crying interminably. This was the first time I’d ever spoken my daydreams aloud, and it excited me. Marie-Paule immediately followed along, as if this were all she’d been waiting for. She even asked a few too many questions: why this, why that, on and on.

What I liked most was that I could convince her of anything. All I had to do was show her things in the street, or people we passed along the way, and then start inventing. This method came naturally. I was having a lot of fun, and our walks home were lively. One night, my father told me he had seen us. “You looked like a little schoolteacher!”

After a while, I grew tired of always having the same characters, and I noted that, once again, Marie-Paule was wearing the expression of a stubborn kid who thought only of getting home to her mama. She had a sort of defeated look, even when she laughed. I could never get her to take her coat off—she would only unbutton it—because, she said, that was how her mother had dressed her to leave the house. It was a hot spring. One day, I invented a woman with black hair and very long nails who lay in wait for us just beyond the café, a child thief. She took children by the

hand and led them far away to a distant place, and the parents would never see their daughters again. Marie-Paule was silent. Then I felt her slowing down. Her face turned purple. She started to scream. It was a loud, powerful, endless scream, the likes of which I never would have imagined coming out of such a slip of a girl. She pulled on my arm with all her might, and I had to let her go. She started rolling on the ground on top of her schoolbag. I struggled to pull her up; she twisted away from me to fall back down. I saw at that moment that she had wet her pants. I took her handkerchief from her pocket, wiped her face, had her blow her nose, and kissed her. By the time we arrived at her house, there was no sign of what had happened.

Had I taken Rue de la République home the next day, instead of Rue Salengro, the story would have ended there. But changing our route was out of the question. We walked quietly, each with her own schoolbag, as if the day before had been no different from any other. And yet we could think of nothing but the moment when I would conjure up the black-haired woman, the child thief on the lookout for us behind the white windows of the café. All it took was one sentence from me for the tears to flow, as on the previous day, and the foot stamping to begin.

So it continued on all the other school days. On the way there, we went up Rue de la République, and we couldn’t do anything because of the friend I was meeting. Anyway, we were set in our routines. We had to save it for after school, when we could take our time. I never thought about it during the day. I played dodgeball and listened attentively to the lessons in grammar and math. When the bell rang, I hurried to the grotto to get a good spot along the wall of greenery that flared out toward the sky. It was as if we were in a cradle watching the clouds, while the prayer rumbled on. At half past four, I helped Marie-Paule jump down from the bench and we set off hand in hand, me like an innocent and her like an amnesiac. With her straight hair and her brown coat, she looked like St. Bernadette.

Of course, the child thief was not alone for long. The cruel bear Croc-nok and the man with the butcher’s knife

also appeared at the corner of Rue Salengro. To avoid falling into their trap, I suggested to Marie-Paule that she keep her head down, walk on tiptoe, and, most important, not cry. That was the signal for the crying and screaming to begin. She collapsed on the ground and refused to go any farther. I wiped her eyes, kissed her, and then we could calmly move on.

I was not afraid that she would complain to her mother. I felt that it was a secret between her and me. What could she have said? I didn’t hit her or pinch her, and watched over her carefully when we crossed the street. She was crying about threats from people who did not exist; as parents say, she was crying for no reason. I believed that, when it came to words, everything was allowed. Sometimes a woman passing by would grow suspicious, convinced that the girl who was sobbing so hard was my younger sister. Marie-Paule would scream even louder, and the woman would walk away, shrugging her shoulders. The only problem was the wet underwear.

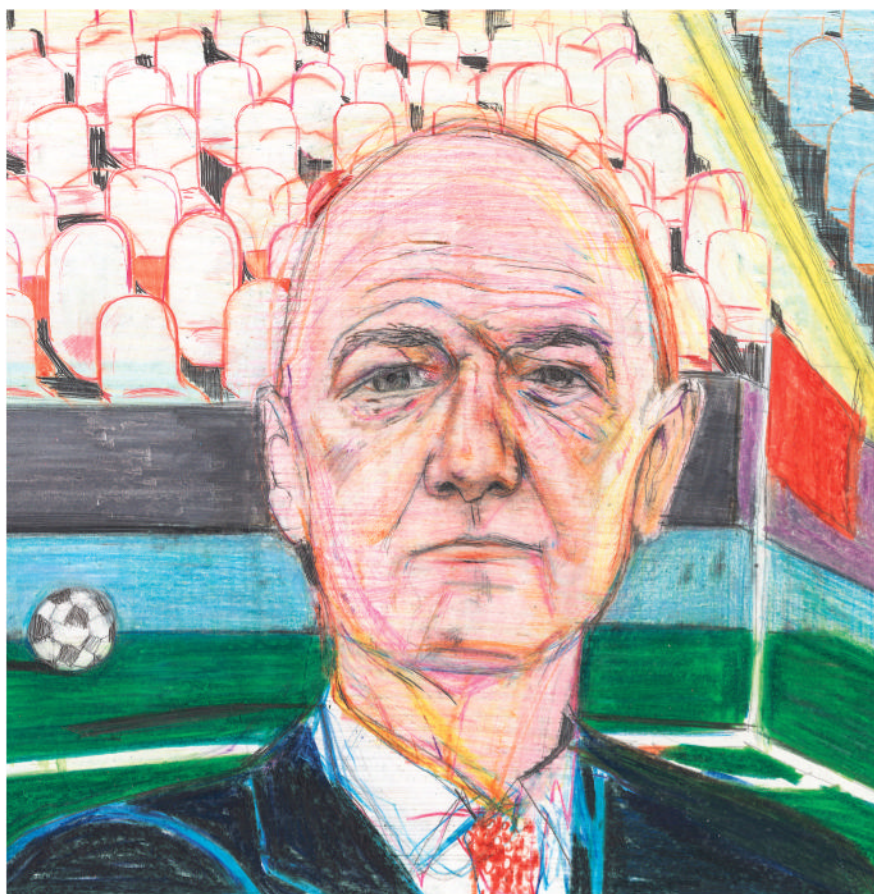
One day, Marie-Paule did not appear at news time. Throughout the rosary recital in the grotto, I was plagued with worry. When I got home, my mother told me that Marie-Paule would not be going back to school until October; she was too young and the kindergarten class wasn’t right for her. She would be sent to the public school nearby.

May was drawing to a close. I was about to leave for a First Communion retreat. One dusty evening, I walked home alone down Rue Roger-Salengro, dreaming about the days we’d spend in church with boys who would stare and push and jostle us. The café windows had been cleaned, revealing the empty interior. I walked slowly, in a daze. Marie-Paule would never hold my hand again. I had lost her. I wept in despair.

I can still see the grotto at the edge of the garden, Rue Salengro, endless and gray, and two young girls walking, a little one and a big one, because, in my memory, I’m a character to myself. I have related this episode from the year I was ten in order to try to understand why I wanted to write, but in the end it’s just another story. ♦

—1984

*(Translated, from the French,
by Alison L. Strayer.)*



The Sporting Scene

POWER MOVE

Gianni Infantino has led FIFA from corruption into an era of authoritarian control.

By Sam Knight

In English, it's called the World Cup, but I prefer the stirring names by which it's known in other European languages—Mundial, Mondiali, Weltmeisterschaft—and which better convey the idea that this is not a sports tournament but something closer to a cosmological event, heavy with meaning. For soccer people, it requires no effort to measure out your life in World Cups. Just a few seconds of footage, or even a photograph, is usually enough—the color of the turf, the haircuts, the uniforms, the exact shade of summer blue—to ascertain not only which year it was and who won but where you were and who you were with and why you were with them and what the preoccupations of

that time were from which it was possible, however briefly, to escape.

My earliest World Cup memory—a six-year-old's spiral of indignation and despair—is of Diego Maradona's dastardly Hand of God, which eliminated England in the quarterfinals of the 1986 edition, in Mexico. Twenty years later, I watched the final, an operatic affair between France and Italy, at a pub in East London. Zinedine Zidane, the great French playmaker, headbutted Marco Materazzi, a wily Italian defender who had made a passing remark about Zidane's sister. Zidane was ejected and France lost. It was a London summer night, when the smell of dried-out parks and exhaust fumes never entirely clears from

the air. I stood at the bar with my girlfriend, whom I was desperately in love with but who didn't care about soccer at all, and I can still feel the conflicting parts of me—one part absorbed by the magnitude, the improbable aesthetic beauty, of Zidane's gesture, the other by her—reaching in two unbridgeable directions at once. (We broke up soon afterward; she is now my wife.)

So these are complicated, major occasions. And this summer's World Cup, which runs from June 11th to July 19th, will be the same, or even more so. For the first time, the tournament will be played across three nations—the United States, Mexico, and Canada—with forty-eight teams (up from thirty-two, as in previous editions) and a total of a hundred and four matches. It will be longer, more climatically varied, and more revenue-generating than ever before. It will probably be fantastic. Perhaps something will go wrong. Either way, the World Cup will be wasted on most Americans. Although millions will marvel at the sheer scale and global character of the enterprise (the Democratic Republic of the Congo will play Uzbekistan on the evening of June 27th, in Atlanta), it is unlikely to graft onto their sense of time and shared memory the way that Italy's victory did in 1982, for example.

That summer, Gianni Infantino—now the president of the Fédération Internationale de Football Association, which governs global soccer and owns the World Cup—was twelve years old and living in Brig, a small town in the Swiss Alps. Infantino's parents were Italian migrants: his father worked on the night trains that ran under the mountains and across Europe, and his mother managed a kiosk at the railway station. Working-class Italians suffered discrimination in Switzerland during Infantino's childhood. But the triumph of the Azzurri, the Italian men's national team, in the World Cup helped to change that. It “allowed us to grow,” Infantino said in a speech, in 2021. “For me personally, I think that the 1982 World Cup was definitely the moment when the football virus . . . became part of my life and my body.”

Swiss Italians of Infantino's generation have described the mounting euphoria of that summer as a feeling of *riscatto*—redemption and release. Brig is only a few miles from the Italian border.

Infantino has courted rulers from Russia, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia.

(Infantino calls his personality a combination of Italian creativity and Swiss precision.) After one match, he and his family crossed the border to the town of Domodossola to celebrate. There were no Italian flags on sale anywhere, so Infantino's mother bought strips of red, white, and green fabric and sewed them together herself.

Brig is in the Upper Valais, a gaunt and conservative place where the inhabitants speak Walliser German, an Alpine dialect that many Swiss people find unintelligible. Six miles along the valley is Visp, the birthplace of Sepp Blatter, Infantino's predecessor at FIFA, who, until Infantino entered the picture, was the most infamous soccer administrator of all time.

Blatter was a former P.R. man and wedding m.c. who became a pioneer of global sponsorship and broadcasting deals. He joined FIFA in 1975 and worked there for forty years. Under Blatter, FIFA became powerful and rich but also morbidly corrupt. The organization is made up of two hundred and eleven national soccer associations and their representatives. For decades, FIFA officials accepted bribes from sports-marketing companies in exchange for selling them the broadcast rights to valuable tournaments they controlled at preferential rates. At a news conference toward the end of Blatter's reign, a prankster showered him with banknotes.

Blatter ran the show but never quite took center stage. In "World Cup Fever," a new history of the tournament, the writer Simon Kuper likens him to *der portier*, the manager of an expensive Swiss hotel who understands all his customers' predilections and who has the cash to cover their bills. "Blatter's genius lay in knowing who was bribing whom," Patrick Oberli, a Swiss journalist and documentary filmmaker who has covered FIFA for years, told me. Since taking over, in 2016, Infantino has made Blatter seem small-time by comparison. He has sublimated FIFA into his own personhood, with astonishing success. His Instagram account, which has 4.2 million followers and a comments section that is strictly curtailed, is now the organization's principal mouthpiece. He has transformed the role of the FIFA president into that of a prominent international politician (President Donald Trump calls Infantino "the king of soccer") while dramatically

increasing FIFA's revenues and reach.

Infantino will be unavoidable this summer. During the previous World Cup, in Qatar, directors of the official tournament feed were reportedly instructed to show him in the crowd once per match and not while he was looking at his phone. The geography of this year's World Cup means that he won't be physically omnipresent, but his imprint will be everywhere. "It's safe to say that there's no major decision that's being made at this tournament without the direct involvement of Gianni," a former high-ranking FIFA official told me. FIFA has staged two men's World Cups under Infantino, but the 2026 edition is the first to be awarded and delivered during his tenure, and thus fully shaped in his image. He has already declared it to be the greatest of all time. Infantino's messaging is as relentless as a 3-D printer's. He is fond of the number eleven, which is the number of players on a soccer team. Most things are iconic. He likes to describe FIFA as "the official happiness provider to humanity."

Infantino is both absolutely in control and strangely ill at ease. "He doesn't trust many people," the former official said. "His circle is very small." Oberli, the Swiss journalist, has interviewed him four times. (Infantino declined to speak with me.) "In every case, I was faced with someone who was fearful," Oberli said. "It was a peculiar feeling. It was as if he were sitting an exam." In 2023, when Infantino was reelected, unopposed, for a second full term as president, he opened a rare news conference with a rebuke for the waiting reporters. "I don't understand why some of you are so mean," he said. "Why? Why? I don't get it."

The modern history of FIFA begins at dawn eleven years ago, when Swiss police officers entered the Baur au Lac, a luxurious nineteenth-century hotel in Zurich, and started arresting the organization's delegates, who had gathered for an annual congress. The raid, on May 27, 2015, followed years of investigation by the U.S. Department of Justice and the F.B.I. (More than forty FIFA officials and associates were ultimately indicted on various fraud charges; twenty-seven pleaded guilty.) As the delegates were marched out of their hotel rooms, investigators also arrived at the Home of FIFA, the organization's global

headquarters, which has six underground levels dug into a hillside on the edge of Zurich. According to a Swiss search warrant, the police spent from 7:50 A.M. to 9:30 P.M. in the building, removing hundreds of boxes of bidding documents, World Cup contracts, and USB drives.

Six days later, Blatter announced that he would step down. For years, his presumptive heir had been Michel Platini, a former captain of the French national team and the president of UEFA, Europe's soccer governing body. (FIFA's national associations are organized into six powerful continental blocs.) Where Blatter was a political operator, Platini was bluff and down-to-earth—an actual soccer guy. In the eighties, Platini had won the Ballon d'Or, the prize for the world's best player, three years in a row. "Everything is set up for Michel Platini to be president," the former official recalled.

But a single invoice changed that. On the afternoon of September 25th, some four months after the raids, Olivier Thormann, the head of the Swiss economic-crime division, returned to the Home of FIFA to question Blatter and Platini about a payment of two million Swiss francs (roughly two million dollars) that his officers had discovered. Although the alleged purpose of the payment (for consulting work that Platini had done for Blatter in the late nineties) and its timing (just before Blatter's reelection in 2011) were definitely questionable, they weren't obviously illegal—unlike the bribery and money laundering that the F.B.I. had uncovered. But Swiss prosecutors didn't see it that way. The two most important administrators in global soccer were taken to separate rooms. According to a former employee at the organization, as the FIFA president was led away, Thormann asked a receptionist, "Do you have a defibrillator for Mr. Blatter?"

The criminal investigation ended Blatter's and Platini's careers in soccer. (Both men were charged with forgery and fraud, but later acquitted of any wrongdoing.) It also threw open the succession question at FIFA: Who would run instead of Platini? For years, he had been assisted at UEFA by Infantino, its forty-five-year-old general secretary and the former head of its legal department. Platini had star quality, but Infantino was an energetic administrator with a noticeable gift for languages. "It was a bit like 'Pinky and

the Brain,” a former FIFA executive told me, referring to a nineties cartoon about two genetically engineered mice. (In each episode, the Brain would come up with a plot to take over the world.) “Infantino was the brains. Platini was the fun.”

Among fans, Infantino was best known for overseeing the draws for UEFA’s competitions, like the Champions League, where a former player would take balls out of a glass bowl and then open them to disclose which teams were playing each other. Infantino presided over the events with jocular asides and instant recall of previous matches and scores. “He was extremely competent and hardworking,” a former colleague at UEFA said. “He knew all the rules, read all the regulations.”

When UEFA adopted Infantino as its presidential candidate, some observers wondered whether he was merely a placeholder until Platini could clear his name. But “Gianni’s campaign was very slick,” Philippe Auclair, a veteran French journalist and soccer writer, recalled. “He travelled everywhere. He met absolutely everybody.” With UEFA’s funding, Infantino toured the world, courting soccer bureaucrats from Montserrat to Papua New Guinea. (Each FIFA member has equal voting power.) “He was like a juggernaut, basically, which surprised a lot of us,” Auclair said.

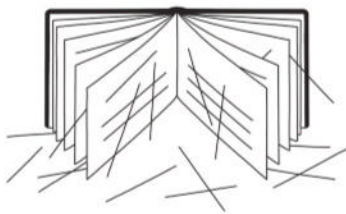
Infantino’s chief rival was Sheikh Salman bin Ebrahim al-Khalifa, of Bahrain, the president of the Asian Football Confederation and a longtime dealmaker within FIFA. But on election day, in Zurich, Infantino gave a thirteen-minute speech that was crisp and commanding. Beginning in English, he switched effortlessly among Italian, German, French, Spanish, and Portuguese. He acknowledged the arrests and the need for reform. “We have been speaking in the last months about many, many things: corruption, courts, tribunals, lawyers, whatever,” he said. “Police.” But Infantino’s central—and audacious—pitch to the delegates was that, as president, he would give them more riches than ever before. “When I propose figures, I know what I’m speaking about,” he said. His plan was to double the amount of FIFA revenues that were paid out to members to help develop soccer in their countries—a total of \$1.2 billion. “The money of FIFA is your money,” he said. “It’s not the money of the FIFA president. It’s *your*

money.” The room broke into a loud applause. A former FIFA employee who was watching the proceedings realized that the election was over. “Like, why even vote?” the employee said. “He just promised them more money.”

If Infantino has an operating philosophy, it is “More.” For the first seventy-three years of FIFA’s history, the organization arranged just two competitions: the men’s World Cup and the soccer tournament at the Olympic Games. Now it oversees twenty, ranging from the FIFA Beach Soccer World Cup to FIFAe, its e-sports division. Infantino sees FIFA’s expansion in ethical, as well as commercial, terms. He talks about soccer the way that other people talk about clean water or universal basic income.

“Immediately you have a ball, you smile,” he said, at last year’s America Business Forum, in Miami. “This is a magic object which transforms children or people into happy people or happy children.” In 2022, at a meeting of the Council of Europe, a human-rights organization, Infantino suggested that holding the World Cup more often might prevent so many African refugees from drowning in the Mediterranean.

The effects on FIFA’s bottom line have been tremendous. Since Infantino took over, its revenues, which are calculated on a four-year cycle, have more than doubled. During the next cycle, which will run until 2030, FIFA is projected to have fourteen billion dollars to spend—of which \$2.7 billion, some twenty per cent,



will be handed back to its national associations, under a program known as FIFA Forward. Blatter championed “football development” in the nineteen-seventies, to translate profits from FIFA’s ticket sales, sponsors, and broadcasters into fields and shoes and soccer programs around the world.

But skeptics have long argued that such funding, which has increased eight-

fold under Infantino, is really just a mechanism for patronage and control. Brazil—which has a population of two hundred and thirteen million people, of whom around a quarter live in poverty—has won the men’s World Cup five times. Between 2023 and 2025, it received \$6.35 million from FIFA Forward. The wealthy republic of San Marino (population thirty-four thousand), which is the bottom-ranked soccer nation in the world, received ninety-four thousand dollars more.

The president holds the purse strings. “The concentration of so much money at the top creates two fundamental problems,” Miguel Maduro, a Portuguese governance scholar, told me, of FIFA. The first is that it gives any incumbent extraordinary leverage over the delegates who elect him. “That’s why no president of a football association dares to publicly challenge the president,” Maduro said. The second is what Maduro called “a systemic conflict of interest” between FIFA’s missions of regulating and monetizing soccer.

In May, 2016, Maduro was appointed as the chairman of a new governance-and-review committee at FIFA, to oversee elections and senior appointments at the organization. Maduro was one of several high-profile figures—including Navi Pillay, a former United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights—who were recruited to reform FIFA and recast its public image in the wake of the corruption scandal. But, a year later, Maduro and Pillay were gone, along with Joseph Weiler, a professor at New York University, after the committee refused to appoint Vitaly Mutko, Russia’s Deputy Prime Minister, to FIFA’s ruling council, because he was a serving government official. “The moment we started to do some things that could put into risk Infantino’s structure of power, he had to decide whether to stay faithful to the reform process or to stay in power,” Maduro told me. “He didn’t hesitate.”

People who have worked at FIFA describe it as an intoxicating place. “O.K., you work at a massive investment bank. Is there one global investment bank?” Mark Goddard, who worked at FIFA for thirteen years, asked me. “There is only one FIFA. There will only ever be one FIFA, by intention and design.”

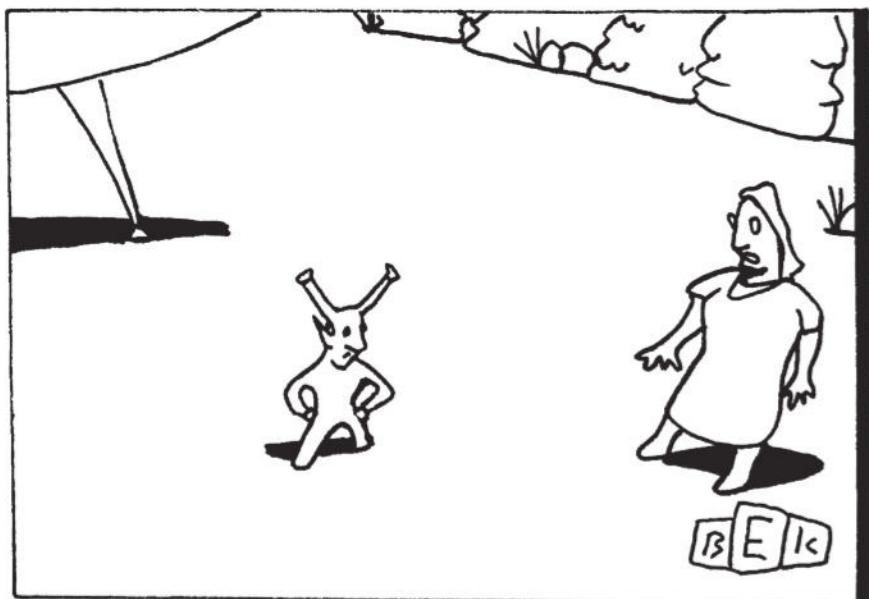
The former executive observed how rapidly new hires could fall under its

spell. “Within six to twelve months, you see a huge personality shift,” he said. “You see people who suddenly have this massive sense of entitlement, who get angry about the smallest things, like, Why has this person got match tickets? Why is this person seated here? Why did this person get this watch?”

FIFA describes itself as a nonprofit, but its staff and delegates live well. Members of the FIFA Council and many chairmen of its committees are paid hundreds of thousands of dollars (plus expenses and per diems) to attend a handful of meetings a year. Under Infantino, the number of FIFA committees has increased from seven to thirty-five. “No one is saying to be humble, at any point. You go to tournament events in exotic locations. You’re flown business class. You stay in five-star hotels on Copacabana Beach,” the former executive went on. Maduro added, “It’s very easy to get co-opted or captured. You just need not to take very seriously your function.”

FIFA has had other presidents who channelled the spirit of their era. Jules Rimet, who created the World Cup, was the son of grocers and grew up in fin-de-siècle Paris. Rimet believed, beyond all reason, in soccer’s ability to reconcile warring nations. According to “World Cup Fever,” he volunteered to serve in the trenches of the First World War, at the age of forty-one, where he was bombarded for four years and awarded the Croix de Guerre three times. Throughout his service, he wrote letters, hands shivering from the cold, to organize future international soccer competitions.

Blatter and his predecessor, João Havelange, a Brazilian businessman, were twentieth-century pioneers of branding and marketing deals—agents of globalization. Infantino is a creature of our post-liberal moment: simultaneously banal and hard to read. “His vision for the game is to expand FIFA’s power and his own power, by definition, basically using the logic that anything that is good for me and FIFA is good for football,” the former UEFA colleague said. “It’s very simple.” Earlier this year, Infantino’s tenth anniversary at FIFA was branded “INFANTIN10” on the organization’s social-media channels and marked by a thirty-minute adulatory film, of which more than five minutes were taken up by con-



“If you’re going to abduct me, I need my sweats, neck pillow, and a big bottle of water.”

gratulatory cellphone video messages sent by the great and the good of soccer.

Infantino could not be more European, and yet he often chastises the historic and economic center of the sport that he governs. (More than seventy per cent of the players at the previous World Cup played in the European leagues.) “Europe has to do much more,” he said during his election speech, imploring the Continent to share its footballing wealth and expertise with other countries. He is troubling to many Europeans because he suggests that both their power and their preoccupations—with democracy, human rights, the rule of law—are somehow quaint and fading. “It’s easy in our part of the world to paint with a dark paint everything that comes from the East, from Russia, or from the Arab world,” Infantino said at a news conference in Moscow, six months before the 2018 World Cup, in Russia. (He was later awarded the Order of Friendship by Vladimir Putin.)

FIFA’s statutes describe the organization as “neutral in matters of politics and religion.” But neutral is not the same as disinterested. During the 1934 World Cup, in Italy, Rimet sat in silence next to Benito Mussolini during matches in Rome. Il Duce liked to watch “with sustained attention, without distractions,”

Rimet later wrote. In 1978, FIFA allowed the World Cup to be staged by Argentina’s military junta. Brave ground staff painted the base of the goalposts black, to remind the world of the victims of the regime. The governments that Infantino has worked most closely with as FIFA president have been Putin’s, the Emir of Qatar’s, the Trump Administration, and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

On the one hand, it is a self-selecting group. FIFA has to deal with rulers who have the wealth, and the disposition, to put on the largest events. “A lot of the sucking up is exactly as a multinational corporation will do,” a former FIFA committee member told me. “It’s the behavior of Coca-Cola, of Siemens, of Mercedes.” In 2024, Aramco, the Saudi state-owned oil company, became an official FIFA sponsor. On the other hand, Infantino’s fascination with autocracy seems to be more than just a matter of the people whom he does business with. In 2021, he and his family lived in Qatar, which hosted the following year’s World Cup. On the eve of the tournament, Infantino gave what is known as his “Today I Feel” speech, in which he said that he felt as if he were Qatari, Arab, African, gay, disabled, and a migrant worker all at the same time, in response to criticism of the labor and human-rights conditions

in the Gulf state. The sound bite was widely ridiculed, but it was only a fragment of a much longer address in which Infantino questioned the superiority of Western values and claimed that soccer was an irreducible good, immune to the human context in which it was played. “If we could organize an event in any country of the world, in North Korea, I would be the first to go,” he said.

Infantino likes to remind people that FIFA has more members than the United Nations. Earlier this year, the organization announced a partnership with Trump’s Board of Peace at its launch, in Washington, D.C. Infantino presented what appeared to be an A.I.-generated video of a new seventy-five-million-dollar “football ecosystem” that would rebuild “people, emotion, hope, and trust” in Gaza, and rocked out while Javier Milei, the President of Argentina, sang along to an Elvis song. Then, in March, Infantino was among a handful of spectators at the Mardan Sports Complex, in southern Turkey, to watch the Iranian men’s team play a friendly match and to insist on the team’s appearance at the World Cup this summer. “We have to bring people together. It is my responsibility,” he said recently. “It is *our* responsibility.”

It is a form of politics in which choices—even Infantino’s—do not really exist. Last year, he delayed the start of the FIFA Congress, in Paraguay, by three hours because he was tied up with Trump and Mohammed bin Salman, the Saudi crown prince, in Doha. A group of UEFA delegates walked out in protest, accusing Infantino of putting his political ambitions ahead of soccer’s. Infantino can’t stand that kind of dissent. He does not believe in boycotts or what he refers to, disapprovingly, as “pressure” on FIFA’s members or corporate sponsors. At the America Business Forum, he said that he is surprised whenever he reads negative coverage about Trump: “He’s just implementing what he said he would do. So I think we should all support what he’s doing, because I think he’s doing pretty good, right?”

A month later, at the ceremony for the World Cup draw, in Washington, D.C., Infantino awarded Trump FIFA’s inaugural Peace Prize. “This is what we want from a leader,” Infantino said, as he bestowed a miniature version of “Thoughts and Desires,” a statue that

stands outside the U.N.’s offices in Geneva, upon the President. Only one FIFA member, Lise Klaveness, the president of the Norwegian Football Federation, has had the temerity to speak out against Infantino’s political freelancing. “I sat in Washington, in a room full of football presidents, and felt the painful feeling of being hostage to something that is clearly wrong,” she said in a speech, two months later. “The feeling that the emperor is not only walking without clothes—but that he is leading us in a dangerous direction, and that, at the same time, I can’t stop it.”

Everyone else, for the most part, takes the magic ball and smiles. After the prize ceremony, Trump and Infantino returned to the stage with the leaders of the other host countries for this summer’s World Cup—Claudia Sheinbaum, the President of Mexico, and Mark Carney, the Prime Minister of Canada—to begin the draw for the tournament. Carney pulled out the first ball, which he unscrewed to reveal the first team assigned to the group stages. “Uh-oh!” he said, chuckling. It was Canada. Sheinbaum pulled out the next. “Viva Mexico!” she whooped. Trump, at least, had the naturalness, or the insouciance, to show that he knew the thing was rigged. “This is shocking,” he deadpanned, after taking out a ball for the U.S.A. But Infantino didn’t mind. He had his own podium, for FIFA, alongside the host nations. He marshalled the politicians like a concierge you might easily mistake for a guest. Then he took out his phone for a group selfie.

Infantino’s most notable intervention at FIFA has been his foray into club soccer, which was once the preserve of national and regional associations. FIFA’s elite club competition—the Club World Cup—used to be little more than a set of glorified friendlies between the continental champions, usually held in the Middle East or Japan. But, in 2022, Infantino changed the format dramatically. The tournament would now take place every four years, like the World Cup proper, and include thirty-two teams rather than seven. There would be a prize pot of a billion dollars and a new trophy, made by Tiffany & Co.

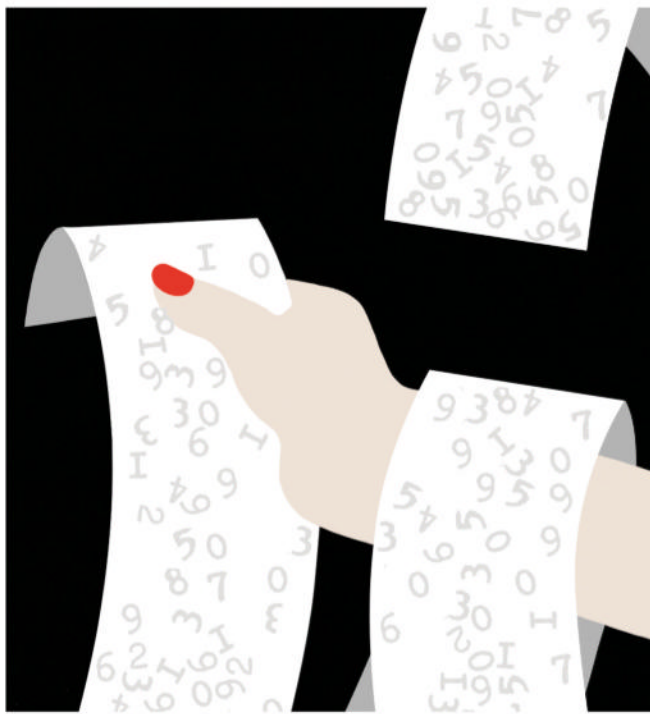
Not long ago, I stopped by FIFA’s museum, in Zurich, where the new Club World Cup was on display. It is a large

concave disk, made of gold vermeil, which opens, with a key, to reveal what looks like an astronomical model. Almost every surface is laser-engraved with text, in thirteen languages. Infantino’s favorite slogan, “Football Unites the World,” is rendered, in Latin, as “*Pediludus Coniungit Mundum*.” Elsewhere on the trophy, there are the original rules to soccer, from 1863, which include a proscription on players having nails, iron plates, or gutta-percha—a Malaysian rubberlike material, now used in root canals—protruding from their boots. Infantino’s name is inscribed twice, as the competition’s “founding president” and visionary, in the trophy’s heavily punctuated prose: “The pinnacle of all club competitions. Inspired by FIFA President Gianni Infantino, the tournament, first staged in 2025, eclipses any precedent.”

Infantino’s first revamped Club World Cup took place in the U.S. last summer and presented an uneven spectacle. There were mismatches: Bayern Munich, the perennial German champions, thumped Auckland City 10–0. At a match in Orlando, only three thousand people turned up to watch Ulsan H.D., of South Korea, lose 1–0 to Mamelodi Sundowns, of South Africa. There can be such a thing as too much soccer. Games were dulled by the heat. Players from the top European teams, like Real Madrid and Paris Saint-Germain, had already played sixty matches during their regular seasons, before taking to pitches in heat-dome temperatures of ninety-seven degrees and stifling humidity. “It’s impossible,” Marcos Llorente, of Atlético Madrid, complained after a match in Pasadena. “Even my toenails were hurting.”

Ahead of the tournament, the European members of FIFPRO—a players’ union—filed a legal complaint against FIFA, alleging “abuse of dominance” over the soccer calendar, which forces some players to compete virtually all year round. Fans at the Club World Cup also suffered from the heat, thunderstorms, and the vagaries of FIFA’s dynamic ticket pricing, whereby prices rise and fall according to demand. Shortly before the semifinal between Chelsea and Fluminense, a Brazilian club, at MetLife Stadium, in New Jersey, ticket prices went from four hundred and seventy-three dollars to thirteen. As if reading from the trophy, Infantino described the

THE TALLY



One year in the early nineteen-seventies, when I was a child of eight or nine, my mother came back from the annual Christmas food shopping looking thoughtful. This trip to the supermarket was the most carefully planned of the year: savings were expended, there were lists within lists and much fretfulness. Parking was a worry, stock often ran low, and something was always forgotten or mysteriously consumed by the trolley, because it was not in the shopping bags when they were unpacked at home.

This year, my mother was, at first, pleased with the final bill, and then more and more confused. She checked the tally several times. She took a pen and went through the items she had bought, ticking each one off on the receipt, which was many feet long. Then she drove back to the supermarket to say that she had been undercharged for the turkey by, she estimated, ten Irish pounds. The manager was summoned. He checked her figures and rang up the balance for the turkey. He asked if he could keep her annotated receipt “for training purposes,” and gave her a box of chocolates for it, really nice ones.

It was all a bit mad, we thought, but my mother was adamant. “I couldn’t have eaten it,” she said. “I just couldn’t sit down on Christmas Day, of all days, and eat a turkey I had not paid for.”

Though I liked the excitement of the free chocolates, I felt the loss of my mother’s amazingly long till receipt. It seemed to me that the manager

had taken something from her—her story, or her goodness—for the purpose of “training” people who were surely not good, because their first interest was in profit. Why was she so obedient to the system? I worried that she would be patronized by those people as well as admired.

Perhaps as a result, I grew to dislike supermarket managers as a breed. These were invariably young men in suits with nametags that said “Mr. This” and “Mr. That,” while the women who worked the checkouts, often old enough to be their mothers, had nametags that said “Sheila” or “Mary.” I also realized that this anecdote about my mother’s return to the chaos of a supermarket right before Christmas was not one that most people enjoyed or wanted to hear. What was I trying to say? That my mother was a fool?

Ireland being what it is, when, in my twenties, I got a job as a television producer, one of my first assignments was on a travel show featuring the owner of the supermarket chain, a man called Feargal Quinn. He was an affable, smooth business type. A Catholic who would later be knighted by the Pope, he had old-school values, but seemed to enjoy new company and fresh opinions, of which I had, at that age, a ready supply. In between staged lunches and helicopter shoots over the châteaux of the Loire, we had arguments about employee nametags and sanctions on oranges from apartheid-era South Africa. One evening, I told him the story of my mother’s Christmas till receipt and he asked me where in Dublin she did her shopping.

“No,” he said when I told him, as though I’d got it all wrong. “That happened on the Northside. It was a woman in . . .” and he named a different shop in the chain.

I wanted to say (I probably did say) that I had not invented my own mother or stolen someone else’s, and that, if this story said anything, it was that the Enrights were not reared to be liars. I wanted to add that he could have the receipt and the tenner for the damn turkey but not the truth—that was still, somehow, mine.

Now that I think about it, he may have said that the receipt had been on the wall in the manager’s office on the Northside for years. So there was either a superfluity of honest Dublin women back in the day or a manager who moved around.

I am not thrilled that my mother’s shopping list was an object of corporate interest. I am not delighted by my family’s continuing probity, in an age of predatory capitalism. Still, integrity is also a way to hold the self together. Some days, you just can’t eat the turkey. Honesty may be a one-sided contract with the world, but it is the only side that we can control.

After the filming was done, Feargal Quinn sent me a hamper, by way of thanks. It was delivered, by his personal driver, to my mother’s house, in a nice display of suburban glamour. She found the chauffeur’s cap particularly fetching. I have no idea why Quinn sent it to her address, when I did not live there anymore. ♦

tournament as “the most successful club competition in the world.” The winning team, Chelsea, earned more than a hundred million dollars in prize money.

The Club World Cup was a rehearsal for the big one this summer. There will be sixty per cent more matches at the 2026 World Cup than at any previous edition. According to research published in the journal *Sports Medicine* in March, “Never has one tournament presented such a combination of extreme environmental factors,” with players encountering high altitude for matches in Guadalajara and Mexico City; elevated pollution risk, from ozone and possible wildfire smoke, on the West Coast; and the danger of exertional heat illness, or stroke, when forced to play in the midday sun.

During the tournament, more than half of the sixteen participating venues are expected to exceed safe temperature levels for high-activity sports, as determined by FIFPRO and the American College of Sports Medicine. FIFA’s own safety threshold is a few degrees higher. Last December, FIFA announced that there would be two cooling breaks per match, regardless of the weather, which led to speculation that the organization was more interested in creating regular interruptions—for broadcasters and sponsors—than in player welfare.

The Champions League final, the climax of the European soccer season, takes place twelve days before the World Cup starts. “It’s no secret that there’s not enough time,” Lee Taylor, a sports scientist at Loughborough University and a co-author of the *Sports Medicine* paper, said. “They won’t be prepared in the gold-standard way. . . . The players are bloody knackered.”

The ticketing environment has also been extreme. At the World Cup in Qatar, in 2022, the most expensive seats for the final cost about sixteen hundred dollars. In April, equivalent tickets for this year’s final, at MetLife, went on sale for \$10,990. A month later, the price tripled, to almost thirty-three thousand dollars. For the first time at a World Cup, FIFA has experimented with both dynamic pricing and its own proprietary resale platform, on which it earns an additional thirty-per-cent commission. The organization is forecast to make about two and a half billion dollars from ticket sales. “A big issue in the past was to make sure it was accessible to everyone, or to most people,” the former senior official said. “This one is obviously different.”

In early April, I visited FIFA’s resale site to see what I could find. A few months earlier, in response to complaints about high prices, the organization had released thousands of sixty-dollar tickets

for “hardcore” fans. I found one of those, at the back of the upper deck of A.T. & T. stadium, in Arlington, Texas, for England’s game against Croatia, on June 17th, for two thousand dollars. For the quarterfinal that will be played in Miami, on July 11th, there were seats high above the corner flag available for five thousand dollars. But for virtually the same spot, one row down, the price rose to thirty-five thousand dollars. (Last week, prosecutors in New York and New Jersey subpoenaed FIFA for information about its ticketing strategy. Jennifer Davenport, the New Jersey attorney general, called the process “a gauntlet of confusion, fake scarcity and impossibly high prices.”)

“This is a tournament without rules,” Ronan Evain, the executive director of Football Supporters Europe, a network of fan groups, told me one morning this spring. I asked Evain what he was most concerned about. “It is rather the things I am not concerned about,” he replied. Immigration control was at the top of the list of concerns. Citizens from four countries that have qualified for the World Cup—Senegal, Haiti, Iran, and Côte d’Ivoire—currently face restrictions travelling to the U.S. “What is going to be the security doctrine of the tournament?” Evain asked. “Can you show an L.G.B.T.+ flag? Can you show a flag of Greenland?”

FIFA’s permanent workforce has almost doubled in size during Infantino’s presidency, and another thousand staff have been hired to put on the World Cup, many working from the organization’s offices in Miami. According to Evain, one of the major challenges ahead of the tournament has simply been to obtain information: about visas, or ticketing for disabled fans, or parking. Even small decisions within FIFA are thought to require Infantino’s personal approval—“He decides everything by himself,” a former council member told me—an arrangement that has contributed to an atmosphere of opacity and delay. (FIFA denies this.) Evain told me that FIFA staff sometimes message him to find out what is going on. “The boss is all-powerful, but he’s largely absent,” Evain said. “It looks like people are left with two options: either not doing anything or trying to guess what he wants.” When I texted Evain’s comment to a former FIFA employee who’d spent years working for Infantino, he replied, “Decisions = risks = fear.”



“We’re perfect for each other—you’re an emotional-support dog, and my life is in shambles.”

The discord around FIFA contrasts sharply with Infantino's absolute control over the organization. Blatter often had to yield to lesser chiefs, such as the heads of the continental confederations, in order to maintain his grip on power. But Infantino faces no such resistance. "Blatter was afraid of the big federations," the former colleague said. "Infantino doesn't take them seriously. They are just co-opted into the system." Infantino is unlikely to be challenged when he runs for another four-year term, in 2027.

Mark Pieth is a Swiss professor of criminal law who investigated the U.N.'s oil-for-food scandal, in which corrupt officials paid kickbacks to Saddam Hussein's regime, in Iraq. In the twenty-tens, Pieth was one of the reputable figures enlisted by FIFA to help reform the organization. He gave up after falling out with Blatter. "It's a bit like if you wanted to reform the Vatican," Pieth told me, when we met at his office, in Basel. "FIFA never wanted to be really reformed."

Pieth observed that Infantino's FIFA seems like a model of governance, with an independent ethics committee, a top-dollar human-rights policy, and a global democratic assembly. "The thing looks kind of good on the surface," Pieth said. "But it's empty. It's an empty shell." He was struck by how Infantino had begun to bypass FIFA's membership—in fact, anybody involved in the running of soccer at all—in order to deal with the world's richest governments directly. "To be frank, I think the organization is shifting into a different mode," Pieth said.

After the simultaneous awarding of the Russian and Qatari World Cups, in 2010, a process that was riddled with vote-buying, FIFA updated its statutes to make sure that such a thing would never happen again. At the FIFA Congress in May, 2024, however, delegates relaxed the rules. That December, Infantino convened an extraordinary virtual meeting of all two hundred and eleven members to approve—as a single agenda item—the hosting rights for the 2030 and 2034 World Cups: a three-continent plan for the 2030 edition, shared between Spain, Portugal, and Morocco with three matches in South America, to mark the competition's centenary; and Saudi Arabia, in 2034.

"We hear 'corruption,' we always think about bribery and an individual person receiving a brown envelope," Pieth said.

"This is a totally different kind of thing. They buy the entire world organization." After we spoke, I watched a recording of the vote. Infantino stood in front of a wall of screens—the world of soccer on Microsoft Teams—and asked for delegates to approve the hosts of the next two World Cups with a round of applause. "If you agree, please? Acclamation," Infantino said, and raised his hands. He stood and began to clap while the screens clapped back at him.

Earlier this year, I took a train to Brig, where Infantino grew up. For centuries, the town was the gateway to the Simplon Pass, a vital trading route across the Alps to the wealthy states of Venice and Milan. Wordsworth walked out from Brig on a gloomy day in August, 1790. "Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light—/Were all like workings of one mind, the features / Of the same face," he wrote. I found my way to the small stadium of the town's soccer team, which plays in the sixth tier of the Swiss league. There was snow on the pitch, which was closed for the winter. Infantino likes to tell the story of how he became the president of F.C. Brig-Glis as a young man, after promising that his mother would wash the team's shirts for free. In 2017, as FIFA president, he brought a team full of famous former players, including Diego Maradona, to Brig to play what the Swiss media called "Gianni's Game," a match in his honor.

Before the game, the players gathered at Brig's most arresting building, the Stockalper Palace, which at the time of its construction was the largest private building in Switzerland. It was the headquarters of Kaspar Stockalper, a seventeenth-century merchant and an Alpine politician who parlayed his control of the Simplon Pass and a local salt monopoly into becoming one of the most powerful men in Europe. At Stockalper's zenith, when he travelled between Milan and Lyon, he could spend every night at a property that he owned. His fortune was once estimated to be worth 122,233 cows.

The palace is a fantasia, with a courtyard that does not lead to any rooms and three towers topped by onion domes—the tallest of which was dedicated to Stockalper's namesake, Kaspar, of the Three Magi, and adorned by symbols of

the sun. Stockalper's motto was "*Sospes Lucra Carpat*," an anagram of his name that is loosely translated as "God's favorite shall take the profits." Almost every major family and merchant in the Valais owed Stockalper money, even the bishops. But, in 1679, to his surprise, Stockalper was brought down by his enemies and stripped of his power. "*Ut ombra corpus sic gloriam sequitur invidia*," he wrote in his accounts ledger, according to a recent biography by the Swiss historian Helmut Stalder. "As the shadow follows the body, so envy follows glory." Stockalper went into exile across the mountains, to Domodossola, the town where Infantino celebrated during the World Cup as a boy.

"It's mainly opportunity costs," Infantino's former colleague said, assessing his impact on soccer. "It's what you could have done with all your power and money versus what's actually happened." The colleague lamented FIFA's heedless growth and the increasing state capture of the game: "It didn't have to be like that." Soccer and money have always intermingled. Rimet, the instigator of the World Cup, was an enthusiastic supporter of professional soccer at a time when amateur sport was considered superior. "Is perfection of this world?" he wrote in a challenge to Baron Pierre de Coubertin, the squeaky-clean founder of the modern Olympic Games. But Infantino has moved FIFA into a new era of gigantism and top-down compliance, in which the game's chief administrator is better known than many of the players whom he oversees. Unassailable, unloved, and corrosive to the sport that he adores.

The World Cup this summer will be Infantino's masterpiece. It might also be his folly. "I think that's the biggest problem he's got," Auclair, the French journalist, said. "He has overreached so much." At this year's FIFA Congress, in Vancouver, Infantino invited Palestinian and Israeli delegates to the front to show that, in the world of soccer, all people get along. But the president of the Palestinian football federation, Jibril Rajoub, refused to shake his counterpart's hand. Infantino wasn't down for long. During his address, he returned to his favorite theme. "If nobody tries to unite, what will happen to our world?" Infantino asked. "We have to do it, and we have this opportunity," he said. "Because, together, we are unbeatable." ♦



Fiction

FIRSTBORN IMMIGRANT DAUGHTER

By Taiye Selasi

Dear Firstborn Immigrant Daughter, First. There are many ways to be an immigrant. Some immigrate to territories, others to tax brackets. There is only one way to be an expat. Say your parents, both doctors, were born in West Africa. When they moved to West London, they were immigrants. If they had been Uber drivers and not doctors, they would have been migrants. If they had been white American doctors, they would have been expats. Migrants travel on boats, immigrants travel on planes, expats travel on psychedelics. In London or Lisbon or Brooklyn or Berlin, you are the firstborn daughter of immigrants. Not expats.

Second. By “firstborn daughter,” we do not mean firstborn child per se.

You might have elder brothers. A

second-born twin. Your father might have children from—how shall we put it? Children from a previous entanglement. You might not know, or yet know of, his firstborn. But you are the first human being your mother ever met—and this, dear F.I.D., is key—over whom she felt complete and uncontested dominion. You are the first thing your mother could own.

You see, a son will leave, she says, and must: to leave is his mandate, his mission. After all the *love* that she’s poured into him (she pours *school fees*—a different liquid currency—into you), a son will leave your mother to love some other woman whom your mother will refer to as a “girl,” very likely the daughter of another Immigrant Mother but ideally, if your mother is lucky, not the first (not an F.I.D., difficult and defiant like you, but a middle child, mild and

compliant), and if *they* have children, this son and that girl, the Dominant Grandmother will be the other mother. The horror. No, says your mother, a son can be loved but not owned, not contained, not controlled. A son becomes a man, and men tend to leave, or else, staying too long, to let down.

A daughter, by contrast, as your mother knows well, born a daughter herself, is a belonging. She belongs to the family, to the village, to the culture, to the Church, to the Old Country, but to herself? No. Because your mother was a girl once, she was owned, too, and though abandoned or betrayed by her owners she believed them when they told her, as they liked to do often, that a woman unowned is unloved. Despite her brilliance and her resilience, your mother still believes that a woman is safest in the world as a wife and that a wife is safest in a marriage as a mother—hence your father, hence her fury, hence you. Point being. When your mother chose your father—if (1) she did choose, and we pray that she gave her consent, and if (2) one can be said to have chosen a man when “no man” was never a choice—if your mother chose your father, she did so in part to be safe, to be claimed, to be owned. As a girl in the Old Country, she could not own herself. As a woman, she sought out a co-owner. Then, given that a mother cannot own a son, her first shot at ownership was you.

By “firstborn daughter” we mean only this: the first thing your mother could own.

•

Third. If you wish to belong to yourself, you must forgive your mother. She knows not what she does or has done. But we do.

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Fourth. We know.

We know that she pushed, prodded, pressured you incessantly; criticized, nitpicked, corrected you insensitively; valued your performance much more highly than your peace of mind; scarred you, scared you. (She scares us all, too.) She is sorry, of course, that she made you unhappy, and sorer that the New Country made you

ungrateful, but she doesn't see why you need a therapist at all, much less one who has something against her. No. Your therapist is the problem, your mother pronounces. Gentle parenting? Covert narcissism? *Codependence*? She laughs. Politely, you explain that at first you laughed, too. Like all F.I.D.s, you are hyper-independent. But it makes sense in, say, Spanish, where *dependencia* means addiction: codependence should be called "co-addiction." Less politely, she reminds you that she doesn't speak Spanish, as she never had the schooling that you did, or the mothering. No one poured school fees or study-abroad plane tickets or holidays in Málaga and Mérida into *her*. She speaks accented English and two languages from the Old Country, neither of which she taught you to speak, and so what? If you learned to speak Spanish or Mandarin or Russian, could you not learn an Old Country language? (Touché! But what she doesn't understand is that your cousins' taunting laughter doesn't haunt you when you mispronounce 母亲 or мамочка—that no foreign language makes you feel as foreign as your Mother's Tongue.) Besides, she pivots, she seldom drinks wine, unlike you, with your full-bodied this, tannic that! Say what you will, but she isn't an addict—a dependent—so how can you be *codependent*?

When you explain that some addictions aren't to substances but, instead, to online shopping, shit-stirring, little-white-lying, exploding into anger in the middle of an otherwise polite conversation, she explodes. Your mother speaks the language of the bone-tired provider, the culturally oppressed alpha, the captain: *commands*. You speak the language of the sailor-intellectual: *questions*. And she doesn't understand. If you love her then you will obey her, and if you obey her then she will love you. See? Simple. She can't understand why you can't understand.

Fifth. We know. If she is mentally unwell, she refuses to seek treatment, living perched on the verge of rage or tears, clinging blindly to the belief that all her suffering will cease when you cease to expect her apology. You Goo-

gle diagnoses. Anxiety? Depression? Borderline? Bipolar I? Bipolar II? The Woes of a Brown Woman in a White Man's World? Will the *DSM-6* include W.B.W.W.M.W.? No. Your mother doesn't practice nonviolent communication. She doesn't know how to hold space. But what she *does* know is how to survive in a racist-capitalist patriarchy as a nonwhite woman without a trust fund—and this, we insist, dear F.I.D., makes your mother a conquering hero. What is John Quincy Adams said to have said? "I am a warrior, so that my son may be a merchant, so that his son may be a poet." (His only daughter, Louisa, died in infancy, tragically. We shall never know his vision for a girl.) Your mother, heroically, became a warrior and a frontierswoman, an explorer, a pioneer. But you are no Henry Adams. An F.I.D. may become a poet, yes, but she must become a corporate lawyer first.

Sixth. We know. When the mothers of your friends from the New Country coo, "All I want is for my daughter to be happy," you laugh. Your mother doesn't want her daughter to be happy. Your mother wants her daughter to be impressive. And you tried, *o*/ We know how hard you worked to earn the woman's approval, if not her affection or affirmation, with those accolades; your academic achievements in primary, secondary, undergraduate, and graduate school(s) were legendary. Legion. For years you amassed them—all the trophies from the spelling bees, the sports matches, the recitals, the debate-team competitions—as if they were chips at some Vegas casino which you could one day trade in for her love. But when you brought them to the counter, your hands overspilling, you discovered that this freight ton of chips was insufficient, enough to buy her approval in public, yes, but not what you craved—her affection in private. Strangers say, bursting, "Your mother must be proud of you!" Must she? Your mother says, tersely, "Well done." She loves to hear others praise your tireless efforts but never says, "Rest. You must be tired. Come." She has no time for your tiredness. If you want to know what tired is then look at her childhood, then

look at her marriage, then immigrate from the working class to the upper middle class in just under a decade, *then* tell her you're tired. No, rest is for the lazy, the Caucasian adolescent, the indolent, the indulgent—until the age of thirty. Then rest is for beauty, and beauty is for mating. After thirty, rest is important. Your mother, suddenly, is alarmed by your exhaustion. Why must you work quite so hard, stay so late? Yawning holes in your soul you can hide from your suitors, but not static wrinkles.

Seventh. We know. Your mother finds you beautiful but only when you're thinner, when your hips are not looking so fleshy, so full, or only when you're fatter, when your buttocks are fuller, a steak wouldn't kill you, you're all skin and bones. Your food is the problem, your mother pronounces. Quinoa? Spirulina? Nooch? She laughs. As *she* is not eating these foods, you point out, she need not pronounce their names. Then the problem is the food that you *don't* eat, she pivots. What kind of immigrant doesn't eat white rice? It is your food that makes you anxious. Not her fretting or fuming or guiltig or exploding over nothing at all, not her ever-running commentary, as if she were a sportscaster reporting the score of your body-mass index, not her aggressively passive questions about your boyfriends or lack of boyfriends or lack of babies or lack of love or lack of REM sleep. It is not your mother but your food that makes you anxious, says your mother, and the anxiety that makes you fleshy or not fleshy enough. These men in the New Country may like Starving Beauties but men where she's from, where *you're* from, prefer curves. (It's a shame, she adds, sighing, that you can't see your beauty. In those earrings that she bought, you are beautiful. Never mind that those earrings are not to your taste. Your mother does not believe in your taste.)

Eighth. We know. If this warrior went to university—and let us pause to acknowledge what a feat this was then, for a woman—there were countless male students, most likely double the

number of female ones, in her graduating class. That student-body demographics might limit the Options is a difficult concept for your mother to grasp. (This is how she refers to heterosexual men—as the Options, though never as optional.) All she wants, she says, is for you to find love. As if love were a thing in hiding. A low-lit *mezcalería* with an unmarked door. In fact, she wants other things also. (1) That the love be a man—not a woman—who loves to flatter your mother. (2) That the love—if not a great love, then a good-for-now love—lead to childbirth, and quickly. She’s being honest, she says in her wounded-bird voice, not unhelpful, as you say in yours. And it’s true: she *honestly* doesn’t care if you carry regret, just as long as you bear her a grandbaby. What you think but don’t say is that, to have this grandbaby, you will have to have sex with a man—the same kind of man, lo, the same kind of sex, that she once so doggedly scorned.

Or has she forgotten?

For years your mother spoke of men as if they, like sea wasps, could kill you on contact; as if brushing past some boy in a secondary-school corridor might inseminate you spontaneously

and dishonor her irreparably. What we now call sex-shaming you knew, as an adolescent, as your mother’s only language, only logic, for desire. This, we understand, has to do with the Church—by which we mean a schema, not a structure. Church for your mother is less spiritual than social, a container, a social and cultural container, like a hot-yoga studio for New Country mothers, or a luxury artisanal grocery store: a space where women wear identical clothing, enjoy identical righteousness, repeat identical phrases. *By the grace of God* for your mother and her Church, *Trust the process* for theirs; a sari or a muumuu or a bubu in her temple, Lululemon or Lilly Pulitzer in theirs. But the pressure to conform is the same in both containers, with certain women serving as the archetype, and it is these women, like the popular girls of your youth, whose approval all the congregants crave.

N.B.: If your Immigrant Mother was ever unmarried when you were, say, older than ten years of age, you will have witnessed her wooing not men but these women—all wives by the grace of God. The *single* Immigrant Mother is an anomaly, an impossibility, torn between two irrecon-

cilable desires: (1) to be rescued by men, who require sex; (2) to be revered by churchwomen, who revile it. The elders especially—dry-boned, bad-breathed, they take pleasure in Judgment instead. And the Options! “Single, solvent, straight: pick two.” The New Country is no country for second husbands. Better to return to the Old, where the devil is known.

Ninth. We know. If desiring a man was a distraction at best and a disgrace at worst for decades, then when were you meant to learn about men? Who was meant to teach you? Your absent-minded or absentee father? Your tactless or tactile uncles? Your cousins? (Non-immigrants find it confusing that non-relatives can be cousins. They think blood is thicker than water. We know love is thicker than blood.) Your aunties?

You can’t remember seeing, as a child or an adolescent, one happily married auntie. Comfortably, conveniently. But contentedly? No. Unsafe, all your aunties were un-soft. They taught you their secrets: to candy an onion, to fold fabric into wearable origami, to braid, to laugh in the face of want of all sorts, to dance in the wake of woe of all kinds. But to trust? To yield? To repair without delay, to disagree without damage, to hear without defense, to fold care into truth and truth into trust and trust into love? No.

Your mother insists that she gives great advice. You insist that she gives only warnings. Ages fifteen to thirty: *Warning! You might get pregnant!* Age thirty-plus: *Warning! You might never get pregnant!* Everything that you know about relationships you learned from the exclusively stable marriages that you saw on TV and the exclusively unstable marriages that you saw in foreign and independent films. (The former seemed to rely on a laugh track for survival, while the latter, like smoking, looked toxic and chic.) Now you have guidance—the podcasts, the memes, the self-help books summarized in Instagram carousels—to help you make sense of the messes you’ve made. But your mother remains utterly baffled. You were always *so good* at things! Math! Music! Manners! Why



“So you eat the madeleine, but the story doesn’t end there, does it?”

are you *so bad* at mating? she asks in sincerity, confounded and offended, almost angrily offended that her belonging belongs to no man.

Last. No judgment. We know. *We do*. Our gentle suggestion, just one, is that you begin to distinguish between two sorts of lovers. We call them the Slipper and the Shoe. The Shoe is a lover who is fit for your journey, the Slipper for your indoor comfort alone. Few people meet (or need) more than two Shoes. Some, alas, never know one. One day, you may find, to your delighted surprise, dear F.I.D., the Shoe that fits. Until that fine day, a Slipper will do—but only for indoor use. Here “indoor use” includes sex, yes, ideally good sex, sex that makes you feel sexy, but also (not limited to): binge-watching Netflix, forwarding memes, sharing music recommendations. We would urge you to pick a Slipper who excels at Food & Beverage—the Peter Pan with a penchant for *gyuto*, the oenophile man-child who plays the *cajón*—but an F.I.D. seldom *picks* Slippers. As with stocking stuffers, say, or Secret Santa gifts, you sort of take whatever turns up: a colleague of a friend, an unsuitable ex, a one-night stand run long. But eventually you will have to *identify* what is happening, and here you must not self-delude. The function of this lover is not to: be a partner, start a family, build a future, support your work out in the world. The sole function of a Slipper, like a Childhood Home, is to comfort a grownup indoors.

Just a word here about Childhood Homes. It is quite possible that you do not have one. But your New Country friends speak of theirs with an affection and an entitlement that, together, unnerve you. “Thiis is my house,” they’ll drawl on arrival. “Oh, leave your shoes on!” A touch smug, falsetto: the tone that you use when speaking of your Shih Tzu, your mother of your standardized-test scores. The Childhood Home, for these friends, is a church of its own, if not a birthplace as such then a birthright, the residence of the mother but the dowry of the daughter. Half museum, half mutual fund. This is because, like all New Country capitalists,



their mothers believe in Passing the Baton. Your mother does, too, but has mandated that you must *rerun* her leg of the relay. (It builds character and work ethic, she says. Stop whining. She did it barefoot, you’re running in spikes!) You have never considered—nor been invited to consider—the home in which you grew up as yours. It was your mother’s house always, a dictatorship, your little bedroom a Sanctuary City. If your mother continues to reside in that house, the city has likely been ceded: it is a guest room for family from the Old Country now, or a hoarder’s paradise, or both. If your mother moved out, then she did so in chaos, as one flees a war, saving none of your keepsakes. Gone: macramé bracelets, handwritten letters, hardcover journals with little gold locks. Unlike mothers from the New Country, your mother does not believe that childhood itself is an Old Country. Now, critically deficient in hugs, hot chocolate, framed family photos, and encouraging magnets, you delight in the comfort that you find in the company of underwhelming lovers. And fair enough.

Enjoy your Slipper lovers until they wear thin, we say! Just enjoy them *indoors*. They—warm, soft, a wee bit

weak—can’t accompany you out into the world. The minute you try to walk any meaningful distance, their soles will go soggy, your feet will go cold: first discomfort, then disappointment, then dismay, then disdain will dim your delight—just like that. Alas. Such lovers can soothe certain wounds in your soul, but only temporarily, only superficially. To soothe is not to heal a wound, a heart, a bone. For that you must walk.

Start walking alone.

A Shoe will appear as you go, fear not, but first you will walk, as you must, on your own. First you will walk to your mother and say, “What you gave me was all that you had. What you gave me was not all I *needed*, at all. What you gave me was all that you knew.” For a moment you will sit with your mother, insisting, “Rest. You must be tired. Come.” With a featherweight kiss to that warrior forehead, you will whisper, “Well done.” Then, dear First-born Immigrant Daughter, it will suffice that *you* know, that *you are*: not first, just born; not immigrant, just child; not owned, just loved; not hers, just yours. ♦

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PAPERBOY

Silence, solitude, and the secret I kept for decades.

By Peter Hessler

My first job in journalism—long before I knew that I wanted to write, and decades before I became a foreign correspondent—was delivering newspapers for the *Columbia Missourian*. I started at 5 A.M. on February 1, 1979, during one of those cold, snowy winters that used to be common in mid-Missouri. The front page featured a photograph of two local children playing in the snow, and a fifty-four-point headline carried news from a distant world: “TRIUMPHANT KHOMEINI RETURNS TO TEHRAN.” The paper consisted of thirty-four pages, and had a cover price of fifteen cents. Along with my older sister, Amy, I folded the newspapers and set out with a list of addresses. Our father accompanied us on the first day, but after that we were on our own.

Amy and I planned to share the route, and our earnings would help pay the fees at a summer camp. At the age of nine, I was probably too young to deliver papers, but Amy, at thirteen, was almost certainly too old. She was striking, with black hair, a fair complexion, and cat-green eyes; people noticed Amy wherever she went. During the spring, we alternated paper-route days, but I could tell that she didn’t enjoy it. A few times, she woke me at 5 A.M., claimed to be sick, and asked me to substitute. I noticed that Amy tended to feel bad on Wednesdays and Sundays, when the paper was heavy with extra ads and special sections.

We had always gotten along well, perhaps because our personalities were so different. Amy was easygoing and extroverted, and I was not; she thrived at school, which I hated. Almost everything that my sister disliked about the paper route was something that appealed to me. I liked waking up early, and I liked the repetition. I liked the fresh smell of the newspapers that were dropped off in a stack every morning

at the end of our driveway. I liked the official paperwork: the stop notices, the new-subscriber slips. The *Missourian*’s circulation department sent these forms in white envelopes that read:

GOOD SERVICE IS GOOD BUSINESS
PROPER & PUNCTUAL DELIVERY
BUILD BIG PROFITS FOR YOU

Mostly, I liked the silence and solitude. Back then, in a small Midwestern city, almost nobody exercised before dawn, and dog-walkers were rare. The one I saw most frequently was on the address list that I had memorized: Glenn Wood, 110 South Garth Avenue. The first time I did the route alone, he was out in front of his house with his dog. He introduced himself, and he told me that the dog was named Sadie. Then he gave me a quarter.

I came home excited. The route paid a little more than a dollar a day, so a quarter tip was significant. A couple of days later, Mr. Wood gave me another quarter. When I mentioned his name to my parents, they recognized him as the city clerk who signed municipal notices that appeared in the paper. He was in his early sixties, and part of his face was covered with a large purple birthmark. My mother referred to such discolorations, in respectful terms, as “raspberries”—a quiet woman at our church had a similar blemish. Like all physical deformities, raspberries were a sign of inner goodness, or at least that was an idea I had picked up from the Bible and from things the priest said in sermons.

Mr. Wood also greeted Amy on her paper mornings, but he rarely tipped her. It was unusual for an adult to show more interest in me; even at nine, I recognized that Amy possessed some magnetism that I lacked. After a while, I stopped mentioning the quarters, because I worried that Amy might demand half the money. In truth, she wasn’t likely to do such a thing, but that would have been my own response, so

it seemed prudent to protect against it.

In July, Amy and I spent all our paper-route earnings to attend the camp, which was in Minnesota. A number of older boys developed crushes on Amy there, and I was rushed to the emergency room to receive stitches after slicing my left wrist open with a scalpel during a crafts unit. I had never seen so much blood; I could tell that the two young counsellors who drove me to the hospital were terrified. Not long after we returned home, Amy quit the paper route. By now, I was ten, and smart enough to recognize that only a sucker would work all year to send himself away in the summer. I never went back to camp, and eventually I decided on two goals of my own. I wanted to become Carrier of the Year, and I wanted to save enough money to buy a car when I turned sixteen.

On many mornings, I saw Mr. Wood. He often asked about school and sports, and he told me that he had been a baseball coach and a Boy Scout leader. He was active in the local Methodist church. At some point, he started putting the quarters into my pocket himself. He would press close, and put his arm around me, and then I would feel his hand inside my pocket. I sensed that this wasn’t right, but it happened so subtly that I couldn’t even say how it began. After a while, it became almost normal. Like the quarters, this was something I didn’t mention when I got home.

Columbia had around sixty thousand residents, and it was home to two competing papers, with the *Daily Tribune* delivered in the afternoon. Both papers announced Carrier of the Year in October, to commemorate International Newspaper Carrier Day. This occasion was often marked by an official proclamation from the city’s mayor:

WHEREAS, many of the citizens of Columbia rely on newspaper carriers to bring



Apart from summer, I delivered in darkness. Invisibility was part of childhood: I saw more of others than they saw of me.

them their only information concerning local and world events; and

WHEREAS, many prominent citizens of the United States and Columbia started in the business world as a news carrier . . .

During my third year, my friend Eric Neuner won Carrier of the Year. The *Missourian* published a picture of Eric receiving his award from James Kirkpatrick, the Missouri secretary of state. Eric was a year older than me, a good athlete and a voracious reader. He was the only other carrier I knew who read almost everything in the newspapers he delivered. That had become part of my morning routine: halfway through folding papers, I took a break to read the sports section, and then, after I got home, I tried to finish the newspaper at breakfast. I skimmed most political and international news, but I read everything about local accidents, arrests, and scandals. I loved the syndicated "Dear Abby" column, especially the headlines:

WIFE IN HAND, BETTER
THAN NIECE IN BUSH

OVERWEIGHT SON CHEATS
ON DIET BY NIBBLING FROM
NEIGHBOR'S DOG DISH

LUSTY LIFEGUARD GETS
INTO SEXUAL HOT WATER

The first step toward becoming Carrier of the Year was to win Carrier of the Month. Candidates were disqualified if they received more than four customer complaints, and they had to participate in subscription drives. In the afternoons, I went door to door, trying

to persuade people to take the *Missourian*. I learned that, despite my shyness, I was good at selling. I liked the nervousness I felt after pushing a strange doorbell, knowing that I would have to perform my sales pitch.

It took me a little more than a year to win Carrier of the Month. The announcement appeared on March 8, 1980, on page 3, along with the international headlines:

NEW VIOLENCE SWEEPS
EL SALVADOR; 29 DEAD

SOVIETS GEARED FOR OFFENSIVE
IN AFGHANISTAN

COLUMBIA MISSOURIAN
CONGRATULATES CARRIER OF
THE MONTH PETER HESSLER

The article included a photograph, along with my grade and home address. In those days, publishing such details wasn't considered risky for a child; the paper did the same thing for its Safe Bike Rider of the Week feature. The article about my award noted that I stood just four feet three inches tall, and it quoted a subscriber. "He's so tiny that some mornings his papers drag," she said. "He's a swell little fellow." I received a free haircut from Fantastic Sam's, a banana split from Baskin-Robbins, and five dollars.

Size was my worst handicap as a carrier. I was so small that I had been held back in school, but even with a year's advantage I remained among the shortest in my grade. I was naturally coordinated, and I believed that I was one of the fast-

est folders in the history of paperboys. Each step of the process—*grab the paper, fold it twice, wrap the rubber band*—was so quick and fluid that I imagined my hands as a Road Runner blur. Carriers often became obsessed with speed and efficiency. Eric, who was much bigger than me, rigged a bike with saddlebags to balance his load. My friend Brian Fick bought a Casio digital watch and timed how long it took him to bicycle his route every morning. Brian decided to skip the rubber bands, using instead the plastic bags that the *Missourian* gave us for rainy days, because he believed that they slid more quickly out of the canvas sack.

My route was hilly, and I carried more than forty papers. Nowadays, it's easy to forget how large newspapers used to be. A page from the *Missourian* was two inches wider and nearly three inches longer than a page from today's New York Times, and the typical Sunday *Missourian*, with sixty or more pages, weighed about a pound. I couldn't handle such weight on a bike, so I walked, cutting through yards and finding gaps in fences and hedges. If I passed through the neighborhood later in the day as a civilian, I recognized thin ribbons of worn yellow grass crossing the green lawns. I was the only person who knew what those ribbons represented—the secret ways I walked every morning.

Most of the year, apart from summer, I delivered in darkness. Lights went on in certain houses at certain times, and I could tell if I was running late by the patterns of illuminated windows. In one Carrier of the Month feature, the *Missourian* quoted the winner (Mike Wagner, twelve years old, 2 Lucerne Court). "I get to see things other people don't see," Wagner said, without elaborating. I felt the same way, although I also had a horror-fascination with the idea that someday I would come across a dead body. In addition to winning Carrier of the Year, Eric Neuner achieved renown when he stumbled upon a trail of blood early one morning on Edgewood Avenue, after somebody had injured himself trying to break into a car. The paper occasionally ran stories about crimes or fires that had been reported by *Missourian* carriers. (January 12, 1982: "YOUTH TIPS OFF POLICE TO THEFT AT WIDOW'S HOME.")

One morning, I was taking a shortcut beside a house on South Garth Avenue



"Let's only buy what we shouldn't."

when I happened to see a high-school student getting dressed inside. The boy was a year older than Amy, who I knew found him cute. He stood in his underwear in front of a low window. We were about ten feet apart, separated by the pane of glass, and I froze. Then, very carefully, I tried to walk away. But he must have heard something, and his head snapped up. For an instant, it felt as though our eyes met. I hoped that it was only my imagination—I knew it was hard to see outside from a lit room.

The following morning, the window had been covered with a makeshift curtain. For days, I feared that the boy's parents would complain to the paper or to my parents. The headlines had made it clear that people could get arrested for such things. (November 23, 1980: "PEEPING TOM: AN OVERLOOKED PROBLEM THAT SHOULD BE TAKEN SERIOUSLY.") I prepared explanations—it *wasn't intentional, this is where I walk every morning*—but I knew that nobody would believe me.

In boyhood, guilt was a constant companion. It tagged along wherever I went; there was always something I had done, some hidden mistake or private atrocity, that was on the verge of being discovered. I often got in trouble at school, usually for making other kids laugh in class, and I dreaded the angry notes that teachers included in my report cards. A couple of times, I shoplifted baseball cards from the local drugstore. I slipped a pack or two into my shorts, and then I paid for one at the counter, being sure to smile and make eye contact. It was easy, but afterward I felt bad, and I stopped before it became a habit.

I attended a small Catholic school, and periodically all the students were escorted into the church in order to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The screened confessional booths were situated in the back, but it was also possible to meet a priest face to face. Anybody who chose this option had to walk past the altar to the front of the church, where the priest waited in a small room. Perhaps because of this visibility, it became a point of pride for tough-minded boys to scorn the screens. In our opinion, only girls and weaklings slunk to the back; it felt good to stride before the congregation with your head high.

But once I was sitting across from the

priest my courage evaporated. I mumbled through some ten-cent sins—I *disobeyed my parents, I was mean to my sister*—and got out as quickly as possible. On my way back to the pew, the guilt was still there, loping doggedly at my side.

A couple of times, I thought about mentioning Mr. Wood to the priest. Something in my mind shut off when he touched me: my body would freeze, and I would think about nothing until it was over and the quarter was safely inside my pocket. Mr. Wood smoked cigars, and the heavy scent was often on his clothes when he came close. Occasionally, he pretended to miss the pocket, and his hand slipped inside my pants. "Whoops!" he would say. "Sorry about that." At those moments, I felt the touch of his fingers, and I flinched and pulled away.

He seemed to sense when I became too uncomfortable. A week or more might pass before he put his arm around me again, and during the interlude he remained friendly. He was the only person on the route who talked to me regularly. His children were much older than me, and I told myself that this was the source of his affection—he was a father, after all. His wife rarely joined him on his walks; the few times I met her, she didn't say much. After a while, Mr. Wood asked if I wanted to earn some extra money on Saturdays. His fraternal lodge, the Odd Fellows, organized a group of boys who sold soft drinks at University of Missouri football games.

I decided not to say anything to the priest. I knew from the past that most of my worries turned out to be baseless. After I saw the high-school boy getting dressed, there wasn't any fallout. Maybe he hadn't recognized me, or maybe he just hadn't thought much about it. In my experience, invisibility was part of childhood. It was like the illuminated windows on a darkened street—I saw more of other people than they could see of me.

My home was less than a mile from the campus of the University of Missouri. My father taught in the sociology department, and many professors, some of them well known, lived in our neighborhood. I delivered the paper

to 408 Thilly Avenue, which belonged to an English professor and a fiction writer who had co-founded the *Missouri Review*. A famous biologist had built the house at 504 Westmount Avenue. My father told me that 106 West Lathrop Road, an old, slightly run-down two-story at the edge of the woods, had once been occupied by a strange, great man named Thorstein Veblen. According to my father, Veblen had lived in the basement, which he entered and exited through a window.

Whenever I passed the house, I imagined somebody clambering through the window wells. Veblen's name was hard to remember, but I connected the house and its basement to the phrase "conspicuous consumption." Long before I understood the term, I was taken with its poetry. That was true of many of my father's work words: "methodology," "longitudinal," "social deviance."

He used these terms casually, and he loved telling stories. If he heard something vivid or shocking, he couldn't stop himself from repeating it, not even to a child. Because of my father, I knew that one house on my route, 703 Westmount Avenue, had been home to an alcoholic who killed himself in the attic. A few doors down, another man blew out his brains with a gun. Various other homes stood as narrative monuments to failed marriages and post-tenure crackups. To this day, if I think of a certain red brick house, I can hear my father describing how the professor who lived there suddenly started failing all his students for no reason. From an early age, I recognized that the university was a place where adults might behave erratically.

Thorstein Veblen was the kind of character who appealed to my father. Veblen, an economist and a sociologist, became famous after publishing "The Theory of the Leisure Class," in 1899. His social commentary reflected disgust with the unfettered capitalism of the Gilded Age, and his cynical aphorisms became widely quoted. ("Always and everywhere invention is the mother of necessity.") Veblen taught at the University of Chicago, but he was let go on account of relentless philandering. The



same thing got him dismissed from his next position, at Stanford. In 1911, with diminishing options, he arrived at M.U., where a former student headed the economics department. The former student found Veblen a job, and he let him live in the basement of his home on Lathrop.

An elderly colleague of my father remembered seeing Veblen on campus. He had been a thin, gloomy figure, and it was a mystery why women were attracted to him. A story the colleague told, which my father loved repeating, was that university officials warned Veblen that they were aware of his reputation for having seduced the wives of administrators at Stanford. They told him that such behavior would not be tolerated at M.U. "Oh, I've seen your administrators' wives," Veblen responded. "You have nothing to worry about."

The story may have been apocryphal, but it rings true to descriptions in "Thorstein Veblen and His America," a 1934 biography. The book gives a lively account of the six years that Veblen spent in Columbia, which he loathed. When the Chamber of Commerce offered a prize for a new city slogan, Veblen proposed that the town be described as a woodpecker hole in "a rotten stump called Missouri." Veblen typically gave every student in his class the same grade, an M, or Medium, the equivalent of a C. If a student needed a higher mark for some scholarship or application, Veblen simply changed it. Once, administrators confronted him about the carelessness of his grading. "My grades are like lightning," Veblen replied. "They are liable to strike anywhere." The biography notes the same detail that captured my imagination as a child: Veblen went in and out of his basement apartment through a window.

As a graduate student, my father was mentored by a Chinese American sociologist named Peter Kong-ming New, who gave him some advice: Never accept an appointment as chair of your department. If anybody insists that you undertake some administrative task, do it so poorly that he never asks again.

My father followed this advice like the Gospel. He was a devoted teacher, and he liked research, but he refused to have anything to do with administration. In the various M.U. stories that he

told, many of them funny and cynical, one of the ugliest words was "dean." Other nasty names included "provost" and "chancellor." In this respect, he followed a long tradition of social scientists who apply caustic commentary to their host institutions. At M.U., Thorstein Veblen had written a vicious screed about university administrations called "The Higher Learning in America." He told a colleague that the subtitle would be "A Study in Total Depravity." Unsurprisingly, M.U. declined to publish it.

By avoiding administrative duties, my father also guaranteed himself a low salary. He rarely received much of a raise, and anybody who read the *Missourian* knew that the university was struggling. (August 2, 1981, front page: "M.U. PAY PLUMMETS TO BIG EIGHT CELLAR.") But this created little distress in our household. My religious mother liked to quote Matthew: "It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."

I often heard that verse at Mass, but I wasn't very old before I recognized that virtually nobody other than my parents took it seriously. My mother was critical of people who seemed grasping or financially ambitious, and she celebrated volunteerism. One of my parents' highest aspirations for a child was to someday join the Peace Corps. They volunteered at the local mental hospital, and my father often took me to help out at a soup kitchen. When my school struggled to find a P.E. instructor, my parents agreed to teach it twice a week for no pay.

My father's many stories never touched on personal finance. The topic bored him, and in any case there was nothing to talk about: he saved nothing and made no investments. My parents packed me and my three sisters into a beige AMC Hornet, a flagship of nineteen-seventies American automotive decline. After my youngest sister entered school, my mother returned to work in a manner that seemed calculated to generate the least possible income. She enrolled as a graduate student, spent years researching a thesis about nineteenth-century Jewish immigration to Missouri, and finally taught history as an adjunct at a small college.

In contrast, I was obsessed with money. The newspapers that I delivered were

full of dollar signs: during the era of Carter and Reagan, the prime interest rate sometimes exceeded twenty per cent, and unemployment was as high as ten per cent. The *Missourian* ran a column called "Inflation Fighters," which offered tips for home economy: cornmeal can be used as a facial cleanser; stale beer is good for setting hair; it's better to fill a gas tank only halfway, because a lighter car gets better mileage. As the economy staggered along, "Inflation Fighters" became increasingly desperate: "Why waste money on tape when you can make your own? Muslin can be melted with one part oil, six parts wax and ten points resin to produce adhesive tape."

Other carriers also fixated on money. The *Missourian* was delivered by more than sixty children, most of them boys, and periodically the paper sponsored an event for us at its office or at a local pizzeria. These get-togethers were often covered by the newspaper, and in photographs I am invariably in the front row, looking small and eager. One year, carriers were invited to a free movie at the Biscayne Theatre. Whoever organized this screening was smart enough to keep the aftermath out of the paper. The film was "Invasion of the Body Snatchers," which, for a group of children who set out alone every morning before dawn, was unbelievably terrifying. I attended with Eric Neuner and his younger brother Paul, who couldn't have been older than seven or eight. Paul dashed out of the theatre to vomit; recently, when I spoke with the brothers, they could recall specific scenes and actors with startling clarity. Eric told me that he had recurring nightmares about the movie well into adulthood.

The Neuners were among the most entrepreneurial of the carriers. They bought a lawnmower and subcontracted other kids to cut grass around the neighborhood. Paul was the first paperboy I knew who bought stocks. He invested with a child's eye, purchasing shares in Coca-Cola and the Wrigley Company. After Paul acquired Coke stock, he forbade his family to consume Pepsi products. Each year, like all Wrigley investors, Paul was mailed an annual report and some sticks of gum.

I nagged at my father to help me invest, but he had never bought a stock in his life. Another paperboy, Sam Abadir,

took a bus downtown and found a stockbroker's office. Sam decided that the trading fees were too high unless you invested at scale, which was also my conclusion. I opened a certificate of deposit at the local bank instead. The year that I turned twelve, my mother wrote a note in her journal describing me as "Amy's banker and confidant." Amy knew that if she ran low on cash, her little brother would front her a loan. A few times, my parents asked for the same thing. It made me feel proud; there was often an old-soul quality to us paperboys. I still have a letter that Eric mailed me the summer I went to camp, reassuring me that my folks were staying out of trouble. He wrote, "Your parents are doing a great job on your paper route. I see them every morning."

I knew that customer relations were my best chance to win Carrier of the Year. Each December, I made holiday cards by hand and delivered them with the newspaper; usually, this generated the equivalent of two months' pay in tips. Once, I tried the same thing at Easter, but the response rate was low. (It never occurred to me that some subscribers might not celebrate Easter, perhaps because my mother had yet to research her thesis.) On snowy days, I went to subscribers' homes and offered to shovel their driveways for a fee. After Mr. Wood invited me to join his group of boys at the M.U. football stadium, I worked every home-game Saturday. I walked up and down the stands with a tray of sodas; each time I refilled the tray, I was given a dollar. Most of the other carriers I knew did the same thing for different organizations; Eric and Paul sold drinks with a group that was organized by the local Little League. All of us kept an eye out for drunks, who tipped better. Alcohol was banned at the stadium, but the *Missourian* ran stories about smuggling techniques. Some fans injected vodka into oranges with hypodermic needles.

Once, my school assigned me to interview somebody in city government. I asked Mr. Wood, who invited me to stop by his home in the evening. Years later, my father said that some instinct told him to accompany me. We sat in the Woods' living room while I conducted the interview. But my father's instinct didn't approach the point of sus-



I was good at selling. I liked the nervousness I felt after pushing a doorbell.

picion. Mr. Wood was among the most popular figures in local government, and people admired the volunteer projects that he organized with teen-age boys. These projects were covered periodically in the *Missourian*. (December 18, 1981: "YOUTHS SHOVEL SNOW TO SERVE.")

Columbia was two hours by car from St. Louis and Kansas City, the nearest cities of any size. The town was remote, but the presence of the university meant that its provincialism was that of a self-contained world. The *Missourian* localized big events: in 1981, two days after President Reagan was shot, the paper featured a Columbia high-school grad who, as a Secret Service agent, had helped subdue John Hinckley, Jr. If something happened overseas, reporters sought out international students at M.U. who might be willing to

comment. In January, 1980, the paper explained why foreign news mattered:

Despite the fact that Columbia is not exactly at the crossroads of the world, the spin off of the crisis in Iran and the invasion of Afghanistan is very evident here, and we have tried to show you how in our pages. . . . Because one out of every four bushels of wheat grown in this country is shipped to Russia, such an embargo would have a devastating effect on the wheat farmers in this country, and Boone County, among others, would suffer the consequences.

The pedagogical tone reflected the fact that the *Missourian* was a teaching newspaper, staffed and published by M.U.'s School of Journalism. No other journalism school in the country produced a daily community paper, and many famous media figures had started out as *Missourian* reporters, including Seymour Topping, who was the

managing editor of the *Times* in the late seventies and early eighties.

The *Daily Tribune* also had an excellent reputation, in part because it hired reporters and editors who had been trained at the *Missourian*. People sometimes said that Columbia had more journalists per capita than anywhere else in America. Periodically, the *Missourian's* editorial page acknowledged the town's support:

We often hear complaints that the city is over-covered, that people spend hours helping us train the newest generations of Kilpatrick's, Germonds, and Toppings.

It's true, of course, that we ask many of you to help us. You, and especially those of you in public office, are our extended faculty and editors. We train the world's journalists. Thank you for helping.

Over time, I became a more sophisticated reader of the paper. I especially liked quotations, the way a voice came to life in a story. A sixth-grade English teacher was the first person to tell me that I should think about writing as a career. But it never crossed my mind that someday I might work at the *Missourian* or become a journalist. I assumed, in a vague way, that I would grow up to be a professor like my father. Between the stories that my father told and the stories that appeared in the paper, my view of university life was impossibly colorful. The *Missourian* had some gifted writers, and they had a nose for the best campus stories. In 1982, when a *Playboy* photographer rented a cheap suite at the Holiday Inn East to scout prospects for the magazine's "Girls of the Big Eight" issue, five hundred women showed up, including a *Missourian* reporter. She coolly documented the scene's details—a Polaroid camera, three cases of Rock and Roll Beer—along with the photographer's casual misogyny. ("Many of the girls who come in are a little on the heavy side. And they think we can do miracles with them.")

One year, after a sophomore decided to use a shotgun as a prop for an anti-suicide speech in class, the story made page 1, with a classic lede:

Dean Pidgeon pointed an unloaded shotgun at himself Monday as part of his University public speaking class project, and while the gun never went off, his presentation backfired.

The writer described a classmate diving

beneath a desk, screaming, "Don't do it!" I liked stories with action, and I would read anything about fraternities or sororities. My father griped constantly about Greek life, a nemesis of M.U. professors since at least the days of Veblen. (According to the biography, Veblen once told a student, "I don't say that I will fail any member of a sorority or fraternity, but no member of such an organization has ever yet passed one of my courses.") The *Missourian* covered so many frat fires that it almost qualified as a regular beat; the houses tended to ignite because of carelessness and poorly managed kitchens. Occasionally, the newspaper documented the quantity of beer consumed at a party with the same precision that it used to report the G.D.P. On September 11, 1982, a ninety-one-keg party at Phi Kappa Theta merited a page-7 headline ("FRATERNITY BASH IRKS UNIVERSITY"), along with a golly-gee quote from the fraternity's president: "We threw the party with good intent. Our purpose was not to get the campus drunk. We had no idea it would get so big."

I delivered to two fraternities. The sketchiest part of my route ran near campus, where residential neighborhoods gave way to some frat buildings and low-rent student housing. That was where I finally came across a body. Early one morning, I was climbing the interior stairway of a decrepit apartment building when I looked up and saw two motionless feet. The shoe soles faced me, heels touching, forming the shape of a V. For what seemed like a very long while, I didn't move. Then, gathering my courage, I continued climbing. Step by step, the rest of the body came into view: legs, torso, head. He was a fully dressed man with a beard and greasy hair, flat on his back on a landing. I stopped, heart pounding. Then I knelt, listened closely, took a whiff, and made my diagnosis: drunk.

The largest fraternity I delivered to was Sigma Alpha Epsilon. It was housed in an impressive white building in the neoclassical-revival style, with six Ionic columns. I always approached the house from the back, following one of my secret pathways through a neighboring yard. On dark Sunday mornings, after Missouri Tigers game days, crossing the fraternity's lawn was like entering an artillery field's zone of fire. Various objects had been tossed from the two-level porch

and lay scattered across the grass. There might be articles of clothing, both male and female. Once, I found a billiard ball, which I pocketed. The most common spent projectiles on the S.A.E. lawn were beer cans and bottles. After Columbia implemented a five-cent deposit law, I would collect as many empties as would fit inside my canvas sack.

Each spring, the S.A.E. members dug a grave in their lawn. The first year I saw this, it scared the living hell out of me. Walking across the grass, I stumbled upon a long pit and a wooden coffin, its shape shadowy in the predawn light. The second year, I was less surprised, and after that the annual appearance of a coffin and an open grave became a normal sign of springtime. As a boy, I never knew the purpose of this strange ritual. It wasn't covered in the *Missourian*, and I must not have mentioned it to my parents, who had no memory of it years later. That was also typical of childhood, when many strange and unsettling things were accepted without explanation.

Recently, I tracked down some S.A.E. members from that era. They explained that the coffin was connected to a fictional figure called Paddy Murphy. Different chapters had their own versions, but the M.U. Paddy Murphy was somebody who had died from alcohol poisoning. Each year, a different brother played Paddy, lying in the coffin, where he was roasted by a series of mock eulogies. The coffin had been acquired by a brother with a summer job in a mortuary in St. Louis. He had driven the two hours to Columbia on Interstate 70 with the coffin sitting upright in the passenger seat of an open convertible.

On April 24, 1981, the *Missourian* ran an unsigned comment at the top of the Opinion page:

GLENN WOOD, CITY'S FRIEND:
RETIRING BUT NOT FORGOTTEN

For over the past 17 ½ years, Glenn Wood has sat in the city clerk's chair. But more than just a city clerk sat there. A friend to city residents, a confidant to council members, a reservoir of knowledge and an ambassador of good will all resided in that chair thanks to Mr. Wood.

By then, I was nearly twelve, and strong enough that I had started using a bicycle on my route. One thing I liked about biking was that I could greet Mr. Wood but not stop. Even before

LOVE OMEN



In 1990, when I was twenty-six years old, I decided to do a one-year journalism program at King's College, in Halifax, Nova Scotia. I brought my three-year-old son, my boyfriend, and our baby with me. I loved being a mother, but I was panicking a bit, thinking of a career, thinking that I should probably get one. We were broke. My mom was giving us money. I was worried about getting pregnant again. We drove across the country, from Winnipeg to Halifax. The baby was only three months old. We didn't have a place to live in Halifax, but eventually we found one, on the ground floor of an old house on Agricola Street, in the North End.

At King's, the director of the journalism program called me into his office. He'd found out that I had a three-year-old child. He told me that I was making a mockery of the program. How did I expect to complete this intense course of studies with a child at home? I told him that my boyfriend was taking care of the kids. *Kids? Plural?* He was so angry. He asked what line of work my boyfriend was in. I said that he was a juggler. "You have a clown at home taking care of your children while you study journalism?" I was determined, then, to prove this man wrong, to finish the year and get my degree. I started making short radio documentaries about laundromats and tattoo parlors and bingo halls, stories about permanence and luck.

One night, somebody broke into our house by climbing through my son's bedroom window and stole

our boom box and all our cassettes. After that, I slept with my boyfriend's prop juggling machetes near the bed.

Not long after the break-in, my boyfriend and I decided that he should have a vasectomy. My boyfriend, now my ex-husband, remembers the details of that day differently. But, in my memory, we took the kids with us. We put the baby in her stroller and walked and then took a bus and then a ferry across Halifax Harbor to Dartmouth, where the clinic was. We all crammed into the doctor's office. The doctor asked my boyfriend how old he was. He said twenty-eight. The doctor said that he was too young to have a vasectomy. He asked my boyfriend what would happen if he and I split up and he wanted to have more children with a different woman. My boyfriend said that he didn't want to do that. The doctor sent us packing. He couldn't take us seriously. We all made the long trek back to the other side of the harbor, on foot, on the ferry, on the bus.

My son, Owen, who had just turned four, was working on his letters. He had problems with some of them. He wrote postcards to the "hole family" back in Winnipeg. He signed them "love omen."

My uncle wrote me a letter to say that I had been kicked out of the Mennonite Church, which I had grown up in. He tried to be kind. He was my favorite uncle. He said that it was because of my life style and my lack of attendance and the illegitimate children.

We were so broke. Once, the university helped us pay our rent. My boyfriend got a gig performing at the openings of new Ultramar gas stations. He had a blue cape and a sidekick, a clown named Dipstick. He was "Captain Ultramar." My friend Carol came to Halifax to help out with the kids while my boyfriend toured. One icy day, we were all in the car and it started to slide backward on Sackville Street. It was a street that sloped steeply down from the Citadel all the way to the harbor. Carol and I screamed, but the kids were calm. The baby stayed asleep in her car seat. We slid backward, screaming, sleeping. I remember Carol yelling, "Counter-steer, counter-steer!" At the last minute, we managed to avoid plunging into the sea by spinning out into a snowdrift. We laughed.

The year was over. I got my degree. I flew home with the baby. My boyfriend and Owen drove home, passing through the States, with a U-Haul hitched to the car. I had to get a notarized letter saying that my boyfriend had my permission to take my son across the U.S. border. The border guards stopped the car, pointed at my boyfriend, and asked my son who he was. Owen said, "That's my mom." He thought it was funny. They asked again, "Who is this man?" My son said, "He's my mother." The border guards kept asking. My kid just resolutely stayed in character, never breaking, eventually wearing the guard down with a silly joke, a four-year-old's joke, and, out of pure exasperation, the guards allowed them to cross. It's funny to think how, back then, we, my family, assumed that things would always, sort of magically, comically, with some luck, work out in the end. ♦

the bicycle, I had made it clear that I didn't want him touching me anymore. There was never a confrontation, but I found ways to keep my distance. When he asked if I wanted to participate in his youth group at the Odd Fellows Lodge, I told him that I was too busy.

I had read enough stories in the paper to know that Mr. Wood's behavior was wrong. But I still had some confusion, because he was so admired in the community. The *Missourian* editorial noted that Mr. Wood had been a Scoutmaster and a Sunday-school teacher, and it mentioned his plans:

When Mr. Wood announced his retirement last December, he indicated he was looking forward to devoting more time to the teenage boys who belong to the junior chapter of the Odd Fellows Lodge.

During the years that I delivered it, the *Missourian* remained the same size, averaging about thirty pages a day, and the circulation was stable. I had no idea that newspapers or carriers might have an uncertain future. But recently, while rereading issues from those years, I recognized signs of trouble. A 1983 feature about a spate of mergers noted that Columbia had become the third-smallest American city that still had competing dailies. In 1981, the Sunday edition ran a feature—"MAKE ROOM FOR DATA"—about the first wave of home computers. The writer referred to something called the Source, which could transmit information between machines:

What effects will home computers have on society? . . . The day of the newspaper carrier may come to a close as information services similar to the "Source" creep into more homes.

As a boy, I was oblivious to such predictions, and I also didn't realize that the *Missourian* was struggling to find carriers. Periodically, a story appeared about somebody getting attacked on the job. In 1980, an adult woman carrier was robbed and sexually assaulted on her *Missourian* route; a couple of years later, a fourteen-year-old newspaper vender was held up at knifepoint. The paper sometimes celebrated carriers with descriptions of the job, which didn't sound particularly appealing:

A *Missourian* carrier holds a great responsibility. He or she is expected to:

*Deliver a paper to each subscriber on time,

despite early hours, stormy weather, cold temperatures, or poor health.

*Cover the entire route in time for school.

*Deal with paper thieves.

*Brave the threats of unfriendly dogs.

I was bitten by dogs repeatedly, with the worst offender being a cairn terrier on South Garth. The animal was tiny but vicious, and he often left my ankles bleeding. My father called the animal-control office, which was notoriously unreliable; in this case, someone there talked to the owner a couple of times and then gave up. She was in her thirties, a distracted woman living alone in a run-down rental. Somebody suggested doggy treats, but the animal ignored them and made a beeline for my leg. After that, my father consulted with our mailman, who went to his truck and returned with a large canister of mace. The canister featured an image of an angry mutt with saliva dripping from its jaws.

My father accompanied me the first morning I tried the spray. I always believed that, in comparison with him, I was growing up weak and soft. He told exotic stories about his childhood, in a

HOW TO GROW OLD

Don't fret about
the champagne-glass
neck.
Drink champagne.

Inner-arm flesh,
crepe bat wings.
Train for night flights.

Expect body hair
to
thin,
disappear,
Alpinize.
Trash tweezers,
shavers.

In the bath,
discover a warm atoll
of flesh on the belly.
Cup gently in your hands
like raw tortilla dough.
Admire its satin finish.
Give thanks.

working-class part of Los Angeles where fights had been common. As a boy, he had tattooed his left hand with a pachuco mark, a cross-shaped symbol near the thumb that was popular with the Chicano gangsters in his neighborhood. My father had dark skin, and by his forties the mark was hard to make out. But in his teen-age years it had been distinct enough to get noticed, unhappily, by his future father-in-law the first time they met.

My father told me to hold my ground when the dog charged. The terrier came up snarling, and I hit him in the face with a long, heavy stream. He collapsed against the trunk of a tree, where I sprayed him again. His breathing became increasingly labored. "I think he might die," my father said. But then, like some demented jack-in-the-box, the terrier popped up and charged again. In the course of the following days, he seemed to develop an immunity to the spray.

Every generation romanticizes the struggles of its youth. Like many people my age, I complain about helicopter parents, and I speak fondly of long unsu-

One day you will wake
astonished as Gregor Samsa
and find you have
transmogrified into a volcano.

Think Parícutin, Popo, Ixta, Orizaba.
Give yourself a cool new name,
preferably with an “x” or “z” or “tl”:
Xandra Xiznerox
Zandra Zixneroz
XXandra ZZizneroz
Xztl Zxtl.

Spew smoke. Spew cinder. On
occasion, totally appropriate to
toss rocks. Pumice is popular.

Work on looking like Coatlicue.

Practice divining with an obsidian mirror.
Peer with sincerity daily.
It will tell you what you dread to hear.
Get used to it.

—*Sandra Cisneros*

pervised days during childhood. But I’m also under no illusions about the ways in which that world was a hard place. It’s obvious in the papers that I once delivered, which feature many stories about terrible accidents involving children—drowning in icy ponds or getting electrocuted after climbing utility poles.

There was also a lot of victim-blaming. In 1979, a woman wrote to “Dear Abby” complaining about getting rejected from jobs she applied to because she was overweight. “Face it, most fat women are not as attractive as their slim sisters,” Abby counselled. “So, do yourself a favor and quit asking for ‘kindness’ from others. See your doctor about a diet.” Two other advice seekers worked at a clothing store where their male boss had drilled holes so that he could peer into the dressing room. “A confrontation is not necessary,” Abby responded. “Every morning check the dressing room wall for holes, then cover them with adhesive paper. Do this routinely and your boss will soon realize that you are onto his dirty little peeping game.” This approach seemed common when authorities were uninterested or incom-

petent. *If you have a problem, fix it yourself.*

After the dog mace failed, I borrowed my friend Joe Kopine’s Crosman BB pistol. Joe had purchased the gun because of its powerful air-cartridge system. It looked like a real weapon, with heavy black metal; a bright-orange tip would have seemed absurd to a boy of that era. I packed the pistol with the newspapers in my canvas bag. The next time the dog appeared, I drew the gun, held steady with both hands, and pulled the trigger. The dog leaped straight into the air, spinning and yelping. In the following week, I shot him another five or six times. And that was all it took; he never attacked again.

On the afternoon of May 4, 1982, my father told me that there was something we needed to talk about. He didn’t want to do it at home, and he looked upset. We set off together, on foot, in the direction of campus.

He was uncharacteristically quiet. I was nearly thirteen, and I had mostly figured out how to get along in school. The longer we walked, the more I sensed that my father was upset by some-

thing other than a teacher’s bad report.

He found a bench in the university’s Peace Park. It was a beautiful afternoon, and students were outside enjoying the sunshine. After we sat down, he said, “I wanted to tell you that Mr. Wood was arrested. It’s in the *Tribune* today. It will be in the *Missourian* tomorrow.”

Initially, I didn’t know what to say. Then I asked why Mr. Wood had been arrested.

“He was caught with a teen-age boy on a bus,” my father said. “He was arrested for sodomy.” There was a pause. “Do you know what that means?”

I nodded slowly. Sodomy appeared periodically in articles about arrests, although it confused me—the word seemed to describe different things. The part in the Bible about Sodom also lacked key details. But I wasn’t going to ask those questions now.

“I know that Mr. Wood often talked to you on the paper route,” my father said. “We need to know if he did anything to you. If he touched you or did anything inappropriate.”

Now I understood why his mood hadn’t been recognizable. For the first time, I saw true fear in my father’s eyes. I thought for a moment before answering.

“No,” I said. “Nothing happened. He didn’t do anything to me.”

“Are you sure?” my father said. “It’s important that we know. If he did anything, the police need to talk to you.”

“I’m sure,” I said.

His face relaxed, and he said that he was glad that he had accompanied me when I went to the Woods’ home for my school project. “Who knows what he was planning,” my father said. “The story in the paper said that he has been molesting boys for years.”

I asked what would happen to Mr. Wood.

“He’ll go to prison,” my father said. “They do terrible things to child molesters in prison.”

I asked if he was already there.

“No. They have to have a trial. He’ll be at home until then. You haven’t been seeing him outside in the mornings recently, have you?”

“No.”

“Good,” he said. “Make sure you don’t have any contact with him.”

Walking home that sunny afternoon, I sensed my father’s relief, and I felt as

though I had protected him from something awful. But already I was wondering what I would do if I saw Mr. Wood again.

The following morning, the stack of newspapers was waiting at the end of the driveway. I carried them inside and read the front page:

ARGENTINES SINK
BRITISH DESTROYER

COLUMBIA MAN DIES IN 2-TRUCK
COLLISION NEAR PRATHERSVILLE

EX-CITY CLERK CHARGED
WITH SODOMY

There was a photograph of Mr. Wood from before his arrest. The story said that he had taken a job in retirement as a school-bus driver, and one day a parent became suspicious.

The parent claimed to have seen Wood, who had been driving a bus for Rustman Bus Co., and a boy go to the back of the bus and disappear, said Sgt. Dale Richardson, who led the investigation.

Police said when officers confronted the juvenile, he admitted to having oral sex with Wood. Police did not say whether the act took place in the bus.

Richardson said the boy also named five other juveniles, ranging in age from 13 to 16 years, involved with Wood. Police have interviewed the six boys and their parents, he said.

Police believe Wood first became involved with boys at the International Order of Odd Fellows Lodge, of which he has been a member since 1933. Many of the alleged sex acts occurred at the lodge after meetings, Richardson said.

I folded all the papers and went outside. The closer I got to 110 South Garth Avenue, the more nervous I felt. But the lights were off at the house. I threw the paper onto the porch and continued down the silent street.

Throughout summer and fall, reports about Mr. Wood's case appeared in the *Missourian* and the *Tribune*. My parents didn't discuss these articles with me or my sisters, and I was careful to read them only when I was alone.

On June 21, 1982, in a federal court in Washington, D.C., John Hinckley, Jr., was found not guilty by reason of insanity. The following morning, that story appeared on the *Missourian's* front page, and a headline on page 7 read "MENTAL EXAM OK'D FOR WOOD." Wood's lawyer seemed to be attempting the strat-

egy that had worked for Hinckley, entering a plea of not guilty on account of "mental disease or defect." At the time of the arrest, Wood had admitted to Detective Dale Richardson that he had abused boys repeatedly since 1938, and that pedophilia "was something he couldn't control." One *Missourian* article quoted the officer:

Richardson said Wood had cooperated during the entire questioning procedure. The only thing Wood seemed to worry about, Richardson said, was the "welfare of the boys."

The detective seemed to downplay the crimes. A story in the *Tribune* noted:

The boys said Wood would perform oral sex on them, then they would reciprocate, Richardson said. One boy said Wood paid him \$1 at each session.

Wood never forced the boys to participate, Richardson said, and he never harmed any of the youths. He added that police have encouraged the parents to seek counseling for the boys.

There were many references to Wood paying his victims and buying them gifts. The boys were not named, but I believed that some of them had sold drinks alongside me at M.U. games. With each story, I felt a rush of guilt. I had no word for what I had experienced—in those days, grooming was something that happened to dogs and horses. All I knew was that my mother and Matthew had been right. Greed was weakness, and Mr. Wood had exploited it; he had given me quarters because I had wanted them desperately. I believed that I was partly at fault for what had happened.

I also knew that I should have told my father the truth. But the stories in the paper convinced me that I had done the right thing. I didn't want to talk to those police; I didn't want to stand in that courtroom; I didn't want to appear in these articles:

LAWYER IN SODOMY CASE
QUIZZES YOUNG WITNESSES

Representing former City Clerk Glenn Wood, Columbia attorney John Schwabe yesterday insinuated at a court hearing that at least one boy Wood is accused of molesting encouraged the 67-year-old man's sexual advances. . . .

Wasn't it so, Schwabe probed in a slightly different tone, that the boy asked Wood to perform oral sex on him? "I don't remember," was the youth's reply. When Schwabe restated the question, the youngster flared: "I said I don't remember, so don't ask." . . .

Then, Schwabe elicited confirmations from the boys that Wood helped them with school

lessons, coached baseball in volunteer work at the Odd Fellows Lodge in Columbia and had been a friend.

"You don't hate Mr. Wood, do you?" Schwabe asked each boy. All but one replied negatively. The dissenting youth said, "A little."

Tense and dwarfed by the witness stand, the boys answered the questions with a few stammers and only an occasional nervous laugh. Their eyes rested only fleetingly on Wood, who wore a coat and tie and frequently cradled his face in his hands.

Wood's lawyer asked the judge to dismiss the charges because the youths were "accomplices in the very crime." This motion was considered but then denied. Eventually, a number of the charges were dropped, as part of a plea bargain, and Wood's lawyer pushed for no jail time. Wood had been evaluated by a psychiatrist who had been a professor at the university's medical school, and the psychiatrist testified that Wood should not pose a threat to the community. "Taking into account human error, the chances are there should be no repetition of this behavior," he said. He also told the court that young boys who engage in voluntary homosexual acts with adults usually recover, and that such contacts are often "loving, caring, positive relationships."

A number of prominent citizens appeared as character witnesses. H. Clyde Wilson, Jr., a former mayor, testified about Wood's contributions to city government, and he said that no "useful purpose" would be served if he were incarcerated. The *Missourian* described the defense lawyer's closing statement:

Schwabe asked Judge Conley to allow him to "indulge in symbolism" as he compared Wood's life to a "flower garden" with an ugly weed in it. "The flowers need not be thrown in the garbage can," Schwabe said. "To even give Glenn Wood county jail time would be to sign his death warrant."

From the day I learned of the arrest, I sensed that Mr. Wood would find a way to see me again. In the end, it happened under cover of a heavy storm. On rainy mornings, I couldn't ride my bike, and neighbors were much less likely to be outside.

That day, I placed the paper onto his porch, and suddenly he was behind me; I hadn't seen him in the downpour. "I'm sorry," he said.

"I'm not supposed to see you!" I said, but my voice sounded childlike in the storm. I saw that he was weeping, and

THE ANTAGONIST



It took me a few tries to find my mother on Google in 2017. My difficulty stemmed from the fact that she had both a Chinese name and a Western name, and, although one or the other often sufficed, there had been occasions when she'd used them together in a kind of portmanteau, meant to account, I suppose, for all the parts of her history. Additionally, I didn't know whether she and my father were still married or if adding "Ong" to my query would be counterproductive.

In 1988, when I was twenty, I left our home, in Los Angeles's Koreatown—the neighborhood where my family had settled after arriving from the Philippines, a few years before—and it would be more or less accurate to say that I have not looked back. Cutting ties with every single member of my family was the best decision of my life. When I Googled my mother in 2017, I was not looking for a rapprochement or hoping to forgive her so that I could leave my formative griefs behind and finally graduate into adulthood. Although I was almost fifty, I was every bit as irresponsible as a child. I was living hand to mouth, barely clearing my low monthly margins. But, as a writer, I was interested in outcomes. I suddenly wondered what had happened to my mother, as if she were one of my characters. And, of course, I was counting on Google to answer the most important question: Was she still alive?

In my childhood, my father was a cheerful drunk—until he wasn't. We children were a frequently fractious brood, sometimes gleefully so, sometimes savagely. And

the burden of disciplining me, my brother, and my three sisters—although it seemed that I was the one most frequently made an example of—often fell to my mother. I could write a version of this essay in which I detail all my mother's high crimes and misdemeanors, but it's enough to say, for now, that she was a master of corporal punishment. Sometimes, as she carried out her frenzied rituals, she would wail, as if the belts and broom handles and rulers were in the hands of the other party. (The sickening recognition I felt when I read the stories in Alice Munro's collection "The Beggar Maid," in which the protagonist recalls being walloped by her father during a turbulent childhood, paradoxically made me want to keep reading, rather than stop.) I was not the only child in my Chinese Catholic community to be subjected to this disciplinary system, but I have often wondered if I was the only one to have answered it, in adulthood, with a steely self-expulsion. (Years later, when my first novel was published, I received, in care of my publisher, a letter from my family—no sender was identified, but the return address in California was a tipoff. I ripped it up at once, without opening the envelope, and left it in the trash can, a few feet away from my mailbox.)

My mother must have inherited her belief that sparing the rod would spoil the child from her own mother, who was, to my mind, the reigning gorgon of our family. (She immigrated to the U.S. a few years after we did and lived with my aunt and her family.) Almost nothing made her happy, but, if one of us children fell while capering, the most malicious half smile would creep onto her face, which, in old age, seemed brined in her thousand expressions and practices of hatefulness. Reader, I'm loath to admit it, but I often resemble my grandmother: I am a grouch, a grouser; children are not my favorite people. Life being a comedy, of course, you never escape even those folks whose skulls you have imaginatively crushed in your writing; their signature epithets and reflexive unkindness may suddenly erupt from inside your own skull.

Regarding my mother, Google eventually directed me to the website of an L.A. cemetery, where, in loving tribute to her memory, family photographs had been compiled for a video montage. My mother had died in 2014, at the age of seventy-eight—of what, the website didn't say, although it might have been useful to have the medical information for my own future. It turned out that there was now a new generation; grandchildren sat on my parents' laps and stood around them. There were also photographs from my own childhood. The images showed ordinary, dreary people. You would not have been able to tell that the boy in some of them had been beaten again and again, singled out for being mouthy and—that catchall designation—"disobedient." Nor would you have been able to tell which of the adults had been the happy hitter, the person who would remain, even in death, the chief antagonist of this boy's life. ♦



"Can we talk about the elephant in the room—how can they afford an apartment big enough to fit an elephant?"

suddenly my body went limp and I began to sob. He wrapped his arms around me, repeating those two words over and over. *I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry.* The interaction probably lasted less than a minute, but it felt like forever. Finally, I pulled away and ran.

At the end of the street, I huddled beneath a tree until my breathing was under control. When I returned home, I made sure that my face betrayed nothing.

On the morning of September 28, 1982, before folding the papers, I found the headline, on page 8:

UNIVERSITY JOBS LOST DUE
TO SALARY RAISES STILL
UNDETERMINED

TEACHERS' PAY HIKE UNDECIDED

PROBATION PLEA DENIED;
WOOD GETS PRISON TERM

The article quoted the circuit judge Frank Conley. "I don't think there is a case that has cost me more personal anguish as a judge than this case," he told the defendant. "I've seen a lot of the good that you have done." He continued, "But so much of the good has been

ruined by that which is bad." He referred to the psychiatrist's characterization of Wood's contact with the boys. "This court is not of the opinion that this was a loving, caring relationship," he said. "It was a very vile relationship." The judge issued a sentence of ten years in prison, for five counts of sodomy.

Judge Conley's mother lived on my route, and I threw the paper onto her porch. For the first time in months, I didn't feel nervous on South Garth. At 110, the house was dark, the way it had been every morning since the arrest.

Beginning that fall, a number of terrible stories about boys appeared in the paper. In southern Missouri, a woman and her boyfriend were arrested after locking her seven-year-old son in the basement for three months. When authorities found the boy, he weighed thirty-two pounds. The *Missourian* quoted the woman's explanation for her boyfriend's treatment of the child. "He didn't like him," she said. "He didn't want him to come out of the basement." Another local court case involved two adult Boy Scout troop leaders who, during a camp-out, branded their Scouts on the buttocks with a red-

hot coat hanger that had been shaped like male genitals. A college student in Columbia was arrested and sentenced to prison after shooting his former foster father in the back of the head. For years, the man had taken in multiple foster children, always boys, and he repeatedly paddled them, took nude photographs, and administered enemas, which he tape recorded so that he could replay the children's moans. The college student had complained to a family-services agency and received no response, so he used a .22-calibre pistol that had been borrowed from a neighbor. *If you have a problem, fix it yourself.* After he was sentenced to five years, the young man told the *Missourian*, "I always figured I'd spend some time."

These stories prompted anguished letters and editorials. Citizens wondered if something was wrong with society, and they debated whether Glenn Wood had deserved to go to jail. The husband of one of Wood's daughters wrote to the *Tribune*:

There's a story that never appeared in any page or in any newscast about the Glenn Wood case. . . . It's a story of that home shattered, but through faith in a God of love and mercy and grace, holding firmly to one another. . . . It's a story of unbelievable courage, of fighting back against immeasurable odds. . . . We've had to live with judgement and criticism and prejudice.

Richardson, who had helped conduct the initial investigation, published a response. In earlier stories, the detective had seemed to minimize the impact of Wood's crimes. But now he set the record straight:

When talking with these boys, they expressed guilt, shame and just as much, if not more trauma than we see in rape victims. Some told of how they were first approached by Wood, how he physically jerked their trousers down. . . . Wood told me that for the past 30 years, he has had an obsession for little boys. I can't help but feel that, during that long period of time, some of his friends and relatives must have suspected some of his actions. Why didn't they help him then? I also wonder how many other young boys were victims in those 30 years.

Recently, when reviewing these articles, I recognized many phrases and details, because I had read them so obsessively as a thirteen-year-old. Another *Missourian* story appeared on September 8, 1982, under the headline "IOWA NEWSBOY VANISHES; SEARCH PARTY STUMPED." A paperboy named John Gosch, who was my age, had disappeared

on a Sunday morning. Gosch became one of the first missing children to be featured on milk cartons.

He also became one of the reasons that children stopped working as carriers. Last year, I met with Bruce Moore, who had started working at the *Missourian* in 1982, eventually becoming circulation manager. “You were one of the last kids to deliver the newspaper by bike,” Moore told me. “It happened not because the *Missourian* didn’t want to hire kids. It was because society dictated it was unsafe for kids to be delivering at that time in the dark.”

Nearly forty-four years after Gosch disappeared, his case remains unsolved. When I read the old *Missourian* story, one detail echoed in my memory. On the morning the boy vanished, his parents found the wagon that he used to haul the heavy Sunday edition of the Des Moines *Register*. Gosch’s mother was quoted: “Every single paper was in his wagon.”

I never won Carrier of the Year. By the final stage of my career, I knew that it wouldn’t happen, because I had recognized patterns. Children tended to win early—that was why I was named Carrier of the Month when I was only ten. My analysis was that the *Missourian* wanted to encourage younger carriers, and by the time they got older they were probably on the way out, so it wasn’t worth wasting awards on them. This was a good life lesson, one that would have made sense to Thorstein Veblen: the longer you work for a company, the less you are valued.

My last day on the job turned out to be Wednesday, August 22, 1984. On that morning, the top headline read “GOP CONVENTION PASSES BATTLE PLAN: FORD UNLEASHES ON MONDALE.” The paper was sixty-two pages, with a price of twenty-five cents, and it weighed 15.4 ounces. The size was significant because, while carrying an unusually heavy bag and taking a tight turn on my bike in a parking lot, I skidded out and fractured my left tibia. I lay in the parking lot shouting until somebody called an ambulance.

Before the accident, I had already been thinking about quitting. On the next International Newspaper Carrier Day, when the *Missourian* announced its Carrier of the Year, it also ran a small notice:

SPECIAL RECOGNITION TO
PETER HESSLER WHO BROKE
HIS LEG WHILE ON THE JOB

Two other mornings from that final period remain vivid in my mind. One was when the S.A.E. house caught fire. On a bitterly cold January morning in 1984, I approached the house through the back lawn and saw that the porch had burned and been gutted. Firefighters had recently left; water from their hoses had frozen into beautiful icy tendrils that ran along the pillared porch.

The other morning was at some point after Glenn Wood went to prison. I never saw him again, but once, while delivering the papers, I encountered his wife on the sidewalk. She was walking the dog, and I said hello.

The woman said nothing. Our eyes met, and I saw that her face was full of cold fury. A wave of guilt and shame washed over me, and I hurried past. Along with the last time I saw her husband, that encounter remains one of my most awful memories from childhood.

After turning sixteen, I used my paperboy savings to buy a 1974 Dodge Dart. The car was Mississippi brown and as long as a city block; in high school, I loved its absolute uncoolness. The fact that my parents never saved a cent paid off when I was admitted to Princeton University. I qualified for Pell grants and large amounts of financial aid, and I entered the university determined to become a writer. For the first three semesters, I applied to the introductory course in creative writing, submitting short stories, but each time I was re-



jected. I felt hopelessly provincial: nothing important or interesting had ever happened to me. I never considered writing about Mr. Wood, because the memory was too painful.

My parents still live in the house where I grew up. They must be among a minuscule number of octogenarians in this country who subscribe to two daily papers in print. Columbia is now the second-smallest community in

America with separately owned competing newspapers. The *Tribune*, like many papers, has suffered after corporate buyouts and staff reductions. But the *Missourian* thrives, because it is subsidized by the university. Last year, I met with Elizabeth Conner Stephens, the executive editor, in the paper’s spacious offices, at the edge of campus. It felt like a vibrant, old-fashioned newsroom; even in summer, fifty student reporters were busy on staff. “The reason it works for us is we’ve been doing it since 1908,” Stephens said. “It’s been baked into our curriculum.”

Recently, when I talked with other former carriers, they all mentioned how the job had shaped their adult selves. At the age of twenty-four, Eric Neuner founded NuShoe, which eventually grew to become one of the largest shoe-repair companies in the world. Eric believed that his paperboy obsession with efficiency was one reason he had been good at organizing factories in San Diego and Mexico. He often meets other C.E.O.s from our generation who delivered newspapers as children. Eric also remarked that such a job is impossible to imagine today. “I wouldn’t let my kids go out at five in the morning,” he said.

Like Eric and many other former carriers, I have never been able to sleep late. To this day, I am uncomfortable around dogs. I am good with money. I fulfilled my parents’ dreams by joining the Peace Corps, but after returning and writing a book about the experience I took the first advance check, called a college friend at Credit Suisse, and started learning how to invest. I know the verse: *It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a freelance writer to survive if he can’t manage his finances.* I retain an appetite for silence and solitude, and I can keep a secret. I never told a soul about Mr. Wood until I was thirty years old. I still feel an occasional twinge of guilt, because my life and my marriage have gone well, and I suspect that this might not be true for others who were harmed. For more than four decades, I have saved one of the *Missourians* I was carrying when I broke my leg. Now the pages are yellowed; the rubber band rotted away years ago. I placed the newspaper on my desk when I began to write this story. ♦



MAGNUM

THE TWICE-WIDOWED KHALA HELAI

By Jamil Jan Kochai

We were two hours late (but on time), and our husbands had been pacing since six, in the kitchen and in the living room and out on the porch, and, even as they drove, quietly fuming, past rivers or fields or stoplights, we noticed them pacing inside their own heads, back and forth and back and forth, half here, half there (in that other time), their eyes scanning street lights and road signs and cul-de-sacs and the salvaged Honda Civics parked in front of Marijan's house, where, breathlessly, in our heels or slippers, we hiked up the driveway, through the garage, past the bathroom (already occupied), and into a living room immediately bustling with a dozen conversations at once. On the other side of the house, our men were already complaining—"Oh, well, you should see how much my wife . . ."—behind a golden curtain meant to partition us in case, we joked, we glanced their way and fell in love again.

In the living room, we tiptoed over the plastic tubes for Bibi Rangeena's oxygen tank and the Kandari girls all scrolling on their phones, huddled behind the worn sectional, which Marijan must have rearranged just for tonight, one end facing the TV above the fake fireplace while the other looked out onto a back garden that was more of a jungle, fruit trees and vegetable plots scattered about with no apparent logic, so that even the stone pathway led into a circle, like a trap, like an ambush on the village roads or in the alleyways back home.

We said our salaams quickly, from a distance, or with much relish, cheek to cheek, beginning, of course, with the Bibi Hajjis, huddled in their corner of Marijan's old sectional, reunited, finally, with Khala Helai, who, three months earlier, shortly after her husband's death—poor Rasul had succumbed to lung cancer after a lifetime of scorching pizzas in an illegal coal oven—had suddenly up and left for Afghanistan.

Her daughters claimed that she had gone to visit Rasul's family, to pay her respects, but everyone knew, or soon learned, that Rasul had almost no family left in Afghanistan, just a second cousin or two, and that his nearest relation, a half sister stricken with Alzheimer's, lived in Australia, of all places. We hovered near the bibis for longer than usual, questioning Helai, but every time we got her to say something about her trip one of the other bibis would interrupt to make some vague complaint about nothing, until, exasperated, we took our seats.

By the fake fireplace, Ariana saw-sawed between Halima and Mastoor—who ran competing fabric shops in South Sacramento—asking how much they would pay for handsewn dresses brought wholesale from Kabul. "Fifty?" Ariana said to Halima. "Per dress? Fifty? As in five and zero? As in five times ten? Fifty? Halima Jan, I'm all for bargaining, but for the love of God let's be serious here. . . ."

Across from Ariana, Khala Gulapa and Mina were already pressed together in their matching Punjabi outfits, having become so inseparable in the wake of their husbands' deaths that they had sold their homes and moved into a small apartment complex in Arden, which, apparently, had been overrun by new Afghan arrivals on Special Immigrant Visas, who gathered every evening to chatter like chickens deep into the night, reminding Mina of the good old days before their husbands died, before their children went away, before they had money and passports and houses so big you could hear your own thoughts bouncing off the walls. "It's like they're living out our lives again," Mina said. "But they're still in the good part."

Several seats over, Rafia, a recent arrival, was explaining to friends, "Our apartment is a fourth of the size. My husband works twice the hours. My eldest gives us all his paychecks. And

we *still* can't afford our rent, not really, because it goes up every six months on the dot, no matter how many cockroaches or shootings or gas leaks there are."

By the window overlooking the garden, Lawyer Muska offered free immigration advice ("The visa has more steps," she said, "but the green card takes longer"), and Dr. Nasiri offered physical exams, pulling a stethoscope from her purse and shining her phone light in our ears, and Professor Kakar offered history lessons ("It's stupidly simple," she said. "Every terrible thing that has happened will happen again. The unimaginably rich will murder millions and die of old age, and the desperately poor will be ravaged by hunger and disease and secret police, and the rest of us will sit in our homes and drink green tea and try not to rot too quickly").

Meanwhile, nestled in their corner, our Bibi Hajjis offered up their miseries: Bibi Rangeena shackled to an oxygen tank in her downstairs bedroom, and Bibi Shirini on the phone listening to her sister slowly die in Peshawar, and Khala Helai dreaming of her husband, her *first* husband, who, we learned, had disappeared during the Soviet War.

Khala Helai was the youngest of our bibis and had been reluctant, at first, to join the others. She preferred the company of youth—the newly married and the mothers. A Bay Area transplant, she'd been among us only a few years but had quickly become a favorite. She was one of those sprightly old women—still plucked her eyebrows and stayed up late for parties—who are incapable of aging gracefully. She always wore too much blush, folded a delicate white hijab over her jet-black hair, and talked constantly of anything, everything. And yet, to the best of our knowledge, Helai had never once mentioned her first husband.

"We were married for two years

before the war,” Khala Helai recounted, sort of abruptly, speaking over Bibi Shirini, who had been repeating the same story about her sister’s cancer diagnosis for so long that we could recite the first phone call by heart, “and we never had any children—thank God—but, of course, his mother blamed me for our childlessness. Called me barren and used up and all that. Years later—after I married Rasul and had Khatara and her brothers and they all turned out to be healthy and strong—I was so tempted to call my mother-in-law and give her an update. Some days, despite everything, I wanted to make up with her just so I could gloat.” She began to laugh but thought better of it and let Shirini finish her story.

“And the whole time,”

Bibi Shirini was saying, “she kept pulling the speaker away from her mouth, so she could gasp for breath, and I tried to hint at the fact that I knew she was not at home, that she didn’t need to hide her illness. But then I realized that maybe the pretending helped her, that maybe, while lying to me, she was lying to herself, and was able to forget, for even a few seconds, the state of her hopeless body.”

In the kitchen, Marijan stirred and scooped rice with such focus that she hardly noticed us entering, and though she was still a handsome woman, she had lost the impossible grace of her youth, when we would doubt her age and the number of her children. Now, on her haunches, on the linoleum floor, she was sweating so profusely that we offered our salaams and our assistance, which she promptly refused, of course. Still, it wasn’t until her husband appeared, with a platter of teacups, muttering, “Burhan is going to be late again,” that we retreated into the living room and heard Khala Zarghoona being accosted by three of Kokogul’s eight daughters, who had gone up to her unprompted and asked, in English, what had happened to her face. Before Zarghoona could explain away the bruise sprouting beneath her right eye, Khwaga, a

policewoman, offered to murder Zarghoona’s husband for cheap—which we thought was a joke at first, but, when a few of us chuckled awkwardly, Khwaga turned and asked what was so funny, and why shouldn’t she kill him, and how many more times could Zarghoona lie about the bruises and the broken bones before he hit her too hard or in the wrong spot?

Fortunately, just then, Marijan entered the living room, with her hair smoothed down and her makeup reapplied, wearing a hand-stitched abaya from Mecca. She circled the room and greeted each of her guests again, beginning, of course, with the Bibi Hajjis, who had been arguing for a while about which one of them would have the most trouble staying alive until Ramadan.

Bibi Rangeena claimed that she couldn’t take more than a few steps before she started gasping for air, as she had on the day that a Soviet bomb had buried her in a cocoon of rubble held together by such an impossible arrangement of dirt and wood and stone that Rangeena could not help but feel that God *must* love her, and that He had kept her alive for a reason, but Khala Helai argued that God having kept her alive was no sign of His favor, because God most esteemed those whom He returned to Himself through martyrdom, which was why she, after years of waiting for her first husband, years of watching the red iron gate through which he would return home, years of listening for his pattering knock at her bedroom door, had finally stopped praying for him to return and instead prayed to God that her first husband was dead, that he had died long ago (shot in a cell, perhaps, and buried in some mass grave), but Bibi Rangeena resented the suggestion that her survival had merely been a matter of chance and argued that she had experienced a bona-fide miracle in the perfect arrangement of the rubble that should have crushed her, and, although she seemed to have more to say, she was out of breath again. “In and hold and out,” Dr. Nasiri told her, pressing Bibi Rangeena’s wrist and

counting her breaths. “Through your nose, yes, very good, and purse your lips for me, that’s right, as if you’re blowing out a candle.”

By the fake fireplace, Ariana explained to Mastoor that all her dresses were handsewn by young widows in Kabul, who had been mending clothes for pennies since they were children. “They call me Mother,” she said, “and I give them half the profit from every sale.”

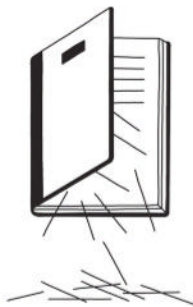
“Why half?” Mastoor asked (as in, we thought, *Why only half*).

“Why not?” Ariana replied. “I like to spoil my girls.”

“Every other day,” Rafia was still complaining to her friends, “I leave two of my kids with one neighbor and the other two with a different neighbor, and I take the bus to wash dishes for six hours at Mahdia’s, who docks my check for every plate I break, even though the busboys stack dishes so high that it’s practically impossible not to topple them.”

“I actually used to work in a garment factory,” Khala Helai told the other bibis. “The Khalqi got me the job in Kabul after I fled Logar. For three years, I lived in a tiny, run-down apartment subsidized by some Communist women’s program, and, even though two of my roommates had also been widowed by KhAD, we all told the program organizers that our husbands (faithful Communists!) had been killed in mujahideen car bombings or ambushes, and so, as honorable widows, we were granted housing and employment and baggy gray outfits stinking of turpentine. We spent seven-hour days mending the uniforms of dead soldiers, and that left us with so much free time in the evenings that I joined a women’s embroidery club. At first, I would ask the other women if they had any idea what had happened to our men, but even those with abducted brothers or fathers or husbands always replied—”

“God, where’s the food?” Bibi Rangeena interrupted, and we were so hungry by then that we couldn’t fault her. In fact, we carried her question along from guest to guest, from couch to kitchen, until it reached Marijan, who tiptoed past the Kandari girls (who were still scrolling on their phones, not



even texting or posting, just watching thirty-second clips of car crashes and makeup tutorials and Israeli snipers shooting Palestinian children, on mute) and told Rangeena that the food was ready but that they were still waiting on Sheikh Burhan.

"Call his wife," Bibi Rangeena said.

"I don't think his wife is coming," Marijan replied.

"Of course Marena is coming," Bibi Rangeena said. "That woman lives for free food."

But half an hour later, when Burhan arrived, with an uninvited entourage of former Taliban and translators and convicts and Communists and mujahideen guerrillas, we realized that he really had left Marena at home, that he'd punished her—or us—for spreading the news about him taking a second wife in Karachi.

"How many are with him?" Marijan shouted from the kitchen, already tearing off her good hijab, and, after we told her that there were nine, maybe ten, new guests, her face filled with such grief that a few of us joined her by the kitchen counter, where, without waiting for permission, we redistributed the chicken and the kebabs to feed the extra men, but, still short, Marijan called for her husband—once, twice, three or four times—"Husband, I need you, husband!"

When he finally burst into the kitchen, red-faced and furious, he pulled Marijan aside and mumbled a few stale phrases about respect and dignity and very quickly worked himself up into a fervor, lecturing louder and louder, until, to prove some point he hadn't made, he recalled for Marijan their wedding day, when, on her way to the bridal stage, she'd collapsed to the floor and sobbed so wretchedly that he'd nearly called the whole thing off, and would have, had it not been for his soon-to-be mother-in-law, who, after a few minutes of consoling her daughter, pulled him aside and explained that, when Marijan was eight years old, she had got into a terrible rock fight with her neighbor in Logar, a little girl named Somya, which had left both of them bloodied and bruised and wishing death upon the other, but, when Death really came, in the night,

nestled in the belly of a Soviet bomber, Marijan woke up to find that Somya's entire compound had been demolished, and, in the haze of the lamplights floating back and forth across the wreckage, she watched as Somya's body was pulled from the rubble by a skinny teen-ager she hadn't recognized until, a whole decade later, she'd found that same boy, worn and bearded and lathered in white flowers, standing on her bridal stage.

But, before he had a chance to explain why he was telling this story, how it related to Marijan's current predicament with the food, the doorbell chirped again, calling him back to the men's side of the khatam.

In the end, Marijan didn't eat. After the men got their share, we tried our best to save Marijan and her daughters a plate or two, but she caught on to our plans and wound up redistributing her food to the Bibi Hajjis. Rangeena took her chicken. Shirini accepted shola. But Helai refused a second helping of spinach (which was all she had eaten) and

assured Marijan that there was nothing to be ashamed of.

"We ran out of food at my own wedding," Khala Helai recalled from the couch, her plate on a tray table. "You see, my father had been offered such a large dowry by my first husband's family—after he had denied them six or seven times in a row—that he felt compelled to accept, but, in punishment for their having 'strong-armed' him, my father bled my in-laws dry, demanding gold and livestock and extravagant dresses for all my aunts and cousins. He invited so many guests to the wedding that my in-laws had to slaughter ten sheep and three steers and a hundred and fifty chickens. But, even then, as the courtyard kept overflowing with new neighbors and distant relatives, food began to dwindle, and the more it dwindled the more panicked everyone became. Our guests started shoving in line, and suddenly my wedding had turned into a brawl, and I remember crying and crying," she said, laughing and laughing. "But now it seems so funny, because when



"I'm looking for someone with incredible upper-body strength."



the brawl got really bad and reached my husband and me in our arbor, he pushed away anyone who came near us, until someone knocked him in the mouth, and he fell backward into my arms, and when he saw that he'd bled onto my dress he apologized, and it was his apology, as much as anything, that made me realize that I would be one of those lucky girls everyone hates because she has what everyone wants, and I *was* one of those girls—for a few years and a few months, until God disappeared my husband, and my brother-in-law started coming by my room after dark, intending to force me into marrying him, but, bless her soul, every night my mother-in-law, Bubugul, would sleep by my side to protect me, her son's wife. You see, she never believed that he was dead. And, even years after he disappeared, a decade,

nearly, when she learned of my engagement to Rasul, she told me to my face that her son was still alive, and that I was committing adultery by remarrying, and that my life would be cursed by God. But, you know, the funny thing is . . . my life has gone relatively well since the day Bubugul cursed me. My second husband was a good man, a hard worker, and a loving father, and none of my children have died or gone mad . . . and so I can't help but think that my mother-in-law was wrong about her son, that he had died long before, and that her faith in his life was . . .”—and here Khala Helai raised a hand to her lips, as the rest of us just stared, hardly eating, until she continued, not looking at anyone—“On the night of my first wedding, I remember I was so afraid of the act of consummation, I stumbled on my great

skirt while climbing the stairs to my husband's bedroom, and I tore my dress and wept shamelessly, because I thought these were such bad omens for our marriage, and even the wildflowers he had scattered on our bed made me break out in hives, so that my poor husband had to rush out into the night to find me an ointment, and by the time he returned I was such a mess of snot and tears that he let me sleep in his bed on my own, and in the morning, at fajr, I found him writing at his desk by the window, and he looked so focussed, so immersed in his poems, that I went to distract him, and the whole time, through his little window, I could see his brothers and sisters in the courtyard, I could see their red iron gate and a dirt road leading away from the red iron gate, I could see a donkey-drawn cart stacked with dead fish, I could see songbirds flittering from the trees to our window, and I could see his mother, Bubugul, kneeling in the tanoor khana, with all this smoke billowing up around her, as she muttered prayers or incantations and tossed God knows what into the fire. Maybe my hair.” We laughed, startling her for a moment, but she kept going. “From then on, I spent more time with Bubugul than I did with my husband, who woke up every fajr for the long bus ride to Kabul and returned only after Maghrib, his corduroy suit and tie stinking of the city, but even when he was home Bubugul would invent some task to keep me away from her son, and I used to tease my husband that, if it wasn't a sin, his mother would've just married him herself, and he would laugh a little but then get quiet and say, ‘She has suffered very much in life, and I am the only one who treats her well,’ which was true, to be honest, because her husband was taking a second wife, and her other sons were strange, heartless men, and her daughters were all dying to leave her. Whereas my husband would bring her fruits or flowers from Kabul, or he would escort her to the clinic when she complained of fatigue, or he would rub her feet at night before I asked him to stop, and I knew she knew it was me who stopped him, because one day, out of the blue, she told me that Heaven lies beneath a mother's feet,

and that no one, that nothing, could come between them, and I realize now that she always doubted my love, and that the news of my second marriage must have been like a confirmation of all her doubts, and as upset as she was she must also have been, secretly, satisfied. . . . But what could she say to me now? In death, what doesn't she know? Fifty years and I dream of him still, fifty years and every story, every joke, every bit of news or gossip leads back to him still. But the funny thing is . . . as much as I think of him, I think of her, and, now that I'm approaching the age she was when we parted, I remember the fights we had in those days, and I find myself siding with her more and more, and I try to resist it, and I try to keep hating her, but it's been so long I can hardly feel the pain of those years anymore, and it distresses me, you know, because I think, How is it that, after all these years, God makes it so that—on top of everything else—I must long for the pain of another time? How is it that, even now, near the end, God finds new ways to surprise me with His miseries?"

Toward the end of the khatam, after eating and praying and rising for our last goodbyes, a few of us caught up with Khala Helai on the front lawn, where, while sitting on her walker, atop a bed of wet grass, mist clouding her bare feet, she waited for her daughter. "She's already on her way," she said when we offered a ride. Three or four times, Marijan urged her to come back out of the cold, but Helai insisted on taking in the cool night air. So we waited with her, and, as a reward, maybe, for waiting, she told us about her trip to Kabul.

It happened that, during Rasul's funeral, Khala Helai had run into her first husband's youngest sister, who had arrived in the U.S. shortly after the fall of Kabul and, only a week prior, had learned that Helai lived so close by. They chatted for a few minutes in the graveyard, as the guests were all flocking to Burhan's mosque for the fatiha, and Helai learned then that Bubugul was still alive, that she lived with her son at the Macroyan apartments in Kabul, and that she had been asking about Helai for years.

A month or so later, as soon as guests had stopped visiting every other day to offer food and prayers, Helai booked a flight to Kabul, without telling her children, and, when she got to the Macroyan apartments, she spent an entire day wandering through shops and courtyards, asking strangers for directions, until, near Asr, she found Bubugul's own granddaughter coming home from school.

It turned out that Bubugul now lived with the same son who had attempted to rape Khala Helai all those years ago. He was the only one of her husband's brothers who was still alive. His youngest daughter, a thirteen-year-old chatterbox named Saba, led Khala Helai through the old, Soviet apartment block, asking a hundred questions about her past life.

"We keep a photo of Uncle in the prayer room," Saba said, guiding Helai up the stairway to their apartment. "I've heard so many stories about Uncle, I feel like I know him. Everyone says he was very smart and very kind, with hardly an enemy in the world. Father mourns him to this day."

Helai stopped just short of the apartment door—red iron, just like in Logar—and, while Saba fumbled with her keys, she said, "You know, after my husband disappeared, your grandmother slept by my side every night for a year."

"You two must have been very close," Saba said.

"Not at all," Helai replied. "We hated each other."

Inside the apartment, Khala Helai found her old mother-in-law lying in a pitch-dark room with the Quran playing on tape. An oxygen tank thrummed in some corner, and, although Bubugul had gone blind years ago, as soon as Helai walked in and closed the door behind her, she called out, "Is that you, Helai?," and, after hearing her voice and touching her face, Bubugul told Helai to come close and whispered, "You know, Helai, it's not fair. Whenever my son, your husband, comes to visit me, all he asks about is you, and, even after I explained to him that you had not been faithful, that you had remarried, that you'd run off to America with another man, he wasn't upset. Just curious. He had all

these questions about your new life. Your home. The names of your children. Your second husband. Your daily routines. Even the color of your hair. But it had been so long since you and I had spoken, and we had parted on such bad terms, I didn't know what to say to him."

And so, in the dark, the twice-widowed Khala Helai spent the rest of the night answering her husband's questions.

On our way home, driving along empty highways or back roads, our husbands recounted for us the unexpected arrival of Engineer Fahim, who had shown up to the khatam uninvited, started a few fights for nothing, but then ended the evening with a dua so beautiful that it had almost restored in them their lost faith in God. But the whole time they spoke to us—excitedly, urgently, more to themselves or to the dark roads sprawled out in front of them—we could hardly focus because of Khala Helai, and when they had finished telling us about Fahim they fell quiet, waiting for us, we knew, to trade stories, to explain what had happened to Helai, why she had fled and then returned. A few of us didn't say a word, while others tried once or twice to explain, and some spent the entire car ride failing to retell Helai's story, and, at home, in bed, while our husbands slept or pretended to sleep, their eyelids twitching, their fingers perpetually curled, we thought back to Helai sitting in the wet grass, a cloud of mist hovering by her feet, then rising, throughout her story, rising, until it was as if she were vanishing right there in front of us, and yet we all stayed at a distance from her, and, even as her story neared its end, as she recalled the dark room in Macroyan, the word of God on tape, the ghost of her husband speaking through his mother, we felt more and more apart, not just from her but from ourselves, our own bodies on the grass (and in bed that night), and the souls within these bodies, which, we had once been told, belonged only to us. ♦



A TALENT FOR SEEMING

By Jonathan Franzen

Although very few people in Butte, Montana, had heard of Bertolt Brecht, it was the kind of place that Brecht would have dug: a boomtown staked out on arid highland better suited for grazing sheep, a bare-knuckled Mahagonny perched on the rim of a copper pit and exposed to every vicissitude. Down in the pit, on a raw October night in 1966, one of the giant haulers was unloading its tonnage when the pistons of its dump bed seized up. While the driver was investigating, both pistons failed. The plunging bed missed the driver's upper body but pinned his legs. Four hours passed before emergency workers were able to cut the pistons, lift the bed with a crane, and free his oxygen-starved legs.

Amputation might have been the safest expedient, but the mine would have had to pay permanent disability. Three days later, the *Montana Standard* reported that Lee Elmer Kinsky was survived by his wife, Louanne, and a daughter, Adele.

The accident was costly for the mine. Louanne Kinsky, who'd been married at nineteen and widowed at twenty-four, could have gone to college or started a business with her settlement. Instead, she bought a larger house in Butte and devoted herself to dressing well and chasing after good-looking jerks. Adele's earliest memories were of being in the way. Four or five nights a week, she was deposited with a born-again neighbor, Mrs. Friedeck, who made Adele pray with her. Before long, she was praying by herself. She enjoyed the feeling that God, unlike her mother, paid attention to everything she did. Later in life, when she encountered the term "attention deficit disorder," she misunderstood it as a descriptor of her childhood.

For reasons not obvious to Adele, then or ever, her mother fell in love with a former rodeo rider, Dean Bixby. When the time came for Adele to meet him, Louanne got her a new jumper, gave their house its most thorough cleaning

since she'd bought it, sprayed each room with scent from a can, and ambitiously attempted to roast a chicken with potatoes. Dean Bixby arrived at the house dressed like "Rawhide," bearing flowers and whiskey. Though ostensibly there to meet Adele, he said barely a word to her beyond hello. All he could see was Louanne's little Gidget minidress, her large and fully paid-for house, her paid-for appliances and her color TV. Once the whiskey was flowing, Louanne burned the chicken and Dean misplaced his appetite. Adele quickly excused herself to watch Walt Disney, but her mother followed her with Dean, brightly proposing some "family time," not previously a concept in the household. Very soon, from the sofa behind Adele, loud enough to be heard over Disney, there came a smacking of mouths and saliva. The sound went on and on. Turning to shush it, Adele saw Dean with his tongue in her mother's mouth and his hand up under her minidress.

Family time, it seemed, meant making babies. Adele's half brothers were six and four when she was baptized in Mrs. Friedeck's church. For school, she wore shapeless sweaters and braided her hair severely, partly as a reproach to her mother, who dressed like a trampy teenager, and partly to fit in with her born-again friends. Except on Mondays, when the church's youth fellowship met, Adele was expected to come straight home from school and babysit her brothers. She babysat on Friday and Saturday nights, too, while Dean and Louanne went out drinking and two-stepping. Sunday mornings, she went to church early and came home to find her mother still in bed, her stepfather shambling around the kitchen. When Dean made banana pancakes, stray banana slices fell to the floor and got mashed into the linoleum by his stockinged feet. He'd lost his looks and wore oversized baseball jerseys to hide his paunch. He earned \$3.85 an hour as a salesman in a gun store.

In the small pond of Butte High

School, Adele was a top student, additionally motivated by a desire to graduate early and escape her house. During her sixteenth summer, she read every one of the books usually taught by the twelfth-grade English teacher, Mrs. Latrobe, only to learn on the first day of school that Mrs. Latrobe was on medical leave, fighting one of the cancers that half the residents of Butte seemed to get. As a substitute, the district had hired a renegade hippie, Bromley Stokes, who'd recently washed up in town.

Bromley Stokes had the build of a football linebacker and the manner of a Merry Prankster, a foot-long ponytail and a perpetually astonished expression. He was less interested in teaching the curriculum than in changing lives. He pushed all the desks to the back of his classroom and made everyone sit in a circle on the floor. Adele had prepared to shine on the subject of "Ethan Frome," but Bromley wanted to know what people were reading for fun. What was their favorite book?

"The Bible," Adele said, when it was her turn. Two other kids had said the same thing, but her answer seemed to especially astonish Bromley. He asked her what she liked about the Bible.

"It tells the story," she said, "of Jesus' teachings, his Crucifixion, and his Resurrection."

"You like it because it's a good story."

"It's the *Bible*."

"What's your favorite chapter?"

"The Gospel of John."

"O.K. And this John guy—did he know Jesus personally? Was he there when all the bad shit went down?"

Bromley's cussword sent a thrill through the circle of students.

"I'm not sure," Adele said.

"You're not sure? Isn't that kind of important information? Because if he wasn't there—and the fact is he wasn't, he was writing a century later—why do you take his word for what happened? Don't get me wrong—I think the Bible's a fantastic book of stories. But it's a

work of fiction, right? Like 'The Great Gatsby.' Like 'Ethan Frome.'"

"No," she said. "Jesus is real. Ethan Frome is just a made-up character."

"I don't know, man. When you kill Ethan Frome, he stays dead. That sounds pretty realistic to me, comparatively speaking."

There were snickers from some of the other students, including a tall and lank-haired kid whose name Adele didn't know. He had a cigarette pack rolled into his T-shirt sleeve, the biceps of someone who could fight. Seeing him smirking at her, she flushed with anger.

Bromley Stokes didn't bother teaching "Ethan Frome" or any other required text. His declared mission was to unleash the "incredible creative potential" of Butte High. His senior class's first assignment was to write a three-page personal narrative and read it aloud. Adele wrote about the night she'd felt Christ's living presence in her bedroom, a night she'd been agreeably rewarded for talking about in church, even though, in her secret heart, she worried that she hadn't felt the presence of anything but her yearning to feel something. She omitted her doubts from the essay and concluded that the night in question had changed her life forever, and that disbelievers' mockery only made her faith stronger, because no one had ever been *persecuted* more unjustly than Christ himself, and to be a Christian was to follow his example of serenely enduring persecution and forgiving your persecutors.

Her conclusion moved her to tears when she read it to the class. Bromley's response was "Wow."

She folded her paper and didn't look at him.

"Seriously, Adele, you amaze me. Your writing is incredible. And then having Christ in your own bedroom—that is really something. That's no trip to Disneyland."

She tried to endure his persecution serenely, but the boy with the muscles was sneering at her. His name was Jamie Grennan.

"You know what's fascinating about the Gospels?" Bromley said. "How nasty Jesus is to pious people. I mean, yeah, he promises the true believers their reward in Heaven, but he goes out of his way to tell them how uninteresting they are to God. It's the Prodigal Son, right?

More joy in Heaven over one sinner who repents than ninety-nine righteous people who've got nothing to repent. *A hundred times more joy*. That is such a radical middle finger to the entire institution of Christianity. And it's right there in the Bible. Adele, chapter and verse?"

"Luke 15," she muttered.

The next person to read was Jamie Grennan. His essay consisted of an inventory of the trout he'd caught on a trip with his grandfather. Bromley, displeased, asked for a show of hands from anyone who believed that this was the most interesting story Jamie had to tell about himself. He told Jamie to come back with three pages that weren't bullshit.

Jamie cut class the next day. When he didn't show up the day after that, Bromley assigned the class a journal-writing exercise and went looking for him. Adele wrote in her journal: "Mr. Stokes thinks he's Jesus and Jamie G is the Prodigal Son." She didn't mean it nicely.

And yet: Bromley had hair like Jesus', and he was tall and strong the way she imagined Jesus. To her, it was a given that the spirit of Jesus was alive in the world today, and that his spirit might be anywhere, in anyone. What if she turned out to be one of the terrible people who didn't recognize him when she met him? Who persecuted him?

"On the other hand," she wrote in her journal, "what if Mr. Stokes is Satan? What will I do if Satan comes knocking



on my door? Will I be strong enough not to open it?"

Jamie Grennan returned to class with a longer essay. He began by describing his daily exercise routine, the number of pushups and pullups he could do. It sounded more poignant than braggy because he read it in a monotone, his hair hanging over his face. He and his little sister had grown up in Great Falls. His stepdad was a state trooper whom his mother had considered a great catch, but

the stepdad wouldn't let her have friends. Eventually, he started hitting her. When Jamie tried to stop him, his stepdad kicked him in the stomach, threw him against a wall, beat him with a belt, etc. Even if his mother hadn't blamed herself, she couldn't have gone to the police, because her husband was in law enforcement. Then one night he broke three of her ribs and put his service weapon to her head in front of Jamie and his sister. He was sentenced to three years at Deer Lodge for that. Jamie's mom divorced him and moved to Butte to live with her mother. At the end of his essay, Jamie explained why he exercised so much: with every pushup, every pullup, he was getting ready to defend his mother. Bromley Stokes was looking intently at Adele, as if to make sure she knew she hadn't written the best essay.

There was more to Bromley, too, than met the eye. He'd trained as an actor in San Francisco, dropped out of A.C.T. to co-found an improv group called the Irregulars, and then dropped out of that to go looking for America. Near Butte, on Highway 2, he'd caused an accident that had left him unscathed but totalled his van and put a mother and her twenty-year-old daughter in the hospital. Sticking around in Butte to make sure they recovered, he'd had a revelation: it was working-class people in places like Butte, not upper-middle-class hippies in San Francisco, who needed the experience of art. To Adele's dismay, he turned his classroom into a studio for improv exercises, sensitivity training, and skit writing. When she complained about this, Bromley pointed out that she'd already done the reading and only wanted to take tests so she could get an A on them. What about the kids who weren't motivated enough to do the reading?

At first, all she wanted was Bromley's attention. She wanted to show him that he shouldn't dismiss a person just because she was an A student and born again. But already she was falling into Satan's trap. She was the first person besides Bromley to utter a cussword in class. Because he was easy to mimic and she wanted to see if he could laugh at himself, she improvised a character called Bumley Tokes. He participated in the exercises, and the character

he improvised was Addled Bitchby. They worked up a whole two-hander with Bumley and Addled. Her eternal soul was in the balance, and she turned it into a thing they played for laughs.

One day, Bromley brought to class a “mind-blowing” story, “In the Penal Colony,” and made each student read half a page of it aloud. Everyone hated it, so Bromley proposed that they spend the next week developing it into a skit. He cast Jamie Grennan as the penal officer. Adele got a nonspeaking part in the human machine that would gouge the prisoner’s sentence into the officer’s body. Bromley said the machine was the most important character, because it was made out of bodies, and you were missing Kafka’s point if you blamed machines for dehumanizing people—the real dehumanizers were highly organized collectives of other people. To Adele, this sounded like empty consolation to the fifteen kids who didn’t get a speaking role.

When they rehearsed the skit, Jamie kept missing his cues, and Adele impatiently tried to prompt him. But Bromley shut her up.

“Watch him,” Bromley said. “Watch what he’s doing by not saying anything. This shit’s not teachable, but try to learn by looking.”

It was true: Jamie building himself up to say his line, starting to say it, and stopping, pacing around as he built himself back up, was a drama in itself. Watching him act—or maybe not act—made Adele’s insides cave in around a void she hadn’t known was in her.

Lust wasn’t her only sin. There was also an actor’s envy. One Monday evening, coming home from her church, she saw Jamie and Bromley walking on Park Street, tall and taller, lank hair and ponytail, engrossed in conversation. She imagined Bromley giving Jamie pointers about acting, and it sickened her to see them disappear into a bar. When Bromley, the next day, announced his intention to mount a full production of “The Crucible,” Adele was convinced that he and Jamie had been discussing the character of John Proctor. She set her heart on playing Abigail Williams, Proctor’s lover. When Bromley instead cast her as Betty Parris, the girl possessed by an evil spirit, as if to punish her for being Christian, a lump persisted in her throat all day. The spirit possessing her was theatre.



*“I wish our neighbor would murder more quietly—
he’s scaring away all the warblers.”*

Her mother didn’t want her in the play at all. Money was tight, and somebody needed to be home with the boys after school. Adele suggested that they could go to Mrs. Friedeck’s, but Louanne didn’t want them anywhere near that woman—one Jesus-freak kid in her house was bad enough. To avoid a fight, Adele offered to get a part-time job and hand over all the money, so long as she could be in the play.

Soon she was working three week-end shifts at the fish restaurant, So Help Me Cod, and otherwise residing in the high-school auditorium. She preferred the backstage darkness to the sun-flooded classrooms, where her neglect of her homework was making itself evident. Five hours passed like five minutes when she was building a set, and then she walked outside and it was night, the stars overhead contending with the lights from the copper pit.

For Jamie, theatre was like a reprieve that Bromley had granted him. He worked with furious concentration, the way a prisoner might work on digging

a tunnel. He stayed later and later after school, until everyone but Adele had left. She ran lines with him, steadied ladders for him. She broke out in a hot sweat when she watched him drive a four-inch nail with three blows. Sometimes she caught him staring at her, too.

Then one night, when they were alone and working on his scenes, Jamie confessed that he hated John Proctor.

She asked him why.

“Because he’s a total dick,” Jamie said. “He has a good wife and he cheats on her.”

“But he probably hates himself for that. Maybe it’s good that you hate him.”

“I just don’t understand why he does it.”

“I don’t know—because Abigail seduces him?”

Jamie glared into the dark auditorium and said nothing. Adele sat down on the sickbed of Betty Parris. The evil spirit was in her.

“It’s Abigail’s fault,” she said. “She looks at him all day, every day. She doesn’t care about anything else. And maybe

they're alone in his house. Maybe she sits down on his bed. She sits down and she calls out . . . *John!*" She shouted the name. "John, there's something in my eye. Can you help me?"

Jamie turned and stared at her.

"Come sit down with me. My eye is really hurting. Come sit."

She patted the bed. Jamie hesitated and then, in an actorly kind of trance, came over and joined her on the bed. She pulled down her lower eyelid. "Can you see it?"

He peered into her eye. "There's nothing there."

"Look closer. There's something there. Do you know what it is?" She leaned toward him until their noses touched and she could smell his cigarette breath. "Do you know what it is, John?"

"I thought you were such a Christian."

Unclear if he was in character or not.

"I want you, John Proctor." She took his face in her hands. "I think I'm in love with you."

At first, Jamie was afraid that having a girlfriend would turn him into a person like his stepfather. Adele's resistance was similar but more complicated. Kissing Jamie, she had flashbacks to the lip-smacking sounds that her mother and Dean had made, and when she humped Jamie's leg she felt like her man-craving mother. Revulsion with her mother was what had led her to seek rebirth in Jesus Christ. It felt good to rub against Jamie, bad to have relinquished her moral superiority. For several weeks, she insisted on staying in character when she made out with him. It was a strange way to start a relationship, but it allowed her to believe that she was serving the greater good of theatre.

If Bromley had chosen "The Crucible" to set Adele straight about religion, he needn't have bothered. She'd stored her love of Jesus in a mental attic and locked it as securely as the A.V. room in the auditorium. She no longer had time for church, and when she rehearsed as Betty Parris she drew on the girl she herself had been at eleven, getting baptized without really understanding what it meant. This may have been why, when the show opened its three-night run, everything she did as Betty Parris got laughs from the audience. She thought she must be doing something wrong,

but afterward Bromley told her no, it was cool, the play was even sicker when the good Christians of Salem took seriously a girl who the audience could see was ridiculous.

As John Proctor, Jamie killed. He never cracked a smile, not even at curtain call, and he stalked the halls of school with the same savage look. He waited for Adele by her locker so that he could back her into a corner. He didn't care who saw them. His utter lack of self-consciousness, which made him great onstage, made him a little scary as a boyfriend. He never wanted to take his hands off her. She felt like she was murdering him every time she needed a little break. Eventually, she intuited that only going all the way would bring him any peace. She performed this act of mercy in a backstage room for which Bromley had unwisely given her the key. But the peace it brought Jamie was always short-lived. He wanted her excessively. He surprised her by taking a job bussing tables at So Help Me. On nights when he couldn't see her, he drank his paychecks. After an incident at his grandmother's, probably alcohol-related, he began sleeping on the sofa in the single-wide that Bromley rented.

Her born-again friends staged an intervention in the girls' locker room. They warned her that her soul was in peril if she didn't stop running with Jamie Grennan, whom one of them had seen chugging Jim Beam before first period. Did she know he came to school drunk? They invoked the name of their youth group, Agape, and begged her to remember the agape they bore her, the true Christian spirit of fellowship, which apparently she'd forgotten.

She laughed in their faces. An hour earlier, she'd gone to the bulletin board where Bromley had posted the cast list for the spring play, "As You Like It." The three words she'd seen there—*Rosalind: Adele Bixby*—made her happier than she'd ever been in her life. She felt six feet tall and weightless.

She believed she was in love with Jamie, but she was a little bit smitten with Bromley, too. His plan was to study the shit out of "As You Like It," with the goal of making sense of every single line. "Our actors can't just declaim the words," he said. "Before they can start acting, they have to know what

they're saying, and then they have to sell it in freaking Elizabethan English. They're going to die out there if we don't help them."

Adele had read the play twice at home, paying particular attention to Rosalind, but Bromley quickly demonstrated how poorly she'd read. She'd managed to overlook an entire passage in Rosalind's very first scene, with her cousin Celia. Bromley, who seemed as beatifically astonished by Shakespeare as her pastor was by the Good News, looked around at his students and asked how old they thought Rosalind and Celia were.

"Thirty?" someone said.

"Thirty?" Bromley said. "Thirty was *old* in the sixteenth century. These girls are your age or younger. They're a couple of bored teen-agers trying to impress each other with how jaded they are. 'Those that she makes fair, she scarce makes honest, and those that she makes honest, she makes very ill-favoredly.' Who's the 'she' here? Adele?"

"Fortune," Adele said.

"Fortune personified by a blind woman. What does that mean?"

"That luck is blind?"

"That sounds right. And what about 'honest'?"

"It means you tell the truth."

"Really? That's what 'honest' means here?"

One of Adele's former Agape friends, Carol Schott, spoke up from the other side of the circle.

"It can also mean chaste," Carol said.

"How do you know that?" Bromley said.

"Because there's a note at the bottom of the page."

Bromley gave Adele a cruel smile and asked Carol, who was militantly chaste, what the line meant.

"It's kind of mean," Carol said. "I think Celia's saying that Fortune makes pretty girls slutty and good girls unattractive."

Adele burned for several reasons.

"You nailed it," Bromley told Carol. "But there's another level to it, right? I never even saw this until right this minute. Why are the girls with ill-favored faces so virtuous? It's not because they're favored by Fortune. It's because nobody freaking wants them! The whole line is a *joke*. Right? Shakespeare's being *ironic*: 'Isn't it strange how Fortune just happens to give the loose morals to

POLYGLOTISM



In the nineteen-sixties, my father, a Corkman, was employed by Chicago Bridge & Iron, an American corporation that built industrial plants worldwide. He worked in hardhat management positions. An early project took him to Mersin, in Turkey. There, he met my mother. She had just spent a year at Langham Secretarial College, in London. They courted in English, then married at Mersin's Church of St. Anthony of Padua, the patron saint of lost things.

My mother belonged to Mersin's well-off Christian community, which was mainly of Syrian origin. This Levantine subculture socialized in French, voiced endearments in Arabic, communicated with functionaries in Turkish. Polyglotism was prized. My mother's father spoke French, Arabic, Turkish, German, English, Italian, and Ladino. He sent my mother to French-language boarding schools in Lyon and Aleppo. She used French with her four children. We called her Maman and my father Papa. My first word was "*attends*," because "*attends*" was my mother's invariable response to my cries from the crib.

That was in Neuchâtel, in Switzerland. We kept moving—to Tripoli, in Lebanon; to Amanzimtoti, in South Africa; and to Matola, in colonial Mozambique. Our nanny there, Victoria, chatted to us in the language of Lisbon, and my first ironic remark was made in Portuguese. I was four years old. The remark came in response to my parents turning off my bedroom light. "*Muito obrigado*," I said. I added, translating, "Thank you very much."

During my father's next assignment, in Ras Lanuf,

Libya, mother and children stayed in Mersin. At preschool, I rapidly acquired fluent preschool Turkish. My teacher selected me to recite a Mother's Day poem. I wore a navy-blue velvet suit handmade by my grandmother (her languages: French, Arabic, Turkish, and Greek). The poem began, "*Anneçim, dünyanın en iyi sin*." My maman, you are best in the world.

My father was posted to Iran. I didn't want to go. After a family friend procured the airplane tickets, I cursed him: "*Allah belanı versin, Georges Chalfoun!*" We moved to Kermanshah, in the Zagros Mountains. There I lost almost all my Turkish.

A year later, in 1970, we moved to Den Haag. I learned Dutch. My mother, too, learned Dutch, well enough to attend Leiden University and teach French at the Eerste Vrijzinnig-Christelijk Lyceum. Near the V.C.L. was the Lycée Français de la Haye, at the front gate of which I was deposited, without my consent, aged ten. I'd been happy at the English School of The Hague. Now I faced two years in the French education system. I had learned an important Gallic concept: the *fait accompli*.

When I was eleven, my mother signed me up for private German lessons with an enigmatic German lady. With her, I reluctantly studied a book called "*Die Drei Schwarze Katzen*." Later, I studied German more systematically. I can still affirm the dative prepositions: *aus, bei, mit, nach, seit, von, zu*, and *gegenüber*. And *außer*.

That's how we did things in my family. You went forward into foreignness. Tabbouleh, hurling, *helva*, "Inshallah," "*godverdomme*," Georges Brassens, George Best, the Dubliners, Kaptan Swing, Sinterklaas, "Shoot," Johan Cruyff, "*çok güzel*," "*ya'aburnee shuhelwa*," Louis de Funès, "*à table*," "*Le Trésor de Rackham le Rouge*," "Revolver," Roger Casement, "*Guerilla Days in Ireland*"—all of it was our culture.

I became a construction worker in County Limerick; a student at Cambridge, in England; a London barrister; a New York dad. For fifteen years, I lived Americanly, monolingually. My French and Dutch rusted like old bicycles. Then my fourth child came along. We lived on the tenth floor of an apartment building. As the ascending elevator approached, my infant daughter and I watched the floor numbers light up. I named them for her in my mother tongue: *Un, deux, trois* . . . Her first word was "*dix*."

In her eighties, Maman studied Turkish, her fourth language, at the Yunus Emre Enstitüsü in London. When she's anxious, it calms her to read her notebook of Turkish grammar. My father recently turned eighty-seven. In April, he called me on his return from a visit to Cork. He mentioned that, in the fifties, when his brother Brendan was in Ireland's north, engaged in revolutionary activities, he wrote Brendan a letter *as gaeilge*—in Gaelic. My father, always regarded by the family as the English-bound one, left school with excellent Irish but never put it to use. His visit to Ireland, where his nine brothers and sisters spent their lives while he travelled the world, overwhelmed him. Papa said, "I have missed so much." ♦



"I just don't get how some people can prefer deep-dish Impressionism."

pretty girls?' Ha-ha! Fortune has nothing to do with it! This guy blows my mind! The closer you look, the more you see—it gets better and better. Because who's playing Rosalind and Celia in 1600? Remember, it's *boy actors*. They're two boys playing two girls talking dirty about girls the way boys do!"

It was insane to attempt Shakespeare with inexperienced actors at Butte High, but Bromley had guaranteed a B-plus to any student who worked more than fifty hours on the production and an A-plus to the principal actors just for memorizing their lines. He was willing to cut the harder passages but not to alter any language. His students had collectively decided to set the play in eighteen-nineties Butte, making the court of Duke Frederick the house of a silver-mining magnate and situating the Forest of Arden in the Absarokas. As Jaques, the melancholy loner, Jamie wore a long black duster and a black cowboy hat. As Rosalind disguised as a boy, Adele wore a bolo tie and a low-slung gun belt with a six-shooter. Playing the boy, Ganymede, unleashed something in her. Swaggering and barking commands like a boy came so naturally that being her real female self began to

feel like the more challenging role. She kept cracking the other actors up. She cracked herself up. Even Carol Schott, cast as Celia, couldn't help laughing. Only Jamie and Bromley didn't laugh. Jamie stared at her as if he didn't recognize her, while Bromley's expression reached new extremes of astonishment. "You've got the gift," he told her seriously. "Jamie's good, but you're better. Are you hearing me? You've got a chance to be the real thing."

Oh, the things that teachers say and students take to heart. She wished she had a hundred more hours in her week, so she could devote every one of them to theatre.

One night in April when the boy playing Orlando was home sick and Jamie was waiting for Adele in their private coital chamber, Bromley kept her late to work on the scene where Orlando courts Rosalind playing Ganymede playing Rosalind. Gone was the wow-spouting, mind-blown Bromley. Script in hand but barely consulted, he was both her ardent young suitor and the first trained actor she'd ever played a proper scene with. A rather calamitous shift occurred in her, akin to the feel-

ing she'd had when she first saw Jamie act. She felt powerless and powerful in Bromley's hands. It was like the time when she was learning to ice-skate with her church friends, and a high-school hockey player had glided up to her and wordlessly taken her arm and towed her around the rink, weaving among the other skaters at a speed that was scary and then thrilling. Around and around the rink she went with Bromley. Finally, offstage, a door slammed, and she saw Jamie striding out of the auditorium.

"I'd better go," she said.

Bromley was grinning at her strangely. "One more time."

She did the scene one more time, not very well, and ran outside. Jamie was in a corner of the parking lot, doing one-arm presses with a cinder block. It wasn't clear where the cinder block had come from, but it was a new one, with sharp corners.

"Sorry about that," she said.

"It's all right. I need to get back in shape."

"You're in great shape."

"I haven't done shit for exercise since I met you."

Across the parking lot, Bromley's Toyota pickup started up. He drove over to them and asked if they wanted a ride.

Jamie, doing his overhead presses, ignored him. When Bromley was gone, Adele asked Jamie to walk her home.

"Might as well," he said. "Now that we're locked out."

"You could have waited inside for me."

He held the cinder block to his chest and started doing knee bends. "You want to know something about Bromley? The real reason he's in Butte?"

"He teaches here."

"The lady he messed up in the car crash? She was still in the hospital when he started doing her daughter. That's why he stayed here. Except now it's different. Now he's doing the mother. It's kind of sick, don't you think? First the daughter, then the mom?"

Disappointment washed over Adele. She wondered if Jamie was mistaken, or lying.

"I wasn't supposed to tell anyone," he said. "That was the one rule when I moved in. I had to respect his privacy. But I'm done with that. I'm done listening to anything he says. I see the way he looks at you."

"What way?"

"Like you're next on his list."

"That's crazy."

"Really?"

Jamie walked away with the cinder block. After the feeling she'd had onstage with Bromley, it was hard to sell complete innocence, and Jamie wasn't in a buying mood. She trotted after him until he stopped on the sidewalk, by a Ford Pinto with Christian bumper stickers. For a long beat, he stared at the Pinto. Then he raised the cinder block over his head and put it through the Pinto's windshield.

"Fuck!" she cried, and took off running. When she reached the next corner, she turned and saw Jamie strolling back toward the high school. She chased after him, apologizing. Yes: apologizing. For making him vandalize some devout person's car. When words failed to make him love her again, she tried actions. In the shadows behind the auditorium, she did a new thing for him that made her feel somewhat desolate. Him it made tender and remorseful.

Outside her house, after midnight, she disentangled herself from Jamie and crept up the front steps. Her mother was standing just inside the door, fully dressed.

"Was that Jamie Grennan?"

Adele murmured an apology for being late and tried to get away, but her mother grabbed her wrist. "You think I don't know about you and Jamie Grennan?"

"He plays Jaques. He walked me home."

"Carol Schott says he's the son of a wife-beater and drinks at school. She says the two of you are hot and heavy. She says the whole school knows it."

"You shouldn't believe everything you hear."

"Is that why you're home so late every night? Are you having sex with that boy?"

"No. We're rehearsing."

"I didn't like you being in that play, but it never occurred to me that you would lie to me. You with all your God talk."

"I never lied to you."

"You think I'm going to stand here and watch you ruin your life? I will talk to Mr. Longhair and tell him you're out of the play."

"You're just jealous that there's something I'm really good at. You can't stand the idea of me being with somebody who isn't fat and ugly and a loser."

Her mother slapped her in the face.

"Fat, ugly loser," Adele said.

Her mother slapped her again. "You'll be lucky," she said, "if that's the worst your boyfriend does to you."

Adele broke away and ran up to her bedroom. Strange to say, she didn't hate her mother for the slaps. They made her ashamed of herself, because she deserved them. She'd caused Jamie to smash a windshield, and the dirty thing she'd done for him still burned in her throat. She almost hoped her mother would follow through with her threat and yank her out of the play, away from Jamie.

But she also knew she was an actress, because Bromley had told her so. When her mother didn't follow through, Adele believed she'd won. She was giddy with her talent for seeming, and aware that Jamie didn't have the same talent. He played Jaques with a disdain drawn straight from life. He delivered the line "The worst fault you have is to be in love" as if it were "I haven't done shit for exercise since I met you." If he'd been more self-conscious, it might have enraged him that people took him to be acting and laughed at his intensity.

The laughter that Adele herself got was like ambrosia; she didn't so much hear it as feel it flowing straight into her veins. After curtain call on opening night, when Louanne and Dean were in the audience, she hurried up the aisle to thank her mother for coming and hear her verdict. "You're quite the little ham," her mother said.

"Did you like it?"

"It was interesting. We couldn't follow half of what you said."

Dean looked at his watch, no doubt thinking of the hours of Friday drinking he'd already missed. Adele waited for her mother to say more.

"It's very intellectual," she offered.

"Did you think it was funny?"

"I couldn't stop wondering how you memorized so many lines. I was impressed by that. I had no idea how much you liked attention."

So much for bringing the experience of art to culturally impoverished Butte.

And yet the show was a hit, with full houses on Saturday and Sunday. Bromley added a performance the following Saturday night and, without telling Adele, invited a V.I.P. from Bozeman—the artistic director of Montana's new Shakespeare in the Parks program. After

the show, the director asked Bromley to convey to Adele an invitation to audition for that summer's "Two Gentlemen of Verona."

"Wait—what?" she said.

"You heard me," Bromley said, beaming.

"What about Jamie? Is Jamie invited, too?"

"Nope."

The invitation scared her. Her only plans for the summer were to waitress full time and be with Jamie. Though she'd believed that she was a real actress, the belief had been sufficient in itself, with no implication for the future. To imagine an actual career, her name in lights, would have felt like a profanement. She told Bromley she needed to ask Jamie.

"Tell him I'll kick his ass," Bromley said, "if he tells you not to do this."

Mindful of the cinder block, she waited a week. Even then, she couldn't tell Jamie without drinking whiskey on their backstage couch. He replied, sullenly, that she could do whatever she wanted. He couldn't have gone to Bozeman anyway, because his stepdad was being paroled on July 1st. It was obvious that Jamie was trying to avoid another cinder-block incident, trying not to be controlling. Adele appreciated the effort and felt compassion for him, also guilt for being more talented. She wasn't sure she was in love with him anymore, which basically meant she wasn't, but she still had agape for him. This, plus being drunk and miscalculating her time of month, was why she told him he didn't have to use protection. She wanted to give him something special.

The next thing she knew, she was living in a Montana State University dorm room and wondering if she'd ever get her period. Both her audition and her callback had fallen flat, but the company must have figured that casting an amateur from hard-luck Butte as Lucetta would make good press. Unchaperoned in Bozeman and surrounded by trained theatre people, each more self-involved than the next, she felt as lonely and invisible as she had at five years old. She called Bromley, collect, and wept into the pay phone. He told her she just had to trust her talent and work harder than the others.

This she proceeded to do. In July,

they took the show on the road, playing in city parks all over the state. Although signs were pointing to her being the most fertile person in the state of Montana, she continued to pretend that nothing was happening—nothing worth mentioning to Jamie in her infrequent calls from pay phones. Jamie was now camped out at his grandmother's house with an aluminum baseball bat. When "Two Gentlemen" got to Butte, she saw him at the house for twenty minutes. He looked like he hadn't slept or showered in a week. He was so wound up about his stepdad, he seemed surprised when she kissed him. With no evident regret, he said he couldn't come to her show, because he had to guard the house. Only after she'd left did she cry.

Bromley came to the performance and later bought her a beer at the bar she'd once seen him walk into with Jamie. He said that it was even more incredible to watch her in a small role, where so much of what she had to do was simply be present and react.

"I was watching the other actors," he said. "They all had, like, three expressions. You had twenty. I couldn't take my eyes off you."

"I was just doing what you taught us."

"Really? Do I look like Stanislavski to you?"

He looked like the only real friend she had left in the world. Mrs. Latrobe had beaten her cancer and was returning to teach English, and Bromley was working at a bakery while he figured out his next move. He wanted to go to India, but he might stay in Butte and start an improv group—if Adele would be in it. Would she be interested in that?

After a long silence, she said she thought she might be pregnant.

"Does Jamie know?"

She shook her head.

"You have to get rid of it. Right now."

"I can't do anything until the run is over."

"Fuck the show. Are you telling me you want a baby? What are you going to do, marry Jamie?"

"I don't know."

"Adele," he said, taking her hands in his. "I think you may be the most amazing person I've ever met. You're a born actress. You can't just throw that away."

His hands were huge and soft. She

didn't want to let go of them, but he needed to gesticulate to emphasize his willingness to help her fix things, by which he meant killing the baby. This was even less thinkable than giving birth to it.

She went back to being Lucetta, in Missoula, in Kalispell, in Great Falls, and repressing the facts of the matter so mightily that they erupted only in the middle of the night, when the actress she roomed with was snoring off her whiskey sours. Every day brought a thousand little dramas, dropped lines and brilliant recoveries, missing props and onstage farts, the extramarital affair that Proteus and Julia had commenced, the gay actor's wicked commentary on it, followed by bad behavior in bars. All this Adele observed from a distance. Whether it was because she was young, because her condition was visible, or because she was hopeless as an actress, it was now official that no one in the troupe would be her friend.

MIRAGE

A neighbor travels to Göbekli Tepe and ponders
T-shaped pillars with carved gazelles and vultures;

you stay within a half-mile radius and notice
on December 23 the Scotch broom has yellow flowers.

The Sacramento Mountains checkerspot butterfly
is about to go extinct; roofers painting metal flashing

listen to Mexican music; a thief climbs a utility pole
and, stripping copper cable, electrocutes himself;

in this world of endless disjunctions and conjunctions,
you struggle to parse the zigzag flight of a butterfly.

At night you see the moon overhead has a wide
halo of light, and, though you read that the effect

is from light refracted on ice crystals through
transparent cirrus clouds, the explanation

does not elucidate light, ice, or cloud. Above
a highway to the west, patches of water shimmer;

you know the water's a mirage, yet you write
to shimmer: you shimmer and dissolve into your words.

—Arthur Sze

She passed her days immersed in any book she could lay her hands on. Only onstage did she come alive.

When Bromley finally tracked her down, in Pioneer Park in Helena, an hour before curtain, he looked crazed with exhaustion. She saw him coming and tried to hide among the other actors, but he seized her by the arm and pulled her aside. She braced herself for renewed incitements to abort her baby. But Bromley was there about a different act of violence.

"Jamie's in jail! He attacked his stepdad with a freaking baseball bat!"

Something seemed to turn in Adele's womb. "Is he all right?"

"Jamie? Jamie's fine. But, Adele, the guy is dead! Jamie bashed his skull in!"

Jamie had called Bromley from the police station the night before, asking him to find a lawyer. The facts weren't entirely in his favor—there was no sign of forced entry at his grandmother's house, and he admitted to having struck

his stepfather repeatedly. But, given the stepfather's violation of both parole and a restraining order, the lawyer was optimistic that Jamie would not be charged.

"How is he?" she said.

"He's calm. Calmer than I've ever seen him. He wants to see you."

"I have a show."

Bromley offered to wait around and take her back to Butte, but she refused. It sickened her to think that the father of the life in her was now a killer. Extremities of violence were foreign to her. She thought of stupid old Dean with his banana pancakes and his baseball jerseys, how harmless he was, how really not so terrible, and understood her mother better, and felt homesick. She still should have communicated with Jamie, but now everything about the two of them turned her stomach. She couldn't summon enough authentic feeling to even write a postcard to him.

The instant she walked into her house, at the end of the summer, her mother knew she was pregnant. Louanne allowed herself to say I told you so, and then she delicately inquired whether it might not be too late to . . . whether it was really necessary . . . But all that mattered to Adele, who was well into her fourth month, was being forgiven. In her relief at being home again, free of the actors and their pettiness and narcissism, she felt the pieces of her life tumble into place. She'd been possessed by an evil spirit. She'd sinned and sinned, and now she was ready to accept responsibility, if only her mother would take her back. It was exactly as Luke had said: she finally had a real reason to go to Jesus, because now she had things to repent. She needed God's mercy and understood the hundredfold rejoicing in Heaven.

Her mother didn't care for the God talk, and didn't slaughter any fatted calf, but she said that Adele could live with her. She could complete her last semester of school, resume her babysitting duties, and then, when the time came, put her child up for adoption. The only condition was that Adele have nothing more to do with Jamie Grennan. He'd got off scot-free with premeditated murder! According to the coroner, there was evidence of nine blows to the victim's head and neck. Nine blows! Could Adele

imagine? If she took up with Jamie again, she could find herself a different place to live.

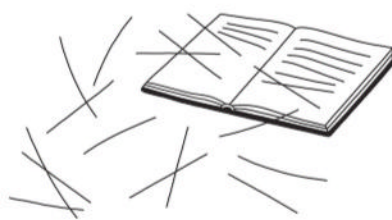
And so she became one of those pregnant girls you saw at school. When Bromley came to the house, she wouldn't let him in. The first time she went back to Agape, she knelt in front of Carol Schott, begged her forgiveness, and thanked her for having been a more faithful friend in Christ than a sinner like her deserved. Carol was staying on for a year as an adviser to the group, before starting a career in ministry. She joined Adele on her knees, and the two of them prayed together, thanking the Lord their shepherd for His mercy in returning His lost lamb to the fold. There wasn't a dry eye in the house.

It was Carol who convinced her that she had to go to Jamie and tell him she was carrying his baby. Her mother reluctantly assented, so long as Carol went with her. Jamie's mother and sister had moved back to Great Falls, but he was still at his grandmother's. He came to the door, at three-thirty on a weekday afternoon, with a beer in his hand.

"Hey, Carol," he said.

He seemed remarkably calm, but he wouldn't look at Adele. When they sat down in the living room, he kept his eyes on Carol, asked her questions, seemed interested. Adele didn't exist, and this was fine with her. She'd come prepared to joyfully embrace the punishment she deserved. Finally, Carol said that Adele had something to tell him.

Jamie didn't look at Adele while she spoke, didn't even seem to hear her. But



when she was done he laughed and turned to Carol. "Did she tell you she wanted me to fuck her without a rubber?"

Carol exercised Christian forbearance. "She can do whatever she wants with it," Jamie said. "I'm leaving town anyway. I've got a cousin in Florida with a fishing boat."

"It is your child," Carol said gravely.

"So I'm an absent dad. She was an absent girlfriend."

Adele never saw him again.

It was notable how quickly, after being consumed by a minor role in minor Shakespeare, she tired of starring as the repentant sinner. To return to the fold had been high drama. But how many times could she repent and mean it? To belong to the fold was to stand there and go "Baa-a-a-a." God's existence dwindled when she didn't need it, whereas Bromley was still there in the flesh, living in his mobile home, easy to visit after school. He was eager to study with her, content to give her foot rubs, and yet, withal, a fully grown man whom she seemed to amaze. He no longer minded that she was pregnant. He contrasted the Bible's shaming morality with the natural morality of Shakespeare, where evil was whatever got in the way of making babies. As Benedick said, albeit grumpily, "The world must be peopled."

Adele wasn't the first girl to fall for the tiny, sweet-smelling person she'd been carrying. Nor was she the first to balk at the papers she was given to sign. But she was also an actress, and the stage had been set for a scene: her mother standing grimly by the hospital bed, Bromley visible outside the doorway, the woman from the agency handing Adele a fountain pen. The script called for the teen-ager to sign on the line, the mother to follow the agency woman out into the hallway, and the best friend to enter and give the teen-ager a consoling hug. But it was much more thrilling to improvise.

After Adele and her mother had fought, bitterly, about her decision to keep the baby, and then more bitterly about her refusal to find Jamie in Florida and demand child support, Bromley invited her to live with him while things cooled down at home. And so she became one of those teen-age moms you saw outside a single-wide.

She enjoyed the role of mother, the importance it conferred on her, but the natural morality of Shakespearean comedy held less appeal when your nipples were raw and you never got to sleep; there was a reason the final curtain fell before the babies were actually made. Everyone assumed that she was sleeping with Bromley, but he was still "doing"

the woman he'd hurt in the car crash. When he returned from the woman or from the bakery, the trailer filled up with his energy and the insights he'd had while driving home, his undiminished hopes for Adele. Her baby, Jasper, astonished him and was also conveniently not his. Life was an orchard and Bromley a fruitarian.

Jasper was two months old when Shakespeare in the Parks invited Adele to audition again, this time for "Twelfth Night." The invitation saddened her so much she almost didn't mention it to Bromley. He, however, was ecstatic. Half the actresses he'd known in San Francisco had picked up a kid somewhere! How many untrained teen-agers got asked to audition twice? Bromley was sure that, if she got a part, the director would be cool with his coming along and looking after Jasper; they'd figure something out. Adele wasn't so sure, but she couldn't deny that working on her elocution and studying "Twelfth Night," which they proceeded to do in their line-by-line way, cleared her mind and lifted something in her.

The only role she wanted was Viola. By the time she auditioned, she didn't need the book, and she could feel the advantage of having analyzed every line. But she didn't even get a callback. Bromley raged against the director's gutlessness, but Adele was competing against actors with a hundred times more experience. It was now clear that she'd been nothing but a novelty act the previous summer; that the real actors had been counting the days until they didn't have to share the stage with her.

Ten days before the play opened, she got a call from Bozeman. The actress who'd been cast as Viola had received another, more attractive offer, and her emergency replacement, a thirty-six-year-old M.S.U. professor, had then shattered her shoulder in a riding accident. The trouper from Chicago who played Olivia was now throwing fits about rehearsing with an intern.

"This is it!" Bromley cried. "Every actor needs a break."

"I can't do it."

"You already *did* it."

"I didn't even get a callback. Everybody will know I wasn't supposed to be there."

"Are you kidding me? Everybody wants you. And that's not even when you're acting. When you're acting—Jesus!"

She didn't believe him, and when they drove over to Bozeman and the director declared her performance "different"—not in a bad way, different in a fresh way—she didn't believe him, either. She was persistently nauseated by her fraudulence, except when she rehearsed. Then something else took over. Then she could see that, although the other actors were better practiced at seeming, their bodies and faces more open to animation, they didn't really change when they performed. She, by contrast, felt transported from herself—abducted by alien lines, written four centuries earlier, and doing their bidding.

Because the company needed her, Bromley was permitted to join the tour as a roadie and care for Jasper. He dealt with the diapers and the bottles and Jasper's first cold. Untethered from her baby physically, Adele became less emotionally tethered as well; became Viola/Cesario, the lovable girl/boy who lived on the babyless side of the final curtain. Now that she was starring, everyone paid attention to her. Anything she needed, some crew member ran to get. Adele the player turned out to be shockingly impatient and demanding.

And Bromley applauded it. The worse she behaved, the prouder he became, because it proved that he'd fully unleashed the potential of a teen-ager from Butte. At first, Adele kept checking in with him, making sure he was O.K. doing most of the child care, but before long she took him for granted. Only late at night, when she returned to her room and found Bromley changing a diaper, did she glimpse the depression pooling in the shadows, the eighteen years of mom duty she was facing, and loathe the phony thing she'd been all day. The obvious solution was to stop returning to her room at all. She took to bunking with the Olivia actress, who had turned her on to pot.

Back in Butte, pushing a thrift-store stroller past houses in foreclosure, she felt so disgusted with her behavior on tour that she was tempted to return to her church. Instead, for comfort, and by way of thanks and recompense, she gave Bromley the long-deferred treat

of sleeping with her. She waitressed at So Help Me Cod, came home coated with lemon drawn butter, and tended to Jasper while Bromley worked his night shift at the bakery. She was happy to see him in the morning because it meant that she could hand over the baby and light up a joint. Stoned sex became her favored escape from the objectively depressing reality of her days. When her buzz faded, she stood at the mirror that hung from one hinge of the trailer's broken medicine cabinet, saw bloodshot eyes and some sort of stress eczema, and rinsed the disagreeable object that Bromley had insisted she get for contraception. There were dishes of baby food crusting over on the kitchenette counter. Waitress clothes in a fish-smelling heap. Stacks of yellowed paperback classics that she could no longer imagine reading.

Bromley, for his part, was planning her next move. He wanted her to go to college, or at least to Chicago, which he was convinced was theatre's most happening city. To placate him, she agreed to study the role of Juliet for the coming season of Shakespeare in the Parks. But hours for studying were scarce, and she kept putting it off.

The disagreeable object proved no match for the most fertile person in Montana. In the weeks after Christmas, dulled by cannabis, rendered vulnerable to religion by depression, she understood her late period as God's judgment on her sins as a player. Although she wasn't exactly excelling as a mother, in God's eyes abortion was still murder. She reasoned that, if Bromley was up for raising someone else's kid, he might be even readier to raise one of his own.

The scene that ensued consisted of Bromley chewing the scenery, Jasper waking up and wailing, and her waiting for the shouting to stop so she could get high again.

"It's not a human being! It's a freaking pea-size clump of cells! Which would you rather flush down the drain—your future as an actress or a pea-size clump of cells? You get a second chance in theatre but not a third. It's like Oscar Wilde said: once is a misfortune, twice looks like carelessness. You think you can keep popping out babies and handing them over? Do I not get a say in the matter? It's *my* pea-size clump of cells, too! I

TABLE MANNERS



I'm sure that in my parents' minds there was such a thing as table manners. They talked about the proper way to hold a fork and knife, the polite way to eat soup, and so on. But my father, a doctor, set fire to the rules more often than he enforced them. His preferred way of ignoring etiquette was to bring his medical magazines to the table and, while we were eating, show us pictures of diseases and bodily damage. I first saw gunshot wounds one day over a lunch of macaroni and cheese. I remember this specifically, because I have never since been able to eat mac and cheese without a slight revulsion.

If I don't hold my aversion to mac and cheese against my father, it's because I came to love being at table with my family. And *The New England Journal of Medicine*, for instance, was not entirely out of place, because our dining room was the family souk, a locus of exchange and argument. The subjects were diverse and unpredictable: Dickens, the Mighty Sparrow, snow, scabies, the existence of God, stenography, whether Caribs ("our" tribe) had ever eaten Arawaks, et cetera.

As important as the variety of things discussed was the fact that all were encouraged to speak. My mother and father wanted to hear what those around the table thought, and it didn't seem to matter whether the quality of thought was high or low. I remember, during one meal, my uncle Charles arguing that, since different bodies react to alcohol in different ways, it was government overreach to designate a blood-alcohol level of .08 as the standard for drunkenness, and that drivers

themselves were better qualified to judge when they were too drunk to get behind the wheel.

Fifty-five years later, I still remember his argument, the loud derision it elicited, and the defiance with which it was defended. I remember the house (on Neil Way, in Ottawa), the dining room, the table, and what we were eating: *buljol* with hops bread. It was my first inkling that being wrong, when with one's family, is sometimes as vital as being right, because it keeps the conversation going in a way that rightness does not. (I have no doubt that those dinner conversations influenced the way I approach writing. Heterogeneity feels familial and inviting; I'm drawn to the appearance of the unpredictable, a startling image or idea that, taken out of its original context, brings light to an emotion or a situation or, simply, to itself.)

Of course, the liveliness of immigrant-family mealtimes is a commonplace, a cliché, the stuff of dull stories, moldy jokes, and so on. If I cherish the cliché, it's because it contains a mythic sense of communality, which, as a child, I experienced as a duality, almost a contradiction.

My parents had left Trinidad when I was a year old, in order to prepare a home for us in Ottawa, and entrusted me to my grandmother. When I arrived in Canada, three years later, I was not at all certain that I wanted to stay with them. For a time, I would have happily given up my mother and father for a chance to be back in Trinidad, the only world I had known. The love I felt for the island of my birth—my grief at its loss—was primal, while the feelings I had for my parents were tentative, uncertain, and often hostile.

It was cruelly ironic that, in my earliest years in Canada, the people who had severed my ties to Trinidad were my only channel back to it. My land was embedded in my parents' accents, in the food they made, in the Anansi stories they told, in their pride in Eric Williams and C. L. R. James, their jokes, their arguments, their songs, and, most poignantly, in their anecdotes about people I longed for: my grandma Ada, in particular.

The dining room was where I sifted for material about Trinidad. It did not occur to my five-year-old self—how could it?—that my parents were as desperate to narrate Trinidad as I was to listen for it. For them, time around the table eating the food of their home and retelling the stories they had heard there was a necessary reconnection with what they had lost—and they had lost more than I had, having been in their twenties when they left. Nor did I understand how much of themselves they added to the Trinidad they were passing on to me, bending the land toward them as they spoke.

These days, when I'm asked what Trinidad means to me, I usually speak about the wound that is emigration and the balm that comes from talking a place back into existence. Trinidad and Tobago—the actual country—ceased to be my homeland long ago.

My homeland is the table around which we talked about home. ♦

swear, Adele, if you keep this thing I'm done. Finito. I've got better things to do."

"Like what," she said dully. "Swimming with the turds in the Ganges?"

"It beats staying here and watching you shit on your gift."

"I'm going to go stay with my mom," she said. "I'm sick of trying to be what you think I should be."

"You like the other thing better? The Christian-mommy thing? It sure doesn't look that way."

"I'm sick of you pressuring me!"

At the shriek in her voice, Jasper erupted in wails again. She kissed him all over his head, kissed him and murmured to him and kissed him, only to be gripped by the loathsome image of a mother pretending to be more devoted than she actually was, in order to score a point in a fight. Even more loathsome was the thought that followed: *she was overacting*. She could have scored her point more effectively, more movingly, by giving Jasper only one or two kisses.

There was nothing more horrible than being an actor.

"Fine, then," Bromley said. "Go and stay with your mom."

Family time was no longer a misnomer chez Bixby. When Adele went home with Jasper that evening, Dean and her half brothers were watching TV together in the living room. Her mother led her to the kitchen and briskly laid out her terms: seventy dollars a week for room and board, payable every Friday. This was for Adele's own good, Louanne explained. Better that there be no resentments about money, better that Adele

learn that rash decisions had lasting costs.

Because Adele's bedroom now belonged to the elder of her brothers, she ferried Jasper and her bags down to the cellar, which Dean had fixed up with carpet remnants and wood-look paneling. From above, through the floorboards, she heard woofing actors and canned laughter. Her mother came down the stairs with an armload of linens, dragged the old crib out of the unfinished half of the cellar, and took the plastic sheeting off it.

"I gather Mr. Longhair came to his senses?"

"I'm the one who left."

"I never understood what kind of man plays nurse to another man's baby."

"Definitely not something you had to worry about Dean doing."

"He put food on the table for you, Adele. He gave you a stable home. I honestly thought you were going to make something of yourself. You were so smart, so pretty—I don't understand what happened to you."

"I guess it's nice that you care enough to be disappointed."

Jasper had awakened, and Adele set him down. He stood swaying and then staggered toward the crib and grasped its bars. His eyes were on her, inviting her to be proud of his verticality.

"Aren't you glad to see your grandson?"

Louanne looked unhappy enough to cry. "You need to give me time."

"For what?"

"Do you not understand what you've done? No husband, no money—do you really not get it? You'll need to find day care, and that's where your money will

go. You can't afford college. You can't afford training. You'll be too busy working a bad job to find a better job. How can a person so intelligent be so stupid?"

"I'm taking responsibility for my actions."

"There was a better way to take responsibility. You refused to do it. And now there's nothing to be done."

"Yeah, well. Just so you know, I'm pregnant."

Her mother stared at her.

"That's why I'm here. Bromley doesn't want it."

"And you do?"

"It's a person. There's a new little person inside me."

Her mother snatched up the linens she'd set down on the divan. Dropped a towel, picked it up. "Then you're not staying here," she said. "You can wreck your own life, but I won't let you wreck mine. One baby in the house was already too much."

"I said I'd pay room and board."

"Why should I believe you'll stop at two? That it won't happen again with the next man, and the one after that?"

"Where do you think I get *that* from?"

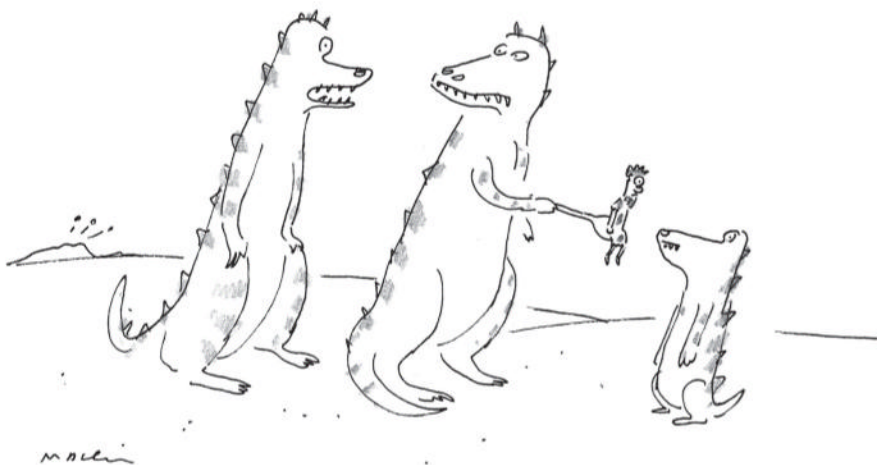
"I married the fathers of my children. But you! You're too stupid to be careful, too Christian to fix it. I don't know what I did to deserve you, but you're not staying in this house. Not even one night."

"I'll leave in the morning."

"No, you're going back to Mr. Longhair. You're his problem, not mine."

Carrying Jasper upstairs to his stroller, returning to the cellar for her bags, she was pierced with mourning for Viola and for the imperious girl who'd played her. It occurred to her that she'd been in mourning ever since the summer ended; that the only real mistake she'd made was to stop being a player. Might Bromley be right after all? Was there really nothing more standing in her way than a pea-size clump of cells?

It didn't even matter, because she had nowhere else to go. She phoned Bromley and asked him to come and get her in his truck. By midnight, the two of them had worked out a new set of terms. At the cost of a tiny human life, she would study "Romeo and Juliet," stop smoking pot, and permit Bromley to be her coach and manager. In return for these concessions, Bromley



"If we continue to spoon-feed him, he'll never learn to fend for himself."

would continue to help her care for Jasper. And she would show her mother who was stupid.

When the Goodman's production of "Hedda Gabler" travelled east from Chicago, thirteen years later, even Adele wasn't vain enough to believe that she was the main reason, but she had supplied a smart idea: The play remained emotionally inert if audiences didn't fall for Hedda, and the key to making Hedda lovable was to play the extremity of her entrapment for laughs. From a certain perspective, the traps that Ibsen had laid for his characters were hilariously well made, and the one character who got the ghastly humor *within the play itself* was Hedda. Rather than a cruel Hedda, a fragile Hedda, a tragically deluded Hedda, Adele saw a woman who was comically at her wits' end. When the artistic director saw it, too, the part was hers.

The show opened in New York in early November. "The design would be more suffocating than sumptuous"—spoke one Ben Brantley, in the only review that mattered—"were it not for the fresh air that Adele Bixby brings to the title role. Her Hedda is a revelation." The remainder of the run sold out in forty-eight hours. Business cards appeared in Adele's dressing room. She bought sunglasses to wear on the street, and her agent, Ginny Dulles, announced that she was coming to New York.

Virginia Dulles was the opposite of Louanne Bixby—even a hundred children couldn't exhaust her need to mother them. How she found time for all her clients was a mystery, since it was impossible to speak to her for less than an hour. She had welling eyes and a crooning sentimentality, a related fondness for a bottle of Chablis at lunchtime, but at the mention of a larger East or West Coast agency, for which a client might leave her, her eyes dried and her voice lost its croon. "When you're in with me, you're in," she said. "And when you're out with me you're dead."

With Ginny's help, Adele had enjoyed satisfying runs as Kate in Seattle, as Rosalind in Dallas, as Nora in Atlanta, before getting her break with the Goodman. The only downside to this was the restriction of her freedom. She missed the ease of escaping from sexual entanglements at the end of a run, and now

she had to actually show up as the mother she'd theoretically been sorry she couldn't be when she was on the road. For a while, each homecoming of hers had been a delirious affair, Jasper flying toward her with outstretched arms, Adele dropping to her knees to receive a package of pure joy, but his joy had diminished even before she settled in Chicago, and she'd made peace with her secondary role in his life. It sufficed to be the only biological parent Jasper knew, to have that card to play if she and Bromley disagreed about his upbringing, which they very seldom did.

Bromley had lost his ponytail and worked respectably for the Chicago archdiocese, teaching English and drama at Holy Trinity. He'd invested a small inheritance in a Bucktown duplex, where he and Jasper lived with Bromley's lady friend of several years, a Polish-born chemistry teacher whom Adele referred to privately as Madame Curie. Jasper was intense, like his genetic father, but more popular at school, gifted at math and piano. He called Bromley Bromley, rather than Dad, and for parity he called Adele Adele, which she'd learned to live with.

Although she was proud of her son and enjoyed his intelligent company, his visits to her apartment felt increasingly obligatory. Her second bedroom, which added significantly to her rent, stood empty six nights out of seven, its walls institutionally unadorned, despite her urging Jasper to make it his own. She could feel a similar formality in her performance as a mother, a stiffness that contrasted unfavorably with the ease that Madame Curie had with Jasper. His impending adolescence seemed unlikely to improve the picture.

New York was a welcome break from all that. The day after Thanksgiving, she walked up Seventh Avenue in the sun's harsh winter footlighting, a free woman dodging day-tripping families and packs of students on vacation, through Manhattan aromas of roasting nuts and overheated pretzels, to the Trattoria Dell'Arte, where Ginny Dulles was waiting for her.

As soon as they were seated, beneath a giant disembodied tit, Ginny reached across the table to stroke Adele's hair and

call her "my darling," an upgrade from her habitual "my dear." The top priority, she said, was cementing Adele's relationship with the Goodman, since Adele was committed to remaining in Chicago *for Jasper's sake*—Ginny's emphasis didn't appear to be ironic—but the phones at her office had been ringing non-stop: her darling's days of having to audition for stage roles were officially at an end. "By the way," she added, "John Cusack tells me Tabitha's in rehab."

Nothing Ginny said was ever just by the way. Tabitha had been a rising star in Chicago, some years ahead of Adele. Now she was one of the departed.

"It's such a tragic waste," Ginny said, pouring Chablis. "Present company excepted, there couldn't have been a more perfect fit for

the Goodman. But she got it in her head that Chicago was too small. Thirty-three years old, one decent film role on her résumé, and she imagines Hollywood is going to roll out the red carpet. Did you see her in 'Strange Neighbors'? Do you know what they pulled that show for? In the November sweeps?"

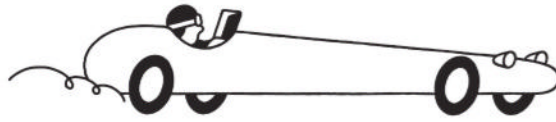
"Yes, you told me."

"They pulled it for warmed-over 'Wonder Years.' And that's the end of it, you know. There's no recovering from a bomb that big, not in Hollywood. Tabitha will find a theatre if she can get herself cleaned up, but it won't be the Goodman."

Apparently all mothers, even surrogate mothers, were alike, but at least Adele no longer had to fear monitory parables from her real mother. Because who was stupid now? In addition to degrees from Montana State and DePaul, she had a small enough credit-card balance that she'd flown Louanne to Chicago for the closing night of "Hedda" there. Adele was long past expecting her mother to admit error. It was enough to see her gazing up at the towers on Michigan Avenue, to see her marvelling at the quantity of roses in Adele's dressing room. The most excellent thing had happened to Louanne—her daughter had become a star!—and the person to whom she gushed about it was the daughter. ♦



THE CRITICS



Books

FOREVER YOUNG

Leslie Fiedler's classic and controversial study of American fiction.

By Becca Rothfeld

He made chutzpah a literary form!" proclaims a blurb on the back cover of a collection of essays and stories by the literary critic and enfant terrible Leslie Fiedler. It is just the sort of affronting remark that Fiedler was known to venture, and there's reason to suspect that he wrote the blurb himself; the telltale sign is that it concludes with his favorite jolt of punctuation. Exclamation marks, generally rare in works of sober scholarship, are strewn with abandon throughout his classic and controversial study "Love and Death in the American Novel," originally published in 1960 and reissued by New York Review Books this spring. The book, Fiedler's most important and most notorious, was designed to unsettle what he once derided as "the conventional reasonable voice of our typical criticism." The result is an incredible repository of vexations, bafflements, witticisms, and brilliancies. Ostensibly a history of American fiction from 1789 to 1959, it is in fact "a kind of gothic novel," as Fiedler described it, with a quick pulse and a wry, expansive style. It is also erudite and impressively wide-ranging, treating books both high and low, veering with ease and humor from Ralph Ellison's "Invisible Man" and the novels of Nathaniel Hawthorne to long-forgotten potboilers.

Leslie Aaron Fiedler was born in New Jersey in 1917, within fifteen years of his fellow-critics Lionel Trilling and Irving Howe, yet he feels worlds apart from those decidedly postwar figures. They are creatures of the mid-century, whereas Fiedler belongs, in spirit, to the nineteen-sixties. Not only was he ar-

rested, in 1967, "for permitting marijuana to be smoked" in his house (an allegation that he indignantly denied), he infamously recommended that high-school teachers read the New Age guru and psychedelic enthusiast Timothy Leary to better relate to their students. In Fiedler's later years, when he developed a full-blown passion for chasing trends, he was only too happy to play the part of the improbably hip elder, sporting an unkempt beard and defending the worst sort of popitism ("It seems to me the novel is intrinsically much more like TV and comic books than it is like prose epic") in a 1974 appearance on "Firing Line."

But it was not always so. Until the start of the seventies and especially throughout the fifties, Fiedler was discerning without being snobbish, avant-garde without being faddish. He took a Freudian and Jungian tack long before such methods became commonplace in the academy, reading books' unconscious longings and phobias through the scrim of their overt proclamations. Literature, in his view, was a susurrus of stifled screams, a missive from the netherworld of the collective imaginary. The American novel served as an inadvertent guide to the country's cultural "mythologies"—one of Fiedler's most frequently repeated words.

He debuted his tactics in 1948, when he scandalized the literary establishment by publishing "Come Back to the Raft Ag'in, Huck Honey!" in *Partisan Review*, the flagship journal of the intellectual elite. In those pages, Fiedler dared to argue that many of America's boyish and putatively innocent classics are in fact fantasies of interracial, ho-

mosexual romance. Novels like "Huckleberry Finn" and "Moby-Dick" represent a vision "so sentimental, so outrageous, so desperate, that it redeems our concept of boyhood from nostalgia to tragedy," a dream in which the white settler is embraced by those "he has most utterly offended," those he has enslaved and colonized.

"Love and Death," which expands on the thesis first introduced in "Come Back to the Raft Ag'in" for five hundred exhilarating pages, was ahead of its time in ways both good and bad. It anticipated the sociological style of reading that has since become de rigueur in English departments, for which the book was heartily chastened when it first appeared. Howe accused Fiedler of "putting literature on the couch" and reducing writers to "cases," and the anonymous author of a Briefly Noted review in this magazine lamented that "Mr. Fiedler is mettlesome and learned; what he still needs to learn is that novel-writing is an aesthetic, not a sociological, activity." Subsequent scholars would beg to differ, sometimes at the expense of more evaluative or humanistic modes of reading.

But there is one respect in which "Love and Death" is antithetical to the academic tradition it predated. It is a polemical, spirited salvo that never pretends to be a work of dispassionate social science. Its tone is decisive, but it speaks with the imperious authority of taste, not the desiccated one of surveys and statistics. Fiedler earned a Ph.D. in English at the University of Wisconsin and spent his life in various universities, first as a professor at the University of Montana, where he taught from 1941 to



"Love and Death in the American Novel" is itself "a kind of gothic novel," with a quick pulse and a wry, expansive style.

1965, then at the University of Buffalo, where he remained until he died, in 2003, but he never submitted to the sclerotic conventions of academic writing. “I have, I admit, a low tolerance for detached chronicling and cool analysis,” he once confessed in a review. “I long for the raised voice, the howl of rage or love.” And, in “Love and Death,” how he howls!

The book starts exactly where America did: in England. By Fiedler’s lights, Samuel Richardson’s novel “Clarissa,” from 1748, is the founding document of Anglophone fiction. The novel as we know it began with the spectacle of seduction—with the titular Clarissa trying (and failing) to evade the clutches of the dastardly Lovelace. In its archetypal form, the seduction plot features a sybaritic aristocrat who attempts to debauch an upstanding daughter of the bourgeoisie. His victim, in her unassailable purity, resists him, thereby proving that the arrivistes populating the ranks of England’s most upwardly mobile class had a moral edge over the nobility.

It is frustrating—and characteristic of his somewhat monomaniacal approach—that Fiedler does not consider,

alongside the seduction plot, its obvious complement, the marriage plot. “Clarissa” follows a nobleman who rapes a virtuous woman, but Richardson’s other seminal contribution to the development of the novel, “Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded,” from 1740, offers a similar narrative with a happier ending: Pamela, a servant, rejects the advances of her wealthy employer and thereby induces him to marry her. Still, Fiedler shows convincingly enough that American writers’ attempts to adapt the seduction narrative to our concerns—to reimagine it so as to preserve our enduring sense of ourselves as innocents—explain our literature’s peculiar aversions and resultant compensations.

In its original form, however, the seduction plot was a European specialty. It flattered its largely bourgeois audience by vilifying the aristocracy and entrenching this new class’s mores—by effectuating what Fiedler characterizes as “the bourgeois redefinition of all morality in terms of sexual purity.” In what Fiedler called the “Sentimental Love Religion,” a doctrine that the seduction plot popularized, women were objects of worship, too immaculate to deflower.

Marriage was the ultimate good, akin to a kind of deliverance, but any actual, physical consummation could come only at the cost of violation.

How could a plot so particular to a European context be transposed to ours? In a 1948 essay, Trilling enumerated “the things which are lacking to give the American novel the thick social texture of the English novel—no state; barely a specific national name; no sovereign; no court; no aristocracy; no church; no clergy.” Fiedler is right to note that Richardson’s “class-determined fable had to be adapted to the needs of a society quite different from the one which had bred it.” Similarly, he continues, the gothic confections that flourished in Europe at the end of the eighteenth century made little sense in the brave New World. Books like Ann Radcliffe’s “The Italian,” from 1797, and Matthew Gregory Lewis’s “The Monk,” from 1796, depicted “symbols of authority, secular or ecclesiastic, in ruins—memorials to a decaying past.” They were set in crumbling castles and moldering dungeons—that is, amid the rubble of a collapsing social order.

But America was terra nova, and to write about its literature is “to write about the fate of certain European genres in a world of alien experience,” Fiedler concludes. At the country’s inception, it fancied itself, in Fiedler’s words, “an escape from culture and a renewal of youth,” a “world without a significant history or a substantial past,” a realm that would “play out the imaginary childhood of Europe.”

It is no surprise that an avowedly juvenile country would produce an avowedly juvenile fiction. Many of our classics, like “Huckleberry Finn,” are *about* children, and many more masquerade as adventures *for* children: the “Leatherstocking Tales” of James Fenimore Cooper, the haunted offerings of Edgar Allan Poe, even the magisterial “Moby-Dick,” which for stretches presents itself as a jaunt aboard a boat (or so Fiedler argues). All of these works proffer visions of escape from civilization and thereby from maturity. Their protagonists tend to be runaways—men who join whaling expeditions in their haste to dodge the malaise that sets in on shore, boys who board rafts floating down the Mississippi to evade their guardians and their chores.



“Maybe it’ll feel more like Heaven once my ears pop.”

Stylistically, these books are often surreal and oneiric, with the gauzy texture of childhood reverie. “Our fiction is essentially and at its best nonrealistic, even anti-realistic,” Fiedler writes.

A world without a past—a world of eternal infancy—must be a world without sex, and in Fiedler’s eyes no literature is quite as pathologically prudish as ours. Even as European writers were aging out of the Sentimental Love Religion and confronting the dramas of adultery in novels such as “*Madame Bovary*,” from 1856, and “*Effi Briest*,” from 1895, their American counterparts remained too squeamish and too genteel to face up to their carnal appetites. Fiedler writes, for instance, that Theodore Dreiser “came of the kind of people who copulate in the dark and live out their lives without ever seeing their sexual partners nude.” Dreiser’s subject was not lust but the “consequences of seduction,” his tone not erotic but didactic. In his work, women were still ethereal innocents who had yet to become believable human beings.

Our female characters have always been casualties of the Sentimental Love Religion, and, in the eighteen-hundreds, they became children, excluded from the domain of sexuality by virtue of prepubescence—or, better yet, by premature death. Little Eva, the cloyingly saintly child in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s “*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*” (1851–52), succumbs to an illness and is thereby rescued from the prospect of adult sexuality. “There lies before the Little Evas of the world no course of action that would not sully them,” Fiedler observes. Even if they wed, as upstanding women must, they will be “tinged no matter how slightly with the stain of sexuality.” This logic reaches its natural conclusion in the work of Edgar Allan Poe, in which necrophiliac imagery abounds. “The only safe woman,” Fiedler writes mordantly, “is a dead woman.” Even authors who refrained from killing off their female characters may as well have, for all the complexity their stick figures attained.

Many writers did not even attempt to depict anyone but men, and Fiedler notes that many of the greatest American books stage retreats from “the world of women to the haunts of womanless men.” On the Pequod in “*Moby-Dick*” and the raft in “*Huckleberry Finn*,” there is room for

a “pure marriage of males—sexless and holy, a kind of counter-matrimony.” That this counter-marriage is often between a white man and a man of color (Ishmael and Queequeg, Huck and Jim) removes it even further from the suffocating confines of polite society. In both of these novels, actual sex is displaced, supplanted by horror and violence—the killing of the whales in “*Moby-Dick*,” the tarring and feathering of a pair of ruffians in “*Huckleberry Finn*.”

In Europe, it is the past that haunts and terrorizes; here, in the realm of ahistoricity, it is our own illicit desire that pursues us through our nightmares. Where the European gothic had identified horror “with the super-ego,” with the restrictive customs of a dying culture, the American gothic “identified evil with the id,” with suppressed lusts. In 1960, summarizing “*Love and Death*” in a review, Trilling wrote that American writers “conceived the scene of terror to be not in ancient castles and the gruesome vaults of ruined abbeys, that is to say, not in the political and social past, but in forest and cave,” in the outer wilderness that represents and reflects the wilderness within.

Some of Fiedler’s readings are irresistible: the homoerotic subtexts in “*Moby-Dick*” are so overt that they are practically texts. Some are adventurous but plausible enough if you squint: Huck and Jim share such a powerful affection that I can be talked into detecting a sexual twinge in their more extravagant endearments. But sometimes Fiedler is downright unconvincing. Are Henry James’s heroines, surely among the most extraordinary female characters in literary history, really one-dimensional idols? Is the subject of “*Lolita*,” a book that pays painstaking attention to its eponym’s desperation, really “the seduction of a middle-aged man by a twelve-year-old girl”? And, while we’re at it, is “*Moby-Dick*” really a children’s book in any respect? And doesn’t James Baldwin’s “*Giovanni’s Room*,” published in 1956, four years before Fiedler’s study, grapple directly with queer sexuality?

Whether Fiedler is entirely right, however, is the wrong question. A work of this magnitude, with a thesis this am-

bitious, can be right only from certain angles and in certain lights. But a five-hundred-page study of the American novel which is incontestable at every turn would have to be a work of rote description, not one of impassioned interpretation—that is, it would have to be tedious. Fiedler is capable of aggravating us but not of boring us. What makes “*Love and Death*” so worth reading is also what makes it so worth disagreeing with.

Several of its omissions are galling indeed. In a 1960 review in *The New Republic*, Howe wrote that the book “rides a one-track thesis about American literature . . . never relenting into doubt by qualification, and simply ignoring those writers and books that might call the

thesis into question.” There is something to this complaint. It is only by overlooking countervailing traditions in American literature that Fiedler can wrangle his material into some semblance of linearity—and, worse, he often declines to discuss writers who bear directly on the themes and tropes he is examining.

He is very good on the ways in which male writers have flattened and fetishized women in American fiction—and very bad at engaging directly with the work of female novelists, or even noting that they exist. With the exceptions of Stowe and Radcliffe, few women writers receive any appreciable treatment in Fiedler’s book. Edith Wharton, in particular, is clearly relevant to his theme yet glaringly absent from his study. Not only did she write a novel about adultery that corresponds almost exactly to the classic seduction schema as he describes it, but her corpus demonstrates that American literature did eventually evolve to accommodate several of the Anglophone novel’s original themes. Once the scions of the old Dutch families had ossified into a sort of aristocracy, we Americans embarked on adulterous affairs just as injudiciously as the Europeans.

“*Love and Death*” was not the only work in which Fiedler went too far. In 1970, he published “*Cross the Border—Close the Gap*,” a very interesting and very misguided essay that, to its credit, identified the major question of its era



(and ours): whether books, confronted with cultural marginalization, must retrench and become cheap entertainment in order to survive. Fiedler thought so, and his painful keenness to “keep up” explains the irrelevance of his later work, so desperately modern that it now seems irretrievably dated. “The traditional novel is dead—not dying, dead,” he thundered, before confidently predicting that Henry James would be ejected from the canon, where he is entrenched to this day, and that there would soon be a resurgence of enthusiasm for the nineteenth-century writer James Fenimore Cooper, who remains an obscure curiosity (though he does feature prominently in “Love and Death”).

Still, what matters most is not whether Fiedler’s work is unimpeachably scholarly but whether it is *fun*, which “Love and Death” most certainly is, even and especially when it is also maddening. By Fiedler’s own admission, it is a book that is “trying to become itself as wildly Gothic, as full of grotesque jokes as, say, ‘Moby-Dick’ or ‘Huckleberry Finn.’” It does not demand to be accepted or rejected wholesale so much as it offers a framework for evaluating the national imaginary and our attendant art.

In the years since “Love and Death” first appeared, the social pressures that produced America’s finest grotesqueries have relaxed considerably. Queer desire is the explicit subject of novels by, among many others, Eileen Myles, Edmund White, and Garth Greenwell; the Sentimental Love Religion persists in a vestigial form in some quarters, but heterosexual sex, too, has come out of the closet. Philip Roth and John Updike can be accused of many things, but balking at full-frontal heterosexuality is not one of them.

Still, there is something fundamentally canny about Fiedler’s remark that “it is maturity above all things that the American writer fears.” And not just the American writer: we need only glance at the state of pop culture to see that the American actor, the American director, and the American public remain stunted. In addition to young-adult fiction that is bought and read by all too many not-so-young adults, and in addition to nominally literary fiction that nonetheless reads like young-adult fiction by the likes

of Donna Tartt and Hanya Yanagihara (both of whom write parodic, sentimental exaggerations of America’s best gothic books), and in addition to the widespread phenomenon of middle-aged “Harry Potter” fandom, there is a glut of media for and about teen-agers: the television shows “Euphoria,” “The Summer I Turned Pretty,” and “Stranger Things,” the movies “Booksmart” and “Ladybird.” One of the biggest box-office smashes of recent years, “Barbie,” is about a toy; a film about Polly Pocket is reportedly in the works. The movies in the Marvel Cinematic Universe are all adapted from comic books; “The Super Mario Bros. Movie,” which came out in 2023, is based on a children’s video game.

These artifacts are pure escapism, impervious to the cataclysm of aging, impervious even to the paroxysms of sex. There is plenty of pornographic decoration in contemporary popular culture, but very little of it is consequential. Sex is still just a surface, a dirty magazine pilfered from the newsstand, an essentially puerile thing. Reviewing a pornographic film in 1959, Fiedler wrote that the women in it are oddly sexless, “not to be touched. . . . Unreal. Unreal. Unreal.”

Of course, as Fiedler demonstrates with such aplomb, juvenility need not yield aesthetic failure. In his reading, the incongruity between youthful fantasy and ever-encroaching adulthood—between the dream of outpacing the past and the reality of colonial violence—animates such masterpieces as “Huckleberry Finn” and “Moby-Dick.” These books are not in the least comfortably ensconced in their childishness: their protagonists are on the run because maturity is always at their heels. Huck’s mad race down the Mississippi prolongs a waning childhood even as it reveals the ultimate fragility of youth and the ultimate futility of efforts to stave off adulthood.

More recent novels, such as Toni Morrison’s “The Bluest Eye,” from 1970, about a Black child who longs for blue eyes and the whiteness they represent, and David Foster Wallace’s “Infinite Jest,” from 1996, about a precocious student at an elite tennis academy, also confront the incursion of adult tragedy into childhood idyll, albeit in very different ways. And the fiction of the past decade still con-

tains its fair share of literal youths—the protagonist of Emma Cline’s “The Girls,” from 2016, is fourteen, and Ben Lerner’s “Topeka School,” from 2019, is in part about a high-school debate team—but it is perhaps above all our literary sensibility, as opposed to our subject matter, that remains underaged. After all, since Fiedler completed “Love and Death,” adolescence itself has transformed. What was once a poignant effort to extend a state of ingenuousness is now tainted from the start. No raft or whaling ship can outrun the corrosive ubiquity of the internet, which has turned high school into even more of a ferment of insecurity, compulsive inwardness, and anxious self-performance than it already was.

Instead of refusing to grow up, we merely fail to; instead of retreating to open waters, we keep clicking and posting. As adolescents who have been obliged to cultivate personae online have grown more self-conscious, so, too, has our literature, as nervously metatextual works of autofiction like Tao Lin’s “Taipei,” from 2013, and Lauren Oyler’s “Fake Accounts,” from 2021, attest. These books and many others in their cohort are so inflected by formative hours spent scrolling that they are the literary equivalents of the social-media profiles that teen-agers (and adults who have never quite outgrown teen-age tics) compulsively check and update.

Some novels in the autofictional tradition are snide and jejune; others, such as Lerner’s “Leaving the Atocha Station,” from 2011, and Sheila Heti’s “How Should a Person Be?,” from 2010, are superb. But none are quite adult in the rich, sophisticated way that Fiedler thought the best novels in the Continental tradition were. None are quite about the conflicting frames of reference and value that arise when an ancient cultural formation disintegrates and a successor has yet to take its place. It was the clash between opposing forms of life, one stale and encrusted, the other ascendant and disruptive, that drove the development of the European novel. Perhaps now that we are standing amid the ruins of the East Wing and the wreckage of the postwar liberal order—now that we, too, occupy an uncomfortable interregnum between two social formations—we will find it in ourselves to put away childish things and write something new. ♦



Books

LADY CHATTERLEY'S MEME

A dirty book's long afterlife.

By Louis Menand

D. H. Lawrence wrote “Lady Chatterley’s Lover” in six weeks. He was living in Italy, where he had moved in 1925 for his health. He had tuberculosis, and he probably knew that “Lady Chatterley” was likely to be his last novel. (It was. He died in 1930, at the age of forty-four.)

He also knew that the book would be impossible to publish in England and the United States, where most of his readers lived but where anti-obscenity laws were strict and aggressively enforced. Lawrence was very familiar with anti-obscenity laws. His novel “The Rainbow,” published in 1915, had been banned in Britain for eleven years.

But Lawrence believed that modern

civilization was sick, and that one symptom of its sickness was a damaged relationship to sex. He wrote “Lady Chatterley” to heal that damage. He used taboo words to represent taboo subject matter, but he wanted to make sex natural and life-affirming, not dirty or obscene. He described his novel as “an honest, healthy book, necessary for us today.”

Still, for thirty-two years, the book was outlawed precisely for being dirty and obscene—honest, maybe, but definitely not healthy. Then there was a reckoning, in the form of two highly publicized court cases, and the book, or, rather, its publishers, prevailed. “Lady Chatterley” went on to sell millions of copies around the world. Did it make a difference?

Guy Cuthbertson believes that it did, sort of. “We live in a world that ‘Lady Chatterley’s Lover’ helped to create,” he writes in “Lady C: The Long, Sensational Life of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*” (Yale). What he means, though, is not exactly what Lawrence had in mind. What he means is that the book—for most people, just the title, really—has become a universal meme. “It might be hated, rejected, banned, derided, burnt, defaced, hidden, or binned,” Cuthbertson observes, “but it is a book that has crept into so many walks of life that so many people have heard of, and that has been so frequently adapted, copied, illustrated, and referenced.”

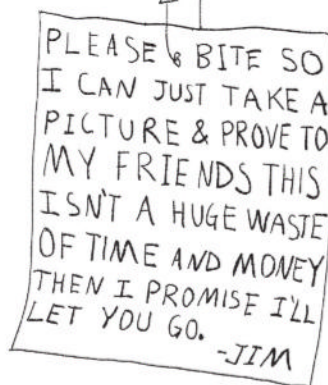
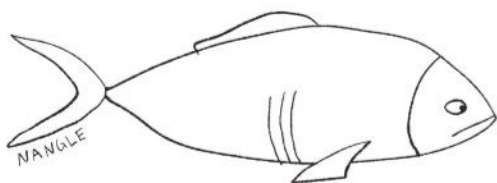
On whether the book has made the world any saner about sex, or about anything else, Cuthbertson is equivocal. The book “has meant freedom for many people,” he says. But it also, he thinks, played a part in “opening the floodgates.” The judicial exoneration of “Lady Chatterley” made it much easier to publish frank talk about, and graphic depictions of, sex, but much harder to regulate manipulative, derogatory, and offensive speech, and to keep pornography, obscenity, and other potentially troubling forms of expression out of the reach of children.

On that matter, Cuthbertson does little more than note the problem—but then neither does anyone else. The First Amendment offers no real guidance. So the fight gets pushed into the social sphere, where it reappears as a front in the culture war. Still, his book’s main claim is persuasive: “Lady Chatterley” is everywhere. Professor Cuthbertson (he teaches at Liverpool Hope University) is a great “Lady Chatterley” search engine, and he has scraped up a staggering number of “Chatterley” hits.

Most of these concern the two principals in Lawrence’s novel: Lady Chatterley, whose name is Connie, and her lover, Oliver Mellors. Connie is married to a baronet, Clifford, who has been made impotent by a war wound, and Mellors is the gamekeeper on Clifford’s estate, Wragby. His job is basically to keep poachers away and to make sure that there are enough pheasants for a jolly shooting party (which, since Sir Clifford uses a wheelchair, seems an improbable entertainment at Wragby).

Strictly speaking, Connie is an aristocrat and Mellors is working class. But

The novel won in court, then slipped from literary scandal into running joke.



Connie is not very class-conscious, and Mellors has returned from the British Army to take up an occupation that allows him almost complete independence. Mellors sometimes speaks in a working-class dialect (“Tha’s got the nicest arse of anybody,” or “Let’s not live ter make money, neither for us-selves nor for anybody else”—that sort of thing). But he also speaks standard English perfectly well, is intelligent, and reads books.

He is not especially hunky—thin, with a red face and, like his creator, weak lungs. Connie is described as “a bit Scottish and short,” with a body that is starting to age. A social-class taboo does attach to the affair, but some of Mellors’s working-class manner is playing. He performs it to make upper-class people uncomfortable, to control the conversation. And “earthiness” is his role in the relationship. It’s what makes the sex genuine.

Whether people approve of censorship or not, most would not have trouble calling the language of “Lady Chatterley’s Lover” obscene. “Fuck” is used thirty times in the novel. “Cunt” is used fourteen times. There are ten mentions of “balls,” four mentions of “cock,” and multiple appearances of “arse” (eleven), “shit” (six), and “piss” (three). There are thirteen sex scenes.

Lawrence was trying to make “dirty words” clean, and he was being deliberately explicit about things that writers

before him generally had to represent elliptically or euphemistically. But the relationship between Lady Chatterley and her lover is not about sex. The whole point is that they love each other. If you don’t get that, you don’t get the book. People who love each other often have sex. So, in “Lady Chatterley,” the lovers have sex, and Lawrence describes it.

“Lady Chatterley” is a novel that stretches across three hundred or so pages and has more than a dozen characters. A lot of the book is conversation, much of it about the social sickness that Lawrence was obsessed with—passages not exactly conducive to arousal. The sex scenes take up about thirty pages, and arousal is, as always, a matter of taste. Lawrence did not write those scenes to titillate, though. He hated pornography, promiscuity, and masturbation, which he called “perhaps the deepest and most dangerous cancer of our civilization.” Still, the bumper-sticker version of the novel is “Fancy lady has a fling with the gamekeeper,” understood as something along the lines of “Heiress gets it on with the lifeguard.” And that is what feeds the Chatterley-knockoff machine.

Which turns out to be amazingly prolific. Cuthbertson tells us, for example, that in 1960 a boy named John Rankin, dressed as a gamekeeper and carrying a sign identifying him as Lady Chatterley’s lover, was awarded a prize for his outfit

in a children’s fancy-dress parade at an event organized by St. Columb’s Cathedral at the Apprentice Boys’ Memorial Hall, in Derry, Northern Ireland. (Interesting that a child was rewarded for dressing up as the lover. I wonder what he was thinking. Or the priests at St. Columb’s.)

A year later, at the Up Helly Aa festival, which marks the end of the Yule season in the Shetland Islands, a skit called “Luvverkey’s Chatter” was performed, featuring people dressed up as gamekeepers standing in front of a giant copy of Lawrence’s novel, along with a large penguin (Penguin being the novel’s publisher). A Lady Chatterley in flimsy attire appeared and ran inside the book. Articles of clothing were thrown out, but, when the gamekeepers opened the book, she had disappeared.

We are informed that at the Lady Chatterley pub, in Eastwood, Nottinghamshire, where Lawrence was born, you can order an extra-pale ale called a Mellors, alcohol by volume 4.4 per cent. And that, in 1990, the Valentine’s Day masquerade ball at the George Hotel in Rye, Sussex, featured Lady Chatterley’s Lover’s Soup. An artisanal florist in Kent offered a Lady Chatterley bouquet, and there was an escort service called Chatterleys of Liverpool. Someone has created a Lady Chatterley’s Lover cocktail. Its ingredients include gin, olive juice, vermouth, and Tabasco.

In 1962, “Das War die Lady Chatterley” was recorded by the German group Die Schock-Kings. In 1965, a person was arrested for reading “Lady Chatterley” out loud at Sproul Hall, at the University of California at Berkeley (part of the Filthy Speech Movement, which succeeded the better-known Free Speech Movement). In 2016, the Belgian singer-songwriter Maarten Devoldere, performing under the name Warhaus, released an album titled “We Fucked a Flame Into Being,” which is a line from the final chapter of “Lady Chatterley’s Lover.”

Then, there are the sequels, the spinoffs, and the rewrites, starting, perhaps, with “Lady Chatterley’s Husbands” (1931). Cuthbertson lists more than two dozen published just in this century: “Lady Myddelton’s Lover” (2014), an Edwardian romance; “Lord Loxley’s Lover” (2015), described as “a gay take”; “Lady Emmeline’s Lover” (2023),

set in the Victorian period; and so on.

Most of the Chatterley mentions and appropriations are pretty straightforward, but Cuthbertson teases out a few lines of influence of a more speculative turn. One concerns the song “Try a Little Tenderness,” immortalized by Otis Redding but covered by many other musicians. It was composed in 1932, the year the first complete and unexpurgated edition of “Lady Chatterley,” known as the Authorized Edition, was published, and “tenderness” is a key word in the novel.

In fact, Lawrence, who was not great with titles (“Kangaroo”?), had at one point planned to call his novel “Tenderness.” In case we are skeptical that this counts as an influence on Otis Redding, Cuthbertson points out that on page 271 of the Authorized Edition the word “weary” appears seven times and the word “tenderness” three times—hence, conceivably, the line in the song “But when she gets weary, try a little tenderness.” I’ll buy it. Why not?

That Lawrence might have called his novel “Tenderness” poses an interesting counterfactual. It would have been a challenge to prosecute a book with a title like that. Who would censor tenderness? But the title “Lady Chatterley’s Lover” tells you right off that this is a book about adultery. Public opinion is against adultery. This strengthened the hand of the Crown in its obscenity trial, because just the suggestion of illicit sex was then enough to get books banned in England.

Radclyffe Hall’s “The Well of Loneliness,” for example, was found to be obscene, in a famous trial in 1928, for the line “And that night they were not divided,” “they” referring to two women. “Sleeveless Errand,” by Norah C. James, was banned in 1929, apparently because its characters use expressions like “bloody hell,” “homos,” and “whores.” There is no sex in the book. Adultery was not a crime in England in 1928, and lesbianism never had been. But obscenity law did not require a crime; it required only the suggestion that a book might corrupt its readers.

Lawrence tried to circumvent the censorship problem by publishing “Lady Chatterley” privately (meaning that he put up the money) in Florence. The

book was typeset by an Italian printer who had no English, and Lawrence felt obliged to tell him what was in the book. The printer shrugged. “Oh, we do it every day,” he is supposed to have said. The book was sold to individuals by subscription and to a few bookstores, and the first printing of a thousand copies sold out quickly.

This made the book easy prey for pirates (“bookaneers”). A banned book cannot be copyrighted. Nothing, therefore, prevented someone from printing and selling an edition of “Lady Chatterley” without paying Lawrence, or even asking his permission. Nothing except English and American law, that is. So pirates published the unexpurgated “Lady Chatterley” in Paris, a city that was for many years the home of English-language pornography. By 1936, there were three “Lady Chatterley” editions being sold in France.

The French had obscenity laws, too, but they were designed to be hard to enforce, and, in any case, the French didn’t care much about English-language pornography in the nineteen-twenties, since it was purchased mostly by tourists. (France would tighten up its censorship regulations in 1939.) Lawrence himself went to Paris to ask Sylvia Beach if she would bring out an edition of “Lady Chatterley.” In 1922, Beach had published James Joyce’s “Ulysses,” a book that, for the next decade, remained banned in England and America (although, interestingly, never in Ireland). But Beach told Lawrence that she did not want to become known as a publisher of erotica.

She did, however, introduce him to a wealthy American bookseller named Edward Titus, who agreed to bring out a cheap edition (in order to undersell the pirates, who were price gouging) and to pay Lawrence a royalty. After Lawrence’s death, his English publisher, Martin Secker, and his American publisher, Alfred Knopf, brought out expurgated editions. Until 1960, those were the “Lady Chatterley”’s most readers knew.

Then came the judges. The British trial, *Regina v. Penguin Books*, held in the Old Bailey in October and November of 1960, was a highly publicized event, even in the United States. *The New Yorker’s* Mollie Panter-Downes covered it in a Letter from London. Sybille Bed-

ford wrote a voluminous account for *Esquire*. There are at least two books about the trial.

The interest was not all jurisprudential. A. S. Byatt called the trial “one of the great comic moments in British culture.” And it did have its caricatural “No sex, please, we’re British” bits. At one point, the prosecutor (his name, almost too perfect, was John Mervyn Guthrie Griffith-Jones, M.C.) asked the jury, “Is this a book that you would even wish your wife or your servants to read?” Jurors laughed at “servants,” a bad sign for the Crown.

Thirty-five witnesses testified for Penguin, none for the Queen (except a policeman who had taken a copy of the book into custody), and the jury was out for just under three hours before returning a verdict of not guilty. It was the opening bell for the “swinging sixties,” memorialized as such in Philip Larkin’s poem “Annus Mirabilis”:

Sexual intercourse began
In nineteen sixty-three
(which was rather late for me)—
Between the end of the “Chatterley” ban
And the Beatles’ first LP.

(Larkin was a lifelong “Chatterley” enthusiast. He called it “the greatest idealistic work since ‘Prometheus Unbound.’” Of course, he also collected pornography and is sometimes regarded as the very definition of a “dirty old man.”)

Cuthbertson covers the trial as the spectacle it was, but he is not especially interested in the legal details. You could say that they aren’t really within his purview, but the novel isn’t what opened the floodgates. It was the courts. “Obscenity” had to be reinterpreted for Lawrence’s novel to be legally printed and sold, and to then make it possible to print and sell “Tropic of Cancer,” “Naked Lunch,” “Lolita,” “Last Exit to Brooklyn,” and “Fanny Hill”—Lady Chatterley’s children.

The legal story really begins a few years earlier, in New York, where Barney Rosset, the owner of Grove Press, published an unexpurgated “Lady Chatterley” in 1959. It was seized by the post office (as Rosset had expected) and duly declared obscene by the postmaster of the city of New York, a man named Robert Christenberry. Grove appealed

on First Amendment grounds, and a federal court reversed the postmaster's ruling. The judge, Frederick van Pelt Bryan, could not see what qualified Christenberry to pass judgment on a work of literature. His verdict was upheld by the United States Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit in 1960.

Rosset had helped Judge Bryan reach this conclusion by including, in the Grove edition, statements by people who *were* qualified to pass judgment. There was a prefatory letter by Archibald MacLeish, a professor at Harvard and a former Librarian of Congress, and an introduction by Mark Schorer, a professor of English at Berkeley, along with blurbs from other eminent men of letters. (It was Schorer who had initially encouraged Rosset to publish the unexpurgated "Lady Chatterley.")

The court took notice. "A work of literature published and distributed through normal channels by a reputable publisher stands on quite a different footing from hardcore pornography furtively sold for the purpose of profiting by the titillation of the dirty-minded," Bryan wrote. "The courts have been deeply and properly concerned about the use of obscenity statutes to suppress great works of art or literature." (Neither Grove nor Penguin minded prof-

iting from titillation, of course, as long as the professors approved.)

Within a year of Bryan's decision, in July, 1959, "Chatterley" went to No. 2 on the New York *Times* best-seller list and sold two million copies. The *Times* called it "the authentic descendant of 'Madame Bovary' and 'Anna Karenina.'" But it was still uncopyrighted. By the end of the year, there were five unexpurgated "Lady Chatterley"s on the American market.

Grove's victory emboldened Penguin, which reportedly stockpiled two hundred thousand copies for release to bookstores in the U.K. the minute a verdict was reached in the London courtroom. A trial was actually in the interests of both parties. For Penguin, the publicity promised robust sales. (And the launch was hugely successful: within a month, two million unexpurgated "Lady Chatterley"s were sold, and, in 1961, Penguin went public.) For the British government, the trial was an opportunity to road test a new piece of legislation, the Obscene Publications Act of 1959.

The act was intended to relax the legal standards for obscenity, which had not changed since 1868, and it had two prongs. The first was that a work must be "such as to tend to deprave and corrupt." However (prong two), people were not to be convicted of an offense based on the "de-

prave and corrupt" prong if "it is proved that publication of the article in question is justified as being for the public good on the ground that it is in the interests of science, literature, art or learning, or of other objects of general concern."

In other words, there was a high-brow exception. This is why Penguin paraded its thirty-five witnesses, most of them persons of Oxbridge-level pedigree, including E. M. Forster, Rebecca West, Helen Gardner, Cecil Day-Lewis, Richard Hoggart (the author of "The Uses of Literacy," an influential study of working-class culture, oddly unmentioned by Cuthbertson), and the Bishop of Woolwich, John Robinson, who would soon become famous as the author of "Honest to God," a work of existentialist theology. The publisher was said to have had some fifty additional witnesses on call.

Penguin was following Rosset's lead: enlisting learned opinion to convince a jury that, to some distinguished minds, and regardless of what a juror's own experience might tell him, "fuck" is not a dirty word. After the trial, it was rumored that the jury had initially been split 9-3 for acquittal, and that the minority was brought around by the expert testimony. The book satisfied the second prong. It checked the "public good" box.



and then suddenly everything turned out ok the end.

Still, neither of the "Chatterley" trials unpacked the conundrum at the heart of censorship cases, which is the definition of "obscene." "Nobody knows what it means," Lawrence once wrote, and he was right as far as the courts were concerned. Is something obscene because it's arousing? Or is it obscene because it's gross? Is lust, a pleasurable feeling, the relevant affect? Or is it disgust, an unpleasant one? Somehow, a piece of writing that arouses sexual feelings has the same status as one that repels.

When I was twelve, I had to take a Bible course at school. One day, we read II Samuel 11, where it is written that King David took Bathsheba, "and she came unto him, and he lay with her." At that age, I had no real idea of what adult genitalia looked like or what the sex act consisted of, but I suddenly realized what "lay" meant, and I thought I was going to throw up. Obscene? Certainly sounds like it. (I'm O.K. with it now.)

Legally, the term has been a kind of

black hole. Every definition seems to require another definition. Under British law at the time of the “Chatterley” trial, something was obscene if it tended “to deprave and corrupt.” But what is depravity? Is it an action or a state of mind? Is adultery depraved? Is “corruption” a code word for masturbation? The absurd part is that corruption and depravity are not crimes, and neither are adultery and masturbation. If you masturbate without the aid of a book, apparently, the government is fine with it.

Under American law in 1960, a book or a movie was obscene if its predominant appeal was to “prurient interest.” Same problem: What does “prurient” mean? The Supreme Court defined prurience as “a tendency to excite lustful thoughts,” but also as “a shameful or morbid interest in nudity, sex, or excretion,” which sounds rather different. Are lustful thoughts “shameful”? What would be a “morbid interest” in nudity?

The over-all impression left by Cuthbertson’s book is that, after being liberated from the censors, “Lady Chatterley” went very quickly from being a scandal to being a joke. It was fodder for spoofs and double-entendres. Even Lawrence’s admirers felt obliged to distance themselves from the novel. Iris Murdoch called it “an eminently silly book by a great man.”

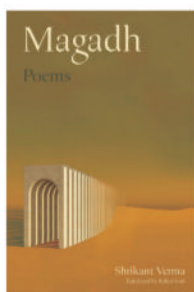
It may be that Lawrence’s frankness simply made people uncomfortable, so they called the book humorless or embarrassing to avoid having to confront the subjects Lawrence raises. His anger at the industrialization and materialism that he thought were destroying English life appealed to intellectuals. Descriptions of the female orgasm, which is the chief concern of the sex scenes, not so much.

The result is that “Lady Chatterley” is not like “Ulysses,” a book that also triumphed over the censors to become something one is supposed to have read. (Lawrence was no admirer of Joyce, by the way. He called Molly Bloom’s soliloquy “the dirtiest, most indecent, obscene thing ever written.”) But no one is supposed to read “Lady Chatterley.” It’s famous, but in the way Mickey Mouse is famous. On the other hand, if Lawrence had called his novel “Tenderness,” would anyone have named a cocktail after it? ♦



BRIEFLY NOTED

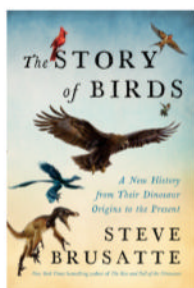
Look What You Made Me Do, by John Lanchester (Norton). A study of class, marriage, and generation gaps wrapped in a revenge story, this wickedly plotted black comedy centers on two women in London: Kate, a wealthy, middle-aged ex-art historian, and Phoebe, a TV writer in her early thirties. Their entwinement begins when Kate learns that the most popular Netflix show of the moment, “Cheating,” contains characters modelled on her and her husband—who, in the show, is having an affair with a younger woman. As Lanchester unspools the mystery of Kate and Phoebe’s connection, the novel poses questions like the ones “Cheating”’s viewers revel in asking: “Is there a single person in it you don’t hate or is that part of the point? Are the boomers worse than the millennials or is it the other way round?”



Magadh, by Shrikant Verma, translated from the Hindi by Rahul Soni (Liveright). The title of this collection, first published in 1984, and written by a central figure of the modernist Nayi Kavita (New Poetry) movement, refers to an ancient kingdom that looms large in Indian history and myth. Verma, who also served as a member of Parliament, renders Magadh as a place at once real and imaginary, lasting and lost—both a point of origin and an unreachable destination. The book circles political concerns that remain relevant today, including empire, caste prejudice, and the dangers of despotism and corruption. But in Soni’s careful translation, the repetitions and subtle variation of Verma’s poems also achieve a haunting, transcendental resonance.



Adrift in the South, by Xiao Hai, translated from the Chinese by Tony Hao (Granta). At fifteen, the writer Xiao Hai left his home town to find work in the factories of southern China. This deeply affecting memoir, which is strung like a wire between the alienation of the assembly line and the dignifying promise of literature, documents his experience. Hai first began to write short verses from the production floor of a garment factory, where, tasked with stitching patterns onto athletic jerseys, he was overcome by feelings that he struggled to name. By the time he moved to a village in Beijing, about a decade later, he had amassed a trove of some four hundred poems. “I always returned to my dorm with a little strength left,” Hai recounts, “and with that strength I dreamed the simplest, most sincere, most fervid dreams.”



The Story of Birds, by Steve Brusatte (Mariner). As this natural history points out, birds are dinosaurs—the only ones who survived the last extinction event. A single Jurassic species, *Archaeopteryx*, is the reptilian ancestor of all birds today, from the flightless, kickboxing cassowary to the penguins who fly underwater. Brusatte, a renowned paleontologist, leads readers through time in a series of vignettes—a predator hunt with an apocalyptic Cretaceous backdrop, a mating ritual between water birds, a monster preying on a marsupial just fifteen million years ago—and pairs them with fossil discoveries that detail their evolutionary past. Throughout, academic precision gives way to sheer delight over these animals, and their song and flight.



Books

STAR-CROSSED

How Linda Goodman brought astrology to the masses.

By Rachel Syme

The astrologer Linda Goodman died in the season of Libra, on October 21, 1995, at Penrose Hospital, in Colorado Springs. The cause, according to her obituary in the *Times*, was complications of diabetes, and she was survived by two sons, one daughter, and two grandchildren. These were immutable facts—as true and observable as the autumn constellations on the night that Goodman died (Pegasus, the winged horse, and Cassiopeia, the arrogant queen, among others) or the dazzling peak, that same evening, of the Orionid meteor shower. What was less certain, at least at the time, was how old

Goodman had lived to be. For nearly three decades—ever since she made the leap from private citizen to national celebrity, in 1968, with the blockbuster success of her first book, “Linda Goodman’s Sun Signs”—she took great pains to hide her age from the public. She never revealed it in interviews and, although she published six books during her lifetime, together spanning thousands of pages, she never once committed her birth date to paper. She did share that she was born under the sign of Aries, but she kept the year secret; the writer of her *Times* obituary could estimate only that she was “about 70.”

Despite her success, Goodman’s life was defined by enormous tragedy.

Goodman’s decision to remain publicly ageless was, perhaps, a pragmatic one. When “Sun Signs” came out, and became the first astrology text to hit the *Times*’ best-seller list, Goodman was in her forties. She may have thought it advantageous to present herself as a New Age ingénue—one who could speak directly to the baby boomers then flocking to esoteric diversions—rather than as an elder from the Greatest Generation. Or it was in service to vanity: Goodman was a former beauty queen, with thick chestnut hair and vulpine eyes, and she preferred to style herself in the youthful boho fashion of chunky necklaces and high-vibrational pastel colors.

Whatever the reason, Goodman’s omission was an odd move for a professional astrologer. A person’s astrological chart lays out the relative positions of the planets and stars at the moment of birth, and it cannot be calculated without an exact year, date, and time. Goodman, who regularly produced charts for high-profile clients, would have known this. By withholding her birth details, she maintained a kind of astrological upper hand: she could make grand pronouncements about the fates of others while keeping her own destiny under seal. Perhaps she didn’t want anyone to contradict her hard-earned understanding of reality, which included, among other beliefs, the conviction that she would never die.

Toward the end of her life, Goodman became obsessed with the idea that death was avoidable. “Physical immortality is natural—and death is unnatural,” she wrote in her fifth book, “Linda Goodman’s Star Signs,” from 1987. She implored her readers to “imagine the spirals of your cells turning the opposite direction and repeat aloud, *I am immortal, and I now ordain my body to demonstrate this.*” She also encouraged those hoping to outwit oblivion to take para-aminobenzoic-acid supplements, to drink at least two eight-ounce glasses of unsweetened grape juice every day, to refrain from pornography, to forgive all their enemies, and to stop eating meat (“Hunters and fishermen cannot achieve eternal life,” she wrote. “I’m truly sorry about that”). Goodman was not only a militant vegetarian but, in her final years, a committed “fruitarian” who was working toward becoming what

she called a “breatharian”—immortals, she claimed, could survive on air alone. She urged her acolytes to boast about their efforts to transcend the human condition. “Don’t be ashamed of your new enlightenment,” she wrote. “Talk about it to every person you meet. Friends, relatives and business associates. Ignore their ridicule.”

It would be easy to think of Goodman, who lived out her last years as a recluse in the Colorado mountains, as just another caftaned kook who’d spent too much time at altitude. Or, less kindly, to paint her as a savvy opportunist who made millions from hawking a woo-woo fad, and whose teachings, once fairly benign, became increasingly dangerous over time. But Goodman’s story is far stranger, and more significant, than that of a dippy mystic or a metaphysical scam artist. Born in a humble West Virginia mining town, she helped to push astrology, once a niche interest, into the center of the Zeitgeist. Her books sold upward of thirty million copies while she was alive, becoming fixtures on coffee tables and nightstands. Before “Linda Goodman’s Sun Signs” emerged, discussions of the zodiac were confined to fringe scenes and scant newspaper columns; by the mid-seventies, a person might casually bring up her sign during a first date or a dinner party. Goodman, with her friendly, approachable writing style, demystified what had previously been a wonky, mathematical discipline, allowing even casual readers to feel a newfound connection with the tides of the universe. The cost was that she became trapped in a bizarre private cosmos of her own making.

Goodman didn’t live forever, but she got the next best thing: a passionate biographer. “Follow the Signs: Searching for Linda Goodman, America’s Forgotten Astrology Queen” (University of Iowa Press), by Courtney Ann LaFaive, an assistant professor of English at the University of North Dakota, is a pensive, often sublime book that isn’t a dutiful work of scholarship so much as an adventure tale, blending fiction, criticism, and memoir. LaFaive is quick to note that she did not arrive at her subject neutrally. She first discovered “Linda Goodman’s Sun Signs” in 2001, when she was thirteen and browsing the

stacks of the public library in her rural Wisconsin home town. LaFaive, like Goodman, was born in April, and she describes being instantly intoxicated by Goodman’s description of an Aries:

The Aries girl will open her own doors. She’ll also put on her own coat, fight her own battles, pull out her own chair, hail her taxi and light her cigarette without any masculine help. . . . Scarlett O’Hara is the very epitome of the Mars-ruled Aries female. . . . Both the O’Hara and the Aries characters are tough enough to defy convention, face an advancing army, or even shoot a man through the head with icy calmness, if he threatens her loved ones.

“I had no cigarettes to smoke or taxis to hail,” LaFaive writes. “I had no idea who Scarlett O’Hara was . . . but I was, indeed, alone and friendless. Linda’s words strummed the truth of my being. *This is who I am.* . . . If I had any battles to fight or coats to put on, even at thirteen, I most certainly would’ve done so myself. I kept reading.”

Here is astrology’s allure: the feeling, at once comforting and enlivening, that your idiosyncrasies can be traced to forces far greater than yourself. The young LaFaive quickly became a Goodman completist; after reading “Sun Signs,” she picked up “Linda Goodman’s Love Signs,” from 1978, a mega-successful, nearly twelve-hundred-page tome that explores the dynamics of every possible partnership in the zodiac. Both books are fixed in their time—Goodman writes only about heterosexual relationships, and she includes observations about what signs make the best and worst housewives. (“Sagittarius girls are acutely bored by the confinement of dusting and mopping.”) If LaFaive recognized such flaws, they did not dampen her enthusiasm. She dragged Goodman’s books with her to college, where her friends groaned when she quoted her favorite passages. This dismissal, LaFaive writes, made her feel even more certain about her devotion. “Astrology embraces the irrational,” she writes. “It accepts nonlinearity: life moving in a cyclical fashion. It values vulnerability: studying the skies to become intimately aware of a person’s gifts and challenges. Perhaps I shouldn’t have been so surprised when I encountered resistance toward my literary love.”

It’s dangerous to write a biography from a place of adoration. LaFaive be-

gins her project with a zealous mission: to restore Goodman’s title as the foremother of American astrology. Early in the book, she describes proposing Goodman as a dissertation topic in graduate school, and gatekeepers of grants and fellowships, who called the subject both frivolous and thin, pointing out that LaFaive had few source materials at her disposal. Goodman had produced piles of published work, but she hadn’t left behind any known diaries or an archive of her correspondence. Astrology, a pursuit that hovers in the nebulous space between science and storytelling, is not exactly a robust academic field, and LaFaive had no scholarly studies of Goodman’s life or work to consult.

Still, she pressed on. LaFaive felt that Goodman had been fundamentally mistreated, particularly in the wake of a defining tragedy. In 1973, Goodman’s twenty-one-year-old daughter, Sally, was found dead in her apartment, in Manhattan. The police deemed it a suicide, but Goodman refused to accept the ruling—or even the fact that Sally was gone at all. Instead, she consulted Sally’s birth chart and concluded that somewhere, somehow, her daughter was still alive. The resulting press—which painted Goodman as an unstable oddball, unable to accept her daughter’s mortality—made her an ideal candidate for “a feminist revisionist biography,” LaFaive writes. “I felt I understood why Linda was maligned,” she adds. “She existed at the crux of the occult and mourning, a space doubly subject to patriarchal judgment.” It was only after LaFaive set out to prove this theory that she began to question whether the problem was not the story swirling around Goodman but Goodman herself.

Goodman was born Mary Alice Kermery in Morgantown, West Virginia, on April 9, 1925. (The date was finally confirmed by a data collector who claims to have found her birth certificate.) There is little information about her childhood, and what there is comes from an unreliable source: Goodman’s penultimate book, a thousand-plus-page quasi-autobiography that she published, in 1989, with the preposterously goofy title of “Gooberz.” In “Gooberz,” which is written in haphazard poetic verse, she describes her parents frequently being

out of town, and her staying with a neighboring Black couple named Bob and Grace Carpenter, from whom she first gleaned a mystical education. Grace, she writes, told “perfectly marvelous fairie stories/while she bustled around, getting breakfast/. . . she and Bob believed in druids too, like me.” Goodman was raised Catholic, but her faith wavered after an early cascade of losses: first, her beloved grandmother died, then a close friend, and then her prized cat. One day, after watching a local boy squish a colony of ants, she had a feeling of despair that she describes as “the dreadful dilemma/of my struggle to make Life and Death rhyme.”

In her twenties, Goodman married a man named William Snyder, a union that was soon marked by calamity. Goodman miscarried multiple times, and lost at least one child in infancy. She and Snyder ultimately had two healthy children, but the relationship fractured and they separated. Not long afterward, Snyder died—the cause, according to “Gooberz,” was alcoholism and pneumonia—and Goodman, suddenly a young single mother, struggled to make sense of her situation. “Why do I still hope—why?” she writes. “When people die, they die/why, oh, why can’t I realize that?/I believe it—I know it/but why can’t I . . . realize it?”

In LaFaive’s telling, it was Goodman’s inability to reconcile life and death which helped her excel in her breakthrough job, as the host of a radio program called “Love Letters from Linda.” (This appears to be when she changed her first name.) On the show, LaFaive writes, Goodman read letters from soldiers stationed abroad during wartime, many of whom expressed anxiety about ever seeing their loved ones again. Goodman likely had a knack for soothing her listeners—she had a mesmerizing voice, low-pitched and lilting—and assuring them that their desired reunions were imminent. “This talent of hers,” LaFaive writes, “injecting hope into the most fraught possibilities, of convincing those who have been separated by dissonance or distance that they can be brought back together again—would make her celebrated.”

During her time as a radio host, Goodman met her second husband, Sam Goodman, “a onetime disc jockey

and carnival comic,” according to an article in *People*, and together they moved to New York City, where Goodman had two more children. Sometime in the mid-sixties, Sam brought home a coffee-table book about astrology, and Linda became consumed by it, launching into a self-education that approached mania. “I think she stayed in a nightgown studying astrology twenty hours a day for a year,” her husband later told *People*.

Goodman taught herself how to make detailed astrological charts, which, in the decades before the internet, involved labor-intensive hand calculations to determine planetary movements. She began offering her services to acquaintances in Manhattan, and word spread. In 1969, a Miami *News* report cited her exorbitantly expensive rates—up to a thousand dollars for a single birth-chart analysis. Hoping to share her knowledge more widely (and, presumably, to find a more efficient way of earning income), Goodman turned to writing. She put out “Linda Goodman’s Sun Signs” with a small publisher, asserting that you could learn “up to ninety percent” about a person simply by knowing her sun sign. Goodman described each in a bold, conspiratorial tone: “Taureans would rather entertain hospitably at home than go to the trouble of visiting. The effort required for scintillating popularity doesn’t appeal to the bull’s nature”; “Leo, the person, rules you and everybody else. (Yes, yes, I know he really doesn’t. But please don’t tell him. It would



break his big, warm, egotistical heart.)”

The enormous success of “Sun Signs” was, in part, a matter of good timing. By the late sixties, the average person was increasingly exposed to the outer realms of both consciousness and the known universe. (In 1968, a few months after Goodman’s book hit shelves, NASA sent the first manned crew to orbit the moon.) Astrology, an ancient divination practice that has its roots in Mesopotamia and was considered an aca-

demic vocation until the eighteenth century, has experienced swells of popularity over the ages, but none so pronounced as the explosion during the sixties and seventies, when horoscopes crossed fully into the mainstream. Betty Crocker published a recipe for an “Age of Aquarius” cake. Yves Saint Laurent designed a cocktail dress printed with astrological symbols. Even a serial killer adopted the Zodiac as his moniker. By 1975, the trend was so widespread that a group of more than a hundred leading scientists, including eighteen Nobel Prize winners, signed an open letter titled “Objections to Astrology,” in which they expressed exasperated concern. “We must all face the world,” the letter read, “and we must realize that our futures lie in ourselves, and not in the stars.” Notably, one scientist who refused to sign the letter was the astronomer Carl Sagan—“not because I thought astrology has any validity,” he wrote, “but because I felt (and still feel) that the tone of the statement was authoritarian.”

“Sun Signs” made Goodman famous, and she altered her life accordingly. She separated from Sam and decided to move to Cripple Creek, Colorado, a former gold-rush town that had become known as one of the West’s most haunted locales. She settled down among old brothels and saloons and started to write her next book. Then she got the call about Sally, and her world collapsed.

LaFaive’s book really takes off when she starts writing about Sally’s death. The police allegedly found an eight-page note and a bottle of barbiturates at Sally’s side, and Sam identified his stepdaughter’s body. Still, Goodman flew to Manhattan not to mourn Sally but to look for her. She had dreamed that her daughter was alive, and took it as a sign. The *Times* later reported that Goodman was so frantic that she hung around New York in a daze for weeks, sleeping on the steps of St. Patrick’s Cathedral. She begged N.Y.P.D. detectives to take her seriously, insisting that someone had replaced Sally’s body with a double. Here, LaFaive deploys a bold technique, inhabiting Goodman’s perspective at the moment of crisis:

She tells them about everything we already know . . . her intuition, and the natal chart. And, sure, that’s all a little kooky to a bunch

of police officers, but they're nodding along, trying to appear sympathetic, because, again, her daughter is dead. She's distraught. Then, Linda pauses and delivers her bombshell evidence: *Officers, I dreamt of my Sally. I saw her in my dreams—I know she's alive. I saw her. Felt her.* Did they write down the word *dreams*? Say, *Tell us more, Linda. What exactly did you dream of?* Grab her hands and say, *Oh, sweetheart.* . . . Certainly not. When I imagine Linda saying those words, all I can see are their faces crinkling and their bellies jiggling.

As LaFaive digs deeper into Goodman's story, though, she finds herself increasingly unable to comprehend Goodman's motivations, and so she turns to others for answers. She contacts members of Lindaland, a small but lively online forum where dozens of Goodman devotees engage in close readings of "Gooberz" and discussion of past lives. She travels to Cripple Creek, to commune with Goodman's old house and meet her acquaintances. People seem oddly frightened to talk about Goodman, as if she were still alive and listening, but LaFaive finally has a breakthrough when she contacts a man whom she calls Albert Bodin, in Maine. Sally, an actress, had spent her last summer living in Bodin's farmhouse while performing at a local theatre, and, seven years after Sally's death, Goodman called Bodin to ask for his help in finding her. At first, he happily obliged—if there was any chance that Sally was still alive, he wanted to lend a hand—but the situation quickly turned disturbing. According to Bodin, Goodman brought along an alleged former C.I.A. agent named David, and, after months of meeting with Bodin and his family, the two ultimately threatened to harm him if he refused to disclose the names of the people who'd worked with Sally that summer. Bodin survived the ordeal but was left shaken and scared, certain that he'd narrowly escaped a worse fate.

At this point, LaFaive's narrative begins to splinter. Although eager for evidence that Goodman was wronged—the victim of a misogynistic media that wanted to undermine both astrology and the woman who made it popular—she comes to see that her subject is more than a mere vector for an argument. In Goodman's hurt, she hurt others. LaFaive grows angry, imagining herself barging into Goodman's

house in Cripple Creek: "I want to find Linda sitting at her kitchen table, a Newport smoldering between her fingers, as she reads the morning paper in a terry-cloth robe. . . I want to walk up to her, bat the newspaper away, look her square in the teeth and say, *What the hell are you doing?*"

In many ways, LaFaive's book becomes more thrilling when she surrenders to the possibility that she is writing not a eulogy but a portrait of one woman's many contradictory selves. The obsessiveness that spurred Goodman's success—she sold the paperback rights for "Linda Goodman's Love Signs," from 1978, for \$2.25 million, at the time the highest sum ever for a nonfiction book—is the same quality that kept her searching for her daughter. She was rich, but almost comically uninterested in material wealth (she apparently gave away most of her earnings); she was prolific, but much of her work was opaque and borderline nonsensical (even LaFaive admits that, for years, she couldn't finish "Gooberz"). What LaFaive finds, looking clearly at Goodman, is not enlightenment but a kind of radical empathy. She begins to weave her own story into the book—LaFaive married an unstable man, and she writes through the heartbreak of her divorce—and, in so doing, earns a deeper understanding of Goodman, not as an all-knowing guru but as a flawed human being, looking to the skies for what to do next.

We may be in the middle of a new astrology boom. A 2025 Pew Research survey revealed that thirty per cent of adults "consult astrology (or a horoscope), tarot cards, or a fortune teller at least once a year," and astrology influencers seem to pop up daily on TikTok. Both astrology and biography attempt to wrestle something infinitely complex—be it a human life or the heavens—into order. But perhaps the only thing we know for sure is how vast the universe is, and how boundless our yearning. At the end of her book, LaFaive admits that she has written a "failed biography," insofar as she was unable to present a grand, unified theory of Goodman. To my mind, though, she succeeds because she accepts what she can't know, the truths that not even the stars can explain. ♦

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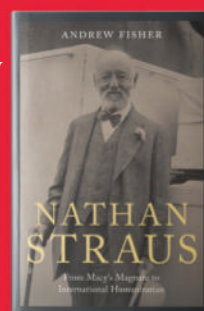
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Books

CARTE BLANCHE

Maggie O'Farrell and the art of inventing the past.

By Katy Waldman

The itinerant American poet Elizabeth Bishop published “The Map” in 1935. “Land lies in water,” the poem begins, a pun on the lies of representation. “It is shadowed green.” In Bishop’s hands, cartography is a cousin to poetry, an enchanting of names and places which summons hidden meanings to the surface. The poem contrasts this process with dutiful, dry record-keeping, which is more faithful to what’s known but evokes less of what’s not. “More delicate than the historians’ are the map-makers’ colors,” it ends.

Cartography serves as both narrative engine and theme in “Land,” by the Northern Irish novelist Maggie

O’Farrell. A central figure, Tomás, is a skilled laborer in eighteen-sixties Ireland, tasked with making maps for the British, who are occupying the country. He wants to depict not only relevant topographical features and place names but also the ravages of the Great Hunger, which killed twelve per cent of the population and led two million more to emigrate when a blight caused the country’s potato crops to fail. The British government refused to subsidize food prices or restrict exports of Irish agricultural goods, further devastating the island. The red-coats “do not wish to make such marks upon their maps, which might lead to certain admittances,” O’Farrell writes.

Tomás, however, “set it all down: the ghost towns, the weed-lush fields, the mass graves, the workhouses, the Famine roads that led nowhere.” As a map-maker, he’s also a revisionist historian, supplementing the official and misleading chronicle of empire with the reality of those living under it.

Tomás’s belief that maps should acknowledge the marginalized and less powerful—that there’s more to history than what the victors convey—is seemingly shared by O’Farrell. The author of thirteen books, she has recently become known for fiction about sidelined or forgotten historical figures, thanks to her novel “Hamnet,” from 2020, which the director Chloé Zhao adapted into an Oscar-winning film last year. That book feels its way into the silence around Agnes Shakespeare, the playwright’s wife, and his son, Hamnet, who died at age eleven. O’Farrell speculates, reasonably, that Hamnet may have been a victim of bubonic plague, and her book centers on the family’s grief in the aftermath of his death.

Both the book and the movie have been accused of reductiveness, of proposing too simple a correspondence between life and art. The climax of O’Farrell’s story is a scene in which, after Hamnet has died, Agnes goes to London to see her husband’s production of “Hamlet.” She’s furious with the playwright for being absent during their son’s illness, but watching the lead actor, who has been coached in Hamnet’s mannerisms, softens her anger. Shakespeare, she realizes, has restored the boy “the only way he can.” It’s as if she loses a child and gets him back through the magic of theatre.

Why substitute art for life? To put a finer point on it, why write historical fiction—or, at least, this brand of it, crowd-pleasing and immersive in the tradition of Patrick O’Brian or Hilary Mantel—when there is actual history? Maybe, O’Farrell seems to suggest, because it’s fun. If Tomás, in “Land,” is grimly burdened by responsibility, O’Farrell is expansive, full of vigor; her characters may die of plague or starve in famines, but she appears to be enjoying herself. The book, which spans Rome, Calcutta, and the “beleaguered dog-shaped country” of Ireland,

Why write historical fiction? Maybe, O’Farrell seems to suggest, because it’s fun.

features tart, nurturing mothers, feisty elder sisters, younger sisters of uncommon beauty, telepathic changelings, farseeing Druids, pompous and hypocritical priests, and steadfast hounds. The passions are big and unembarrassed. Characters rush out to sea, assume new identities, push their enemies off cliffs, kiss in alleyways, pull treasure out of the earth.

Historical novelists are often charged with disrespect and unseriousness, of ransacking the archives for sensational scenery to hang behind their conventional family sagas and love stories. Some critics' squeamishness seems aimed at the act of invention itself, the florid dreaming in the face of reality. The very details that make the genre come alive—the archaic syntax, the outfits, the feelings—are the ones that haven't survived into the present day or that the writer made up. A historical novel's most evocative aspects, in other words, tend to be the least real.

O'Farrell excels at world-building, a term that can attract faint disdain owing to its associations with so-called genre fiction. It describes the craft of designing and furnishing a fictional universe with the particularities of climate, botany, zoology, politics, economics, fashion, and more. Often, she avails herself of technical or era-specific vocabulary. In "Land," for example, a character harvesting seaweed climbs a dune "with his cargo of bladderwrack, great swags of it, the blistered slithery ribbons trying to escape the creel." Later, O'Farrell lingers over a soldier's surveying equipment, how he steadies the theodolite on its tripod and brings "the vertical axis to match a gravitational marker," so that through the lens appears "a world untroubled and hermetic, where mountains and trees, buildings and roads hung upside down."

The appealing texture of the book isn't just a function of information you could look up in an encyclopedia. It comes from the interplay of retrieved details (creel, theodolite) with writerly style ("blistered slithery ribbons," inverted mountains). "Hamnet," too, is an ingenious blend of historical fact and invention: O'Farrell painstakingly constructs a miniature cosmos out of both life and art, evidence and imagination, what's known about Shake-

speare and what she speculates about Agnes. Her Agnes possesses an intuitive, embodied, feminized sort of knowledge; she's said to be descended from a forest witch and seems to have occult healing powers. Shakespeare is identified only as "the father," "her husband," "the Latin tutor." For most of the novel, he's in London, writing and acting in plays, while Agnes raises their children and spars with her imperious in-laws. O'Farrell is brisk with Shakespeare's biography and career—and even more so with the reverently recorded controversies surrounding the great man—but interested in his relationships. We don't learn much about his doings in the city; his creative output is chiefly relevant as a measure of grief. When we do inhabit his perspective, it's from the vantage of a husband and a father, not a genius.

There's a hint of feminist subversion in "Land," too. O'Farrell underlines the boldness of her female characters and the softness of her men. When we meet Tomás, many of his personal memories of the Great Hunger have gone missing. He recollects nothing of his life before arriving at a workhouse during the lean years. Trauma has left him dour and self-contained, as inaccessible to others as his childhood is to him. His project to correct the propaganda of the British is hampered by his own prejudices: he wants his son, Liam, to help him with his survey and shuts his eyes to the boy's inclinations toward a more studious career. Meanwhile, his daughter, Enda, is adventurous and talented, perfect for the role of mapmaker's assistant, but Tomás inevitably realizes her fitness too late.

With her father's trade closed to her, Enda steals her brother's immigration papers, sews her savings into the lining of her jacket, and sets sail for Canada. O'Farrell's research shines in the Quebec sections: Enda's peregrinations, as she looks for work and lodging, reveal a cross-section of New World types and locales—a boarding house, a hired girl, a landlady with an "aged and malodorous cat." Accomplished at the violin, she takes to fiddling on street corners for extra money. At one point, she is greeted by Irish construction workers who seem to rec-

ognize the melody she's playing. Later, as she performs a different tune, "in her head blossoms a vision of the peninsula—field-boundary walls that undulate over every bluff and hollow, the water lilies that crowd into wet ditches in early summer, the surface of the lough that quilts itself in a breeze, the cows that turn their large eyes upon you, the darkness that rises up from the hills at dusk."

For Tomás, capturing recent history is a quantitative pursuit—subtract the post-famine population from the pre-famine population to unleash the death toll in all its horror. His project relies on specialized knowledge: he has a local's eye for culturally significant landmarks and the expertise to measure inclines and elevations accurately. Enda doesn't transmit facts and figures through her music, but she is a virtuoso in her way. Her fiddling is a looser, freer, more accessible type of memorialization—less a notation than an invocation, a summoning of her homeland's spirit.

In "Hamnet" as in "Land," loss and irretrievability are of central concern—how should they be acknowledged, and to what extent? When "Hamnet" falters, it's because the book overreaches in its claims about the power of art to resurrect the past. Its final scene suggests a kind of interchangeability between the dead Hamnet and the fictional Hamlet, between what used to be and what never was.

"Land" is less interested in how fantasy may be exchanged for reality than in how the two are complementary. Through its characters, the book stages an argument about the virtues of various types of maps—those that are measured, those that are recollected, those that are dreamed. Some of these approaches require meticulous scholarship and technical proficiency; others, an attunement to the invisible realms of feeling and folklore. The characters' distinct perspectives overlap to build the world that is the novel. All are useful, all are partial, and none reverse the country's losses. Rather, the facts ground the fiction, the fiction enlivens the facts, and both work together to suggest that the pursuit of resurrecting the past and the pursuit of telling a good story can, in some cases, be one and the same. ♦



The Current Cinema

HITS AND MISSES

"Power Ballad."

By Richard Brody

The myth of untapped genius runs rampant through mass culture, whether on talent-scouting shows like "American Idol" and "Shark Tank" or in the transformation of "real" people into celebrities on reality TV. Genius hiding in daily life is similarly at the heart of the Irish director John Carney's new film, "Power Ballad," a musical dramedy starring Paul Rudd as an American rocker in Ireland who crosses paths with a former boy-band star (Nick Jonas) in search of a solo career. It's the story of what happens when an unrecognized artist's great work is appropriated without credit by another artist who's rich and powerful. In "Power Ballad," this premise (a version of which, oddly enough, also appears in Boots Riley's new film, "I Love Boosters") is worked into a plot that's admirably tight and irresistibly catchy. But Carney, who wrote the script with Peter McDonald, develops it in one and only one register: warmhearted populism. "Power Ballad" is a sentimental tale of family and friends both fostering and thwart-

ing a dream. It finds an unusually strong current of authentic (if narrow) emotion while leaving wilder ideas and feelings trapped beneath its surface.

Rudd plays Rick Power, a middle-aged American wedding singer living in cozy domesticity in Crumlin, a suburb of Dublin. Formerly part of an American band that toured in Ireland, he's married to an Irish woman, Rachel (Marcella Plunkett), with whom he has a fourteen-year-old daughter, Aja (Beth Fallon). Rick is a devoted family man who organizes his life rigorously and cheerfully around each morning's school drop-off, but he has a nagging frustration: he prides himself on his songwriting, yet his music career is limited to playing in a cover band called the Bride and Groove. The movie's first scene, in which the band plays a wedding at a lavish country estate, highlights his problem. He gets the crowd moving with a vigorous rendition of "Celebration," but when he leads the band through one of his own songs the dance floor quickly empties.

The event, however, has an unusual guest, one Danny Wilson (Jonas), a friend of the groom's and an ex-member of a successful boy band, who's now struggling to go solo. (Jonas's character's name matches that of the protagonist in the musical film noir "Meet Danny Wilson," a scuffling but ambitious singer played by Frank Sinatra.) To amuse himself, Danny joins the band onstage, and hits it off with Rick on a duet of Stevie Wonder's "I Wish." After the bash, when all are chilling, Danny invites Rick to his luxury suite on the property, where they jam, drink, and have a bromantic heart-to-heart. Danny despairs of finishing some songs he's writing; Rick has a few ideas that he's glad to contribute, and he plays some of his own tunes for his new friend. On parting, Danny gives Rick a fine old acoustic guitar and asks him to stay in touch. Six months later, Rick is at a shopping mall when he hears a song of his, sung by Danny, who has turned it into a major-label release with a grandiose pop production.

Unbeknownst to Rick, the track, a love song, is a phenomenon, with millions of streams. It becomes a No. 1 hit, and everyone—including Aja and Rachel—is crooning along to it everywhere. Rick is, in effect, secretly a world-famous songwriter, and, though he's happy that Danny has managed to reinvent himself, he is resentful that he hasn't got the acclaim, the money, or the career that writing a hit song should bring. There's no paper trail to show that the song is his, and no proof that Danny ever heard him play it. What's more, Rick can't get through to Danny, because the pop star's brash and aggressive manager (Jack Reynor) refuses to put Rick through, and responds to his claims with threats. Direct action is required: Rick and his bandmate and best friend, Sandy (Peter McDonald), head to Los Angeles to confront Danny in person.

Rudd's natural air of genial tension, of neurosis without an edge, plays into his character's rigidly disciplined but relentlessly upbeat domesticity. Rick is tightly scheduled, punctilious to a fault, endowed with verbal wit that gently but firmly shapes and smooths social interactions. Warm and wise with Aja, and never nonplussed when she out-

Nick Jonas and Paul Rudd play a former boy-band star and a wedding singer.

cools him or simply fails to flatter, he also performs middle-aged hotness just self-deprecatingly enough. His charming but locked-in sense of commitment makes him an apt front man of the *Bride and Groove*—he glows with a little more wattage than his bandmates do—but it’s also why he’s not the group’s real leader. That would be the drummer, Binzer (Rory Keenan), who sits at the back of the stage, surveys the group and the roomful of revellers, and pliantly makes adjustments that keep the party going. Rick’s taut precision, by contrast, can cause trouble at the mike; when Danny first asks to join in on a song or two, Rick—fiercely protective of the band’s routine and his place in it—refuses, until Binzer firmly implores him to be a sport. There are roots to Rick’s extreme defensiveness. The American band that he’d been part of in his youth, called *Octagon*, had been big enough to sign with a record label, but when Aja was born Rick took a year off and the label dropped him. He’s been fortunate enough to make a living as a musician, but his bitterness about the loss of that big break lingers.

When Danny performs, though, something startling is revealed, something that’s built into the casting. Rudd just sings, but Jonas is a singer: Rick delivers songs, whereas Danny makes them his own. Performing “I Wish,” Danny approaches melody, rhythm, and lyrics with a sense of freedom that transcends the sheet music and gives the composition a three-dimensional life. What Danny does, Rick can’t. Their respective performances mark the difference between a mere professional

and a star, with one caveat: if not for Rick, Danny would have no new song to infuse with life. Danny’s gift is what he does onstage; Rick’s is what he does sitting alone in a room.

Unfortunately, the movie doesn’t follow through on this idea, and Rick’s hidden aptitude remains largely invisible. When he sings his own song at the wedding in the opening scene, a bandmate reproaches him, implying that Rick has tried out his own material before with similarly dismaying results. (The bandmate tells him to sing only “the hits” and reminds him that their job is basically to be “human jukeboxes.”) The setup is too pat. In Rick’s many years as a wedding singer, has he never won any admiration for his songs? Not even at home? Has he kept going with no positive reinforcement at all, based on nothing but his own confidence in his talent? The film’s themes of creative frustration and unmet potential are fruitful and fascinating but are left undeveloped, and the movie is painfully short on psychology. What takes its place is feel-good human connection and reconciliation, whether found in unlikely places—such as in a climactic showdown between Rick and Danny in Los Angeles—or in its familiar setting, at home.

Sentimentality has been a consistent strain in Carney’s directorial career. He won international recognition for the 2007 romantic musical drama “Once,” set in Dublin, about an encounter between an Irish and a Czech musician. His 2013 drama, “Begin Again”—which he’d originally titled “Can a Song Save Your Life?”—is the story of a man who loses his job as a

record executive but gets his musical mojo back when he connects with a young woman singer-songwriter. In those films, as in “Power Ballad,” music serves not to undo and reshuffle romantic relationships but to restore and reinforce them, even as it forges new emotional bonds. Carney is a moralist, a filmmaker of fidelity—and of renunciation, depicting the romantic near-misses and what-ifs that his characters leave behind.

In “Power Ballad,” Carney’s musical moralism remains superficial, worked out neither in the detailing of his characters nor in his pragmatic, efficient direction. Rick’s unyielding faith in his own artistic powers is a weighty secret and a constant burden; his absence of torment in the face of it, his apparently content and unruffled life with his friends and family, ultimately suggests less about Rick’s temperament (which gets an all too scant workout) than about Carney’s own mild-mannered aversion to such inner conflicts. The story’s most powerful and expressive possibilities go unexplored, in a way that reflects the substance of the movie itself: just as “Power Ballad” emphasizes the difference between a songwriter and a singer—between the creation of formidable raw material and the amply imaginative realization of it—it also unwittingly displays the distinction between screenwriting and directing, between potent ideas and their bland development. The movie is more than a celebration of persistence in the face of rejection, of faith in oneself, or of the power of love. It exalts, above all, the practical genius in the division of labor. ♦

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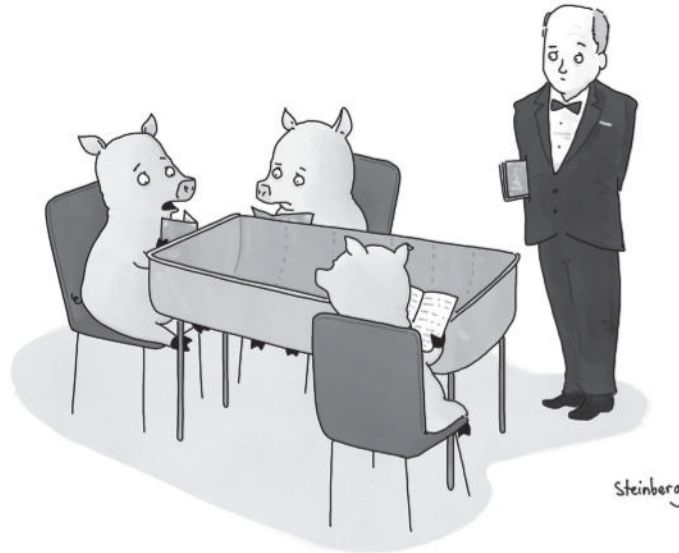
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CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

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 Avi Steinberg, must be received by Sunday, June 7th. The finalists in the May 25th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the June 22nd 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

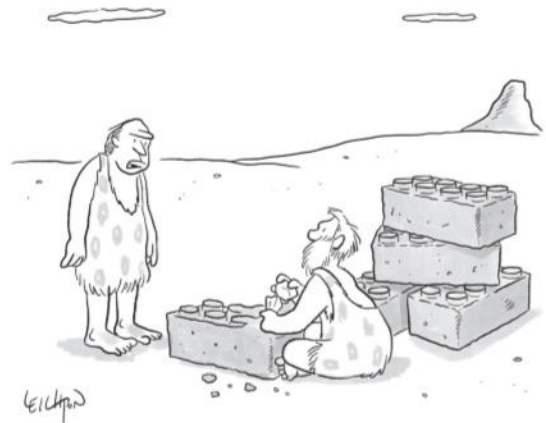


“Oh, my God! We're up against a well-choreographed attack!”
Jim Rieger, Millwood, Va.

“It's a dying art.”
Carol Lasky, Boston, Mass.

*“I worry it detracts from our
core mission of pointless brutal slaughter.”*
John Cove, Berkeley, Calif.

THE WINNING CAPTION



*“I have a feeling this will
be a painful step in our evolution.”*
Vince Yenko, Orlando, Fla.



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LEFT SPEECHLESS

A themed crossword.

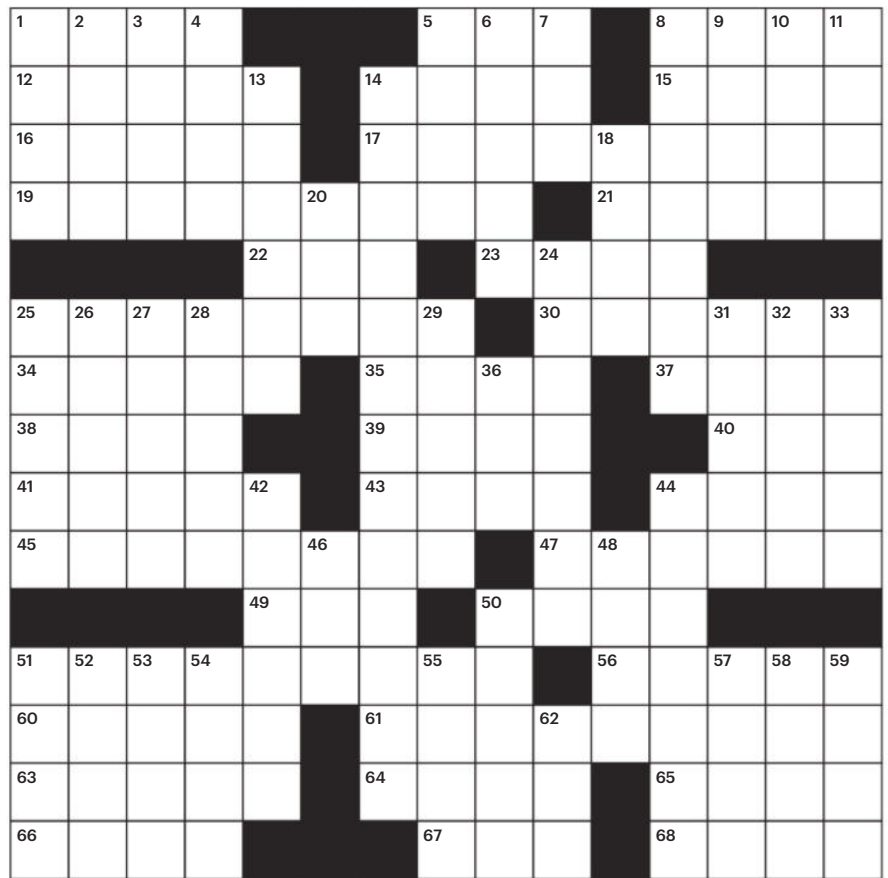
By Adam Aaronson

ACROSS

- 1 Meat-and-potatoes breakfast dish
- 5 Wellness destination
- 8 ___ Havisham (character in "Great Expectations")
- 12 Out-and-out
- 14 Captain with an ivory leg
- 15 Diva's delivery
- 16 No longer fresh
- 17 Couple's arc
- 19 "To Kill a Mockingbird" author
- 21 Snippets of dialogue
- 22 Website section with oft-sought info
- 23 Bird that Odette is transformed into, in a Tchaikovsky ballet
- 25 Improved one's behavior
- 30 Striking sight
- 34 Fan's opposite
- 35 Charged particles
- 37 Eponymous toymaker Rubik
- 38 Person posting on social media, e.g.
- 39 Wikipedia contribution
- 40 Upton Sinclair novel that inspired the film "There Will Be Blood"
- 41 Filthy rooms
- 43 Puncturing part of a pitchfork
- 44 First chip in the pot
- 45 Marshmallow-topped beverage
- 47 Narced (on)
- 49 Prefix with fiction
- 50 "No ifs, ___, or buts"
- 51 Text accompanying podcast episodes
- 56 Ventricles' counterparts
- 60 Close pal
- 61 Offred and Ofglen, in a 1985 Margaret Atwood novel
- 63 Raise, as a flag
- 64 Like the page numbers on the left side of a spread, usually
- 65 Genre for Blackpink and Red Velvet
- 66 Letters at the start of a nonsecure URL
- 67 Significant time
- 68 Snaky swimmers

DOWN

- 1 —
- 2 Flour used to make puri
- 3 One of twenty-seven on Brazil's flag
- 4 Be of assistance
- 5 Croc or moc
- 6 Covers with asphalt
- 7 "The Woman in the Dunes" author Kobo
- 8 Show that might start at 2 P.M.
- 9 Element alloyed with chromium to make stainless steel
- 10 Term of address for a king
- 11 Word after survey or Simon
- 13 Weed
- 14 With 24- and 31-Down, antiwar novel by Erich Maria Remarque . . . or a description of this puzzle's grid
- 18 Vanquish, as a dragon
- 20 "Super cool!"
- 24 See 14-Down
- 25 —
- 26 Must
- 27 Clumsily wiped out
- 28 Georges whose 1969 novel "La Disparition" lacks the letter "E"
- 29 Medallists' platforms
- 31 See 14-Down
- 32 Become one
- 33 Guffawed, online
- 36 Anaïs who wrote the erotica collection "Little Birds"
- 42 Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "How Do I Love Thee?" for one
- 44 In danger of being lost
- 46 Sound from a pigeon
- 48 Father of Aron and Cal in "East of Eden"
- 50 Ed of "Up"
- 51 —
- 52 Sound from an owl
- 53 Forget to include
- 54 Strand of smoke
- 55 Spot for some Christmas lights
- 57 Like an avocado that yields to gentle pressure
- 58 Member of Blackpink or Red Velvet
- 59 Snakes in "Antony and Cleopatra"
- 62 Paternity-test molecule



Solution to the previous puzzle:



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