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THE NEW YORKER

AUG. 7, 2023

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THE NEW YORKER

AUGUST 7, 2023

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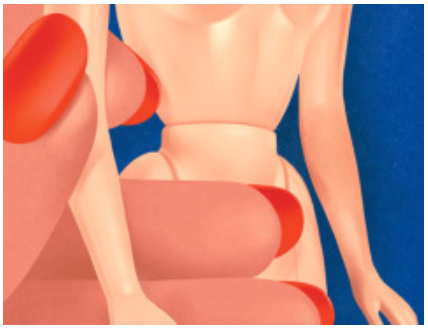
THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM

PERSONS OF INTEREST

Naomi Fry writes about the hyperpop duo 100 gecs, and their seemingly divisionless array of musical influences.



THE WEEKEND ESSAY

Leslie Jamison on how we play with Barbie, and the parent-child dynamic that Greta Gerwig's film interrogates.

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LEFT: VICTOR LLORENTE; RIGHT: KAROLIS STRAUTNIEKAS

THE MAIL

READING *SAMUEL R. DELANY*

I enjoyed Julian Lucas's wonderful Profile of Samuel R. Delany, which contextualized the work of a writer who has meant so much to me in vastly different periods of my life ("Galaxy Brain," July 10th & 17th). I read "Times Square Red, Times Square Blue" around 2005, when I was roaming around N.Y.C. as a homeless gay man and user of meth. The book became almost a sacred text for me. In 2018, by which time I had got sober—and, I hope, wiser—I had the privilege of visiting Chip, as he is known, in Philadelphia. Somehow, despite the degradations of the intervening years, I still had my copy of "Times Square Red, Times Square Blue," which he signed for me on "June 6, D Day, 2018."
Stephen McKinley
New York City

WHAT'S THE *STORY?*

Parul Sehgal's essay about the predominance of "storytelling" in contemporary culture reminded me of what happened to Christianity when narrative theology began to spread through American churches in the nineteen-seventies (A Critic at Large, July 10th & 17th). To congregations that had grown tired of doctrinal and moral pronouncements, the new style—which recast the sermon as a story with which the listener could readily identify—came as a breath of fresh air. After all, the Gospel is nothing if not a narrative, and the Hebrew Pentateuch is one good story after another. As a teacher of preaching at Duke Divinity School, I felt that the notion of story could not encompass everything of God and revelation; nor are the Biblical stories "artless" or self-evident to all. As we observed the movement in action, many of my colleagues and I concluded that the complex, often double-edged narratives in Scripture resist tidy stories. We discovered something akin to what Sehgal arrives at in her analysis: that we need the non-narrative language of instruction, exaltation, declarations, and questions to keep a story honest.
Richard Lischer
Durham, N.C.

Toward the end of her piece, Sehgal considers whether reducing our cultural dependence on narrative will require trading dramatic plots for scatter plots. I am a neuroscientist, and it seems clear to me that even notionally objective methods of presenting information, such as graphs, tell stories—and rely on the decisions of storytellers. When it is time for scientists to disseminate our work, we parse what we can understand, plot it in a way that helps us make our case, and construct narratives that we relate in the form of text. (Often, we even refer to these narratives as "stories.") For every given plot that we make, we reject dozens of others, and carefully choose what goes on each axis, how to calculate that value, how to label it, how to visualize it, how to quantify it, and how to describe it. This is our narrative craft.
Sam McKenzie
Assistant Professor of Neurosciences
University of New Mexico, Albuquerque
Albuquerque, N.M.

Sehgal's essay about the hegemony of storytelling helped me to understand a nagging discomfort that I experienced during my years as a business leader. At that time, telling "inspirational stories" to employees was regarded as an essential part of the job. Sehgal's piece has helped me to see how those stories functioned as tools to create excitement and to bestow some semblance of meaning upon the daily lives of employees whose work otherwise consisted of a series of mundane, or only mildly challenging, tasks. Like Scheherazade's stories, the tales of our company's progress had to be told nearly every day, so that the promise of a happy ending could lift employees' morale and lead them to work harder.
Nalin Miglani
New York City

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Letters should be sent with the writer's name, address, and daytime phone number via e-mail to themail@newyorker.com. Letters may be edited for length and clarity, and may be published in any medium. We regret that owing to the volume of correspondence we cannot reply to every letter.

GOINGS ON

AUGUST 2 – 8, 2023

Welcome to Goings On, the evolution of our iconic Goings On About Town section—a weekly guide to what's new in art, theatre, music, TV, podcasts, movies, and more, in New York City and beyond. Sign up at **newyorker.com/GO** *to receive the Goings On newsletter every week.*

OMAR VICTOR DIOP / COURTESY BROOKLYN MUSEUM

The vital and necessary exhibition **"Africa Fashion"** (at the Brooklyn Museum, through Oct. 22) gives viewers the opportunity to examine garments—and attendant conceptions of self-presentation—that amount to a very particular way of being that doesn't necessarily exclude colonial influence. African designers ranging from Kofi Ansah to Imane Ayissi took ideas from Europe, and from the rest of the world, to make their remarkable work, just as the world has for so long taken from Africa. All this is enhanced by the influence of clothing, objects, and hair styles indigenous to each designer's home region. Africa is not one place, and the curators Ernestine White-Mifetu and Annissa Malvoisin provide the space to embrace its multiplicity.—*Hilton Als*

ABOUT TOWN

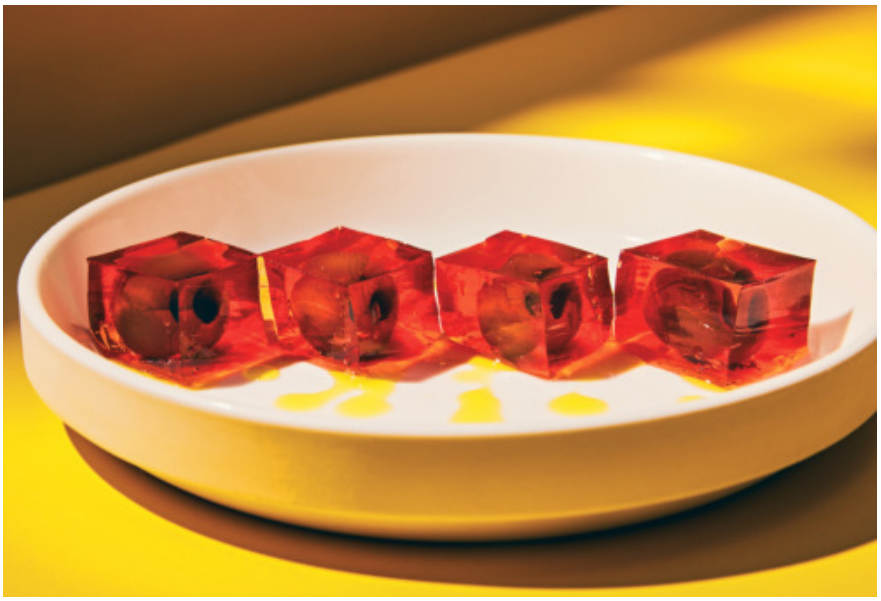
POP MUSIC | If the sugar-rush bliss of **Carly Rae Jepsen's** first hit single, "Call Me Maybe," evokes teen-aged mania, the music she has released since offers more nuanced pleasures. The same longing that defines her smash hit lingers throughout her discography, but her songwriting has become significantly more refined. The crown jewel of her catalogue, "Emotion," channels its title, matching the passion of its eighties-inspired sound. Existing alongside her trove of warm pop LPs is a series of B-sides that riff on her ideas of dance pop and disco. With another companion record imminent—"The Loveliest Time," mirroring her quarantine album, "The Loneliest Time"—Jepsen embraces a never-ending yearning.—*Sheldon Pearce (The Rooftop at Pier 17; Aug. 7-8.)*

BROADWAY | For **"Here Lies Love,"** David Byrne's mix of morality play—about the rise and fall of Imelda Marcos—and G-rated rave, an impressive team, led by the director Alex Timbers, reconfigured Broadway's barn-iest theatre into a warehouse-style disco. Imelda (Arielle Jacobs), her co-despot, Ferdinand (Jose Llana), their foil Ninoy Aquino (Conrad Ricamora), and Broadway's first all-Filipino cast sing catchy songs (by Byrne and Fatboy Slim) about, essentially, propaganda and graft as they invite the dance-floor crowd to boogie along. The audience initially fills in, visually and dramaturgically, as the Marcos-loving masses, then as the protesters who toss the autocrats out, yet the fundamental disjunction never resolves. Amid the aesthetic ravishments, it's hard to forget that Imelda's cardinal sin was greed—and "Love" itself is an exercise in ecstatic excess.—*Helen Shaw (Reviewed in our issue of 7/31/23.) (Broadway Theatre; open run.)*

CONTEMPORARY DANCE | **Mark Morris Dance Group** has been a beloved New York institution for decades, but it's only now making its début at the Joyce. Though these amiable dancers are at home on opera-house stages, it's a special pleasure to see them in a smaller venue, where their unpretentious excellence can register at close range. Both weeks of the run feature strong and varied programs, but week two has the sole world première—the punningly titled "A minor Dance," set to a Bach partita. It also features a revival of "Castor and Pollux," the finale of the group's first concert, in 1980, which has since been performed in only one other run of shows, in 1981. Set to a score, by Harry Partch, of unusual percussion in uncommon meters, it looks like an invented folk dance performed with rhythmic exactitude and tossed-off physicality—an early example of Morris magic.—*Brian Seibert (Joyce Theatre; Aug. 1-12.)*

CLASSICAL MUSIC | "Nobody wants the young English composer," Ralph Vaughan Williams wrote in 1912. "He is unappreciated at home and unknown abroad." Vaughan Williams was challenging himself and others to forge a specifically British musical identity, and the two-week **Bard Music Festival,** part of Bard SummerScape, explores his success in that endeavor as a composer of refined sentimentality. The first weekend of programs surveys Vaughan Williams's elegantly turned hymns and chamber music alongside his more vigorous orchestral work; it ends with a celebration of popular song—with pieces by Noël Coward, Ivor Novello, and others—that would surely have delighted the man who exhorted composers to head out to halls to hear the music of the people.—*Oussama Zahr (Annandale-on-Hudson, N.Y.; Aug. 4-6.)*

MOVIES | The veteran American independent filmmaker Ira Sachs's passionate movie-world melodrama **"Passages"** stars Franz Rogowski as Tomas, a German director who lives in Paris with his husband, Martin (Ben Whishaw), a printer. Tomas begins an affair with a schoolteacher named Agathe (Adèle Exarchopoulos); Tomas and Martin separate on bitter terms but soon rekindle their mutual lust. The couples' long, ardent, and elaborately choreographed sex scenes are as character-centered and nuanced as the film's finely crafted dialogue. Tomas's erotic energy and reckless intimacy come off as inseparable from his work—he's as productive of drama in his life as he is in his films. Sachs's vision of artistic and romantic freedom, complete with its painful complications, rises to a peak of exultation, with a thrilling needle-drop to match.—*Richard Brody (In limited release.)*



TABLES FOR TWO

Café Mars
272 3rd Ave., Brooklyn

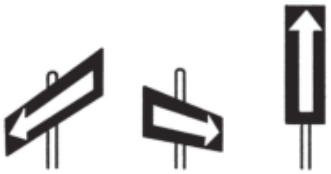
Humor might be the hardest thing for a restaurant to get away with. Plenty of attempts can be found, especially at billionaire-bait tasting-menu spots, where caviar in an ice-cream cone is hailed as the pinnacle of whimsy. The new Café Mars, in Gowanus, bills itself as "an unusual Italian restaurant," and I was worried, heading in, that I would feel coerced into surprise or amusement as each dish hit the table. I don't know what I was so afraid of. "Unusual," in Café Mars's case, doesn't mean predictable trompe-l'oeil or edgy for the sake of edgy. The flavors are familiarly Italianate, but they come in unexpected combinations, in weird and wondrous shapes and textures.

The restaurant's space was previously home to an Italian deli; decades before that, it was a pasta factory. Paul D'Avino, who, with Jorge Olarte, is the co-chef and co-owner, told me that his great-grandfather, a native of Campania, once lived across the street. "We were going to turn this place into an *izakaya*, but I had to do right by my *bisnonno*," D'Avino said. Decor-wise, though, he and Olarte—alumni of such blue-chip kitchens as wd-50, Momofuku Ssäm Bar, and the Noma fermentation lab—have bypassed the trattoria-rustica vibe in favor of curvilinear shapes and geometric hunks of color inspired by the Memphis Milano design movement. Debbie Harry rocks the dining room; the bathroom soundtrack features the late absurdist comedian Mitch Hedberg. There are jokes on the menu, too: sea-bass crudo in a pool of "crazy water," or *acqua pazza*, arrives under a snowdrift of—gasp—grated Parmesan, a rejection of the Italian rule to never pair cheese with seafood.

Almost every table had a plate of quivering "jell-olives": Castelvetranos suspended in cubes of Negroni jello. They are—this is an unreserved compliment—completely horrifying, with a visceral texture that I loathed and also immediately wanted to experience again. The rest of the menu offers more straightforward pleasures, many touched with Japanese influence. D'Avino and Olarte take pasta very seriously and seem to relish reviving underappreciated forms. The shape that the menu simply calls "waves" is bathed in an orangey-red sauce that looks tomato-based, but the nose and the mouth know better: it's pure Calabrian chili, just barely tempered by butter—the world's fanciest Buffalo sauce.

Parmigiana gets a Flintstonian makeover with bone-in pork ribs, accompanied by Japanese spaghetti salad—itself an adaptation of American-style macaroni salad—that substitutes the typical ham cubes with fried mortadella. It's the rare side dish that rewards close reading, but nothing ruins a joke quite like having to explain it. More important than being devilishly clever, it was devilishly good. *(Dishes $9–$36.)*

—Helen Rosner



PICK THREE

Recommendations from the staff writer Michael Schulman.

1. BEST ALTERNATIVE TO THE SUMMER POP PLAYLIST: The performance artist Taylor Mac is an avant-garde maximalist whose most ambitious project to date was a daylong live concert covering nearly two and a half centuries of American popular song. Mac, dressed in high-concept drag created by the designer Machine Dazzle, reinterpreted everything from "Yankee Doodle Dandy" to "Purple Rain." If you missed the show, don't worry: Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman captured it in their bracing, joyous documentary "Taylor Mac's 24-Decade History of Popular Music," now on Max.

2. BEST ALTERNATIVE TO "BARBIE": Before the world's preëminent fashion doll got a feminist consciousness-raising from Greta Gerwig, an Arkansas housewife named Thelma learned to stand up to the patriarchy from her friend Louise. Ridley Scott's "Thelma & Louise" was a lightning rod in 1991, and it still retains its gumption and its thrill. A new 4K restoration screens at Film Forum on Aug. 4, with an introduction by Karina Longworth, who delved into the film and its cultural moment on her podcast, "You Must Remember This."

3. BEST ALTERNATIVE TO THE BIG TOP: Bard SummerScape, the risk-taking festival up in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, is once again hosting the glittering, mirrored Spiegeltent. A few weeks ago, I saw a ribald comedy night there hosted by Jeff Hiller ("Somebody Somewhere"), followed by a dance party. Next week, Aug. 11-12, the downtown misfits John Cameron Mitchell and Amber Martin co-host their alt-cabaret show, "Cassette Roulette."

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THE NEW YORKER

THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
A NATION AFLAME

In Israel, the saying goes, there are four seasons: election, war, strike, and summer. These bleak, blazing days in the country are a result of the first. Last year, elections brought to power the most extremist government in its history. Israel has no written constitution, but until last week the authority of the government and the Prime Minister was limited by the Supreme Court's ability to overturn decisions and appointments that it deemed "extremely unreasonable." Now the Knesset, with its right-wing majority, has passed a law eliminating this power, and legal experts warn that a rise in cronyism and corruption is likely. As Mordechai Kremnitzer, a scholar of constitutional law, wrote in the liberal newspaper *Haaretz*, "Limiting the judicial review will encourage the government to make unacceptable decisions, both in Israel proper and in the occupied territories."

The new law can hardly be seen in isolation. It is just the first fissure in an already fragile edifice. The measure is part of a planned legislative package aimed at transforming Israel from a liberal democracy—for its citizens, but not, crucially, for the roughly 2.5 million Palestinians under military occupation in the West Bank—into a hollow democracy, with only the veneer of competitive elections, a free press, and independent courts. Right-wing legislators seek to change the makeup of the committee that selects judges, diminish the role of Israel's Attorney General, and allow government ministers to act against the advice of legal counsels. They also intend to enshrine the exemption of the ultra-Orthodox from serving in the military.

The divisions in Israeli society have never been more distinct or alarming. The ultra-Orthodox, settlers in the West Bank, and other hard-right factions represent between fifteen and thirty per cent of the public, but in the current political battle their interests have so far taken precedence over those of every other sector of society. Leaders of industry and of the security establishment are among the protesters in the streets. So are many religious citizens and people who hardly consider themselves left-wing. Last week, a hundred and fifty of the country's biggest firms, along with almost all the country's doctors, went on strike. For the first time in Israel's history, there is even a risk to its military preparedness: thousands of reservists, including hundreds of pilots, have signed letters saying that they may suspend their volunteer duty.

In the days leading up to the Knesset's vote, the few relatively moderate voices remaining in Benjamin Netanyahu's coalition tried to assure the public—and the troubled markets—that the legislative effort would end after the elimination of the "unreasonableness" standard. Their assurances were belied by Itamar Ben-Gvir, the extremist minister of national security, who tweeted, "The salad bar is open." In other words, his faction is just beginning to reveal its appetites. Netanyahu himself attempted to frame the passage of the law as a technical matter, describing it, in an interview with ABC News, as a "minor correction." But, if it is indeed trivial, why bring Israel to the brink of civil war? The fact is that the Prime Minister is on trial for corruption, facing charges of bribery, fraud, and breach of trust, all of which he denies. Critics argue that there is a direct line between his legal woes and the package of bills, particularly those which would curb the powers of Israel's already beleaguered Attorney General.

Seven months of unrelenting protests failed to quash the judicial overhaul. But they have awakened Israel's liberal camp, giving it a sense of purpose. Tens of thousands of Israelis marched on Jerusalem last week, and slept in tents outside parliament. In Tel Aviv, protesters faced off against an increasingly violent police force that charged at them on horseback. The leaders of the protest movement have announced that they are expanding their fight to include "financial strikes"

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

and the provision of security for the gatekeepers of civil society.

The protesters have exhibited remarkable perseverance and creativity. A key question now is whether their energy can translate into political action. The centrist opposition parties of Yair Lapid and Benny Gantz appear to have benefitted electorally from the events of the past few months. The Knesset has a total of a hundred and twenty seats; Netanyahu's right-wing bloc holds sixty-four of them. If elections were held today, a poll released by Channel 12 found, the right would lose at least ten seats, and thus its majority.

The center-left in Israel has spent the past two decades on the defensive. That is no longer an option. Faced with a coalition of cynical populists and conservative extremists bent on turning Israel into a Jewish theocracy, the liberal camp will have to present its own vision of the country. Part of the liberals' battle will be to reclaim the public sphere: to insure gender and minority rights, an education system that promotes secular and humanist values, and a more equitable distribution of employment, taxes, and conscription.

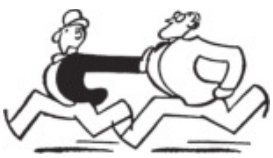
The day after parliament removed the standard of unreasonableness, lawmakers from the ultra-Orthodox United Torah Judaism Party put forth a bill concerning the Haredi military exemption. It says that "the State of Israel, as a Jewish state, sees the utmost importance in encouraging the study of the Torah and Torah students." Israel is one of just a few countries in the world with mandatory military duty for men and women (by law, if not by practice). Yet this bill seeks to place yeshiva study on equal terms with military service. Politicians from Netanyahu's Likud Party admitted that the timing of the bill was, as one put it, "miserable." But it couldn't have come as a surprise. The bill, and others like it, are spelled out in agreements between Netanyahu and his coalition partners. These politicians are simply cashing in.

The "Basic Law: Torah Study" bill may soon land on the desks of Knesset members. Given the power that the hard right wields in Netanyahu's coalition, it could pass. If civil groups then petition to challenge the bill, as they are likely to do, it will wind its way to the Supreme Court. Israel's justices will be helpless to strike it down for what it is: extremely unreasonable.

This week, Israel's parliament begins its summer recess, and the flames will lower, but only for a while. The Supreme Court has agreed to hear a challenge to the unreasonableness law and could overturn it, throwing the country into deeper chaos. The judicial overhaul is expected to continue in October. Up next, the coalition has announced, will be the proposal to change the committee that selects judges.

—Ruth Margalit

BILLION-DOLLAR JOGGER
TRUMP'S GUY



Drew Findling stepped out of his black Mercedes-Benz on a sticky recent morning in North Atlanta, wearing black shorts, a black shirt, black shoes, a black hat, and black shades. He was preparing to go for a run. "I can run any pace you want," he said, "unless you're trying to break the 10K record." Findling, who is sixty-three, belongs to the Athletics Hall of Fame at nearby Oglethorpe University, where, he said, he once clocked a 4:37 mile during a cross-country race. But he's better known as the man representing Donald Trump as he faces likely charges of election interference in Georgia, and as the #BillionDollarLawyer. The late Young Dolph, one of Findling's many hip-hop clients, bestowed the nickname in 2017, after he'd summoned Findling to meet him at a hospital. "A security guard is pushing Dolph in his wheelchair," Findling recalled. "I'm, like, why am *I* here? Then Dolph slowly gets up, and he's, like, 'I got shot, but I'm dropping my album at midnight tonight, and I got my billion-dollar lawyer.'" Dolph posted a video of the exchange on social media. Findling's kids thought it was cool.

Like Gucci Mane, Waka Flocka, and Offset—who has called Findling "the biggest lawyer in the game"—Trump took note. He hired Findling last August, expecting an indictment. Reports have suggested that one could be issued soon. Last week, barricades appeared outside the Fulton County Courthouse. Findling is a liberal—longish hair, beard, a fondness for seventies soul—who, in 2018, tweeted that Trump was "racist" and "pathetic once again." But, when the former President's people called, Findling thought, What would John Adams do? "He defended British soldiers after the Boston Massacre," Findling said, as he set off on a five-miler around a city park. "Once you start discriminating, the dominoes fall."

Findling waved as he passed a few Jehovah's Witnesses handing out pamphlets. Then his phone pinged. "Hey comma," Findling dictated, without breaking stride. "In a meeting comma. Let me call you in a couple hours. Period." Afterward, he said, "I also return phone calls when I run. I think it's a great time to return calls." Not everyone agrees. "One of my closest friends, if he hears me breathing hard, he goes, 'No. You're not doing this to me.' My daughter says, 'Daddy, you're using me.'" Findling went on, "I'll also dictate and draft. Or I'll just enjoy the silence."

A small hill appeared. "Tough section coming up," he said, dodging a woman with three dogs. Near the top, two older men heading in the other direction recognized Findling; one of them was a trial lawyer. "How you doing, man!" the lawyer said. "You're in town for a change." Sweaty small talk ensued. "Good luck," the lawyer said as they parted. "I'll probably see you in *the case*. I have somebody, too." He meant the Trump case, Findling confirmed moments later. "Everybody has got somebody."

Checking the pace—just under ten minutes per mile—Findling returned to his first love. "I was definitely a self-identified runner," he said. "I was always wearing my Dolfin shorts around campus in college. I was a maniac—on Sunday mornings, I got up and ran." Running prepares him for lawyering. "Trying a case the right way is a physical activity," he said. "I tell lawyers all the time that if you're digging in for a three-hour cross-examination on a case you've spent years working on, you've gotta be hydrated and think about the athletic po-

sition"—leaning forward, knees slightly bent, looking straight ahead. "You've gotta be on top of your game."

As he started lap two, Findling got quiet. "Maybe we walk it out from here," he said at the top of the hill. After catching his breath, he began talking about a favorite client, the rapper Cardi B. "She's like a daughter to me," he said. "She did a verse about me. It's terrible, but it's funny as shit." The verse: "Lawyer is a Jew, he gon chew up all the charges." Cardi B wrote it in Sharpie on a New York *Post* article featuring a photo of them, which Findling framed and hung in his office.

"I don't know if you're a student of history," Findling went on, "but Cardi will take you on. The Ottoman Empire—she'll get you. She'll talk to you about Pearl Harbor and how there should never have been shock and awe. She'll talk about Churchill—but she'll never say 'Churchill.' She just talks about 'the fat bald guy.'" He continued, "She and I were at some event once and she was talking about the Royal Family, and I go, 'Cardi, stop. You're full of shit. You're just rehashing Season 3 of 'The Crown.' She goes"—Findling's voice softened—" 'You got me, Drew.'"

What did Cardi B think of her lawyer representing Donald Trump? Findling considered the question for a while. "She's supportive of me," he said. "I bet she knows about John Adams, too." (A rep for Cardi B said, "She gave him shit about it, though.")

—Charles Bethea

ANTI-PERFECTIONISM
WASTE NOT

The Li sisters, Margaret and Irene, have a saying: "If it is delicious in general, it will be delicious in a dumpling." Cheddar-scallion-potato dumpling? "It's our love letter to the pierogi, and all Eastern European forms of starch wrapped in starch," Irene says. Dumplings made from leftovers? God, yes. In June, Margaret and Irene published their second cookbook, "Perfectly Good Food," a guide to zero-waste cooking, which includes recipes for such delectables as Cream-of-Anything Soup, Fridge-Cleanout Fried Rice, and Choose-Your-Own-Adventure Vegetable Paella.

Some forty per cent of the food grown in America is thrown away, much of it from people's kitchens. And food is expensive! The book advocates a jazzy, contingency-driven approach to household thrift. A recipe might call for any crunchy vegetable, the meat of your choice, or thinly sliced onion, "red if you have it." They're not trying to make you buy things you don't need. Irene says, of improvisational cooking, "We wanna make that accessible in a world filled with, like, trash and, you know, capitalism."

Not long ago, the sisters were in Brighton, Massachusetts, in Irene's apartment (a leftover: it used to be Margaret's), making chicken dumplings out of a wizened ginger root and some off-color broccoli. They are Internet-taught riffers, anti-perfectionists. "Our mom would make a special trip to Chinatown to get Chinese chives or Napa cabbage, and we are a hundred per cent too lazy to do that, so we would just use whatever greens are in the fridge," Margaret said.

Irene judiciously trimmed off brown florets. Ginger peels went into a stock bag. She is thirty-three, and wears her hair in a growing-out Mohawk. "I have actually had this haircut for like thirteen years," she said. "Before everybody's hipster boyfriend." Margaret, who goes by Mei, is forty-one, has two children, and recently moved to Scotland, land of marked-down "wonky apples" and tiny fridges.

In 2012, with their older brother, Andy, the Lis opened a dumpling-oriented food truck in Boston called Mei Mei, which means Little Sister. Once, they served dumplings to Yotam Ottolenghi, who was in town while his child was being born (scream-crying, fangirling, tweets). Later, Mei Mei became a restaurant; eventually, Irene bought her siblings out and opened a dumpling factory/cafeteria/cooking school in an industrial part of South Boston frequented by pipe fitters. (In 2022, she won a leadership award from the James Beard Foundation; Mei Mei has an open-book structure, and employees are taught to read a profit-and-loss statement.) All along, the Lis wanted to use the best-quality ingredients, but they never had extra money. They made do, blending seconds and irregulars into fillings and pestos.

Margaret feeds her children Fruit Three Ways: first raw, then as a smoothie, then as a Popsicle. Her husband has learned to be wary. Once, Margaret served him a green dressing he found irresistible. "He was basically licking his plate and he was, like, 'This is the best dressing ever!'" she said. "I was, like, 'That was the kale salad that we had for dinner like four days ago!'"

Irene stirred the vegetables into a bowl of ground chicken. "To season, I am going to open up the fridge and probably start by just pulling out a couple of things that have like a half inch

"If I stop kicking in my sleep I'll die."

left in them," she said, fishing out jars of chili crisp and garlic achaar.

"Should I put some bacon grease?" Irene asked Margaret. "Or fry them in bacon fat? Or both?" Both, she decided. Margaret got to work on a dipping sauce. On Irene's counter, she discovered a dish filled with soy-sauce packets from her favorite sushi spot. "O.K., *Mom*," Margaret said. Their mother, a busy internist, modelled no-waste cooking, marinating chicken in sauces that came with takeout. Their father, a cancer researcher, who died in 2015, was an enthusiastic eater, born into restaurant royalty. His parents, high-ranking military élites in pre-Revolution China, fled to the United States and opened a place called China Garden, in White Plains, New York. "You know, it's kind of the classic immigrant story. You come to the U.S., you open a restaurant, you make sure your kids have a better life, and then your grandchildren go back into the restaurant business," Margaret said. She found some yuzu soy sauce, pickled ginger and its juice, and sherry vinegar because Irene had no black.

"Time for a little flippy-dippy," Irene said, turning the dumplings out onto a plate, and the sisters sat down to eat. For dessert, Irene had made banana bread, a no-waste classic: three overripe bananas, vanilla extract made from desiccated beans revived in grain alcohol, chocolate scraps given to her, like mine tailings, by an artisanal chocolatier. "Everything that went in is on its second life," she said.

On their book tour for "Perfectly Good Food," Margaret said, many questions revolved around the issue of "Can I eat this thing?" She has her limits. "Sometimes you just say, 'I'm not gonna eat that,' and it is O.K."

—Dana Goodyear

THE WAY
ROLE OF A LIFETIME

Jonathan Roumie, the forty-nine-year-old actor who plays Jesus Christ in "The Chosen," a popular crowd-funded TV series about the New Testament's protagonist, ascended the steps of St. Patrick's Cathedral for noon Mass.

Jonathan Roumie

Before he could make it through the sanctuary's nine-ton bronze doors, he was spotted by fans. "We just want a picture with Jesus!" one woman said.

Roumie politely obliged. The fan, it turned out, was among the thousands of pilgrims who'd travelled to Texas a few summers ago to be extras in Season 2's Sermon on the Mount episode.

"Oh, my heavens, my husband is going to just die," she said, posing with Roumie.

"You have touched our hearts in ways they have never been touched before," her friend added.

Roumie headed for the pews. The son of an Egyptian father and an Irish mother, he is olive-skinned and bearded, and his brown hair grazed the shoulders of his leather jacket. He searched his pockets for a hair tie. "I'm going to put it up in a ponytail," he said. "It helps a bit."

Born in Hell's Kitchen—God has a sense of humor—and baptized Greek Orthodox, Roumie and his family began attending a Catholic church after moving to the suburbs. His faith deepened in May, 2018, following an incident that has become gospel to his fans. After two decades struggling in the industry (bit parts on "All My Children," sitcoms, and video games), Roumie was broke. He fell to his knees in his tiny apartment, surrendered to God, and had a mystical experience. Unburdened, he spent his last twenty dollars on a big breakfast, and, when he got home, he found in his mailbox four unexpected checks. A few months later, he got a call from Dallas Jenkins, the director and co-writer of "The Chosen."

Jenkins's father, Jerry, is the co-author of the best-selling Rapture-pulp novels in the "Left Behind" series. Jenkins cites "Friday Night Lights," "The Wire," and "The West Wing" as inspirations for "The Chosen." The show, which now has licensing deals with Netflix, Amazon, and Peacock, has been streamed more than five hundred million times. Earlier this month, when the series had to stop filming its fourth season because of the SAG-AFTRA strike, fans launched a social-media prayer campaign to lobby for an exemption. ("Satan is working overtime to stop production of this show"; "Father . . . please change the hearts of those who have the authority, which You gave, to approve the exemption.") The union allowed the series to resume production.

In St. Patrick's, the ponytail gambit had failed. As the priest gave his concluding blessing, a small queue formed near where Roumie knelt. He gave the acolytes his own brief blessings, then set off on foot for Sarge's Deli, in Murray Hill.

He ordered the Skyscraper Deluxe, essentially a cheeseburger topped with pastrami, but he asked for lettuce instead of a bun. After saying grace, he tackled the sandwich, relieved that his fellow-diners were leaving him be. "I never wanted to lose my anonymity," he said. "God had other plans."

Roumie is an introvert. He has to push himself to be available to fans (who often address him as Jesus), and to make eye contact while listening. He remembers how, back before he was famous, he once approached a celebrity who treated his admiration as a nuisance.

His efforts to be openhearted are a matter of faith as well: What would Jesus do? "Jesus is the only character who I would hope to stay in character as all the time," he said. The Method meets theology. "But some people want a spiritual encounter, and that can be hard to live up to. I'm not Jesus."

More than Robert Powell, Willem Dafoe, Jim Caviezel, or other actors who have worn the big sandals, Roumie

channels the Saviour offscreen, as a Christian influencer. On a Catholic meditation app called Hallow, worshippers can offer a novena accompanied by his image, or pray using a rosary made by Ghirelli, an Italian jewelry brand that he partners with.

The idea of being typecast doesn't bother him. He recently played a lead role in a bio-pic about the charismatic nineteen-seventies "hippie preacher" Lonnie Frisbee, called "Jesus Revolution." In one scene, he says, "People tell me I'm trying to look like Jesus or something. I tell them, I can't think of anybody else I'd rather look like."

Roumie asked for the bill. The server grinned and said that someone had already paid it. "It's like every step of the way I get these little reminders that He's got my back," he said. Outside, the couple who'd paid were waiting for a photo.

—Gideon Jacobs

LONDON POSTCARD
SIDE HUSTLE

Bryan Adams, the Canadian rock singer, was at the Atlas Gallery, in London, the other day, attending an art opening. The art on display was his own; since the late nineties, he has had a side career as a portrait photographer. He got into it because he found himself fascinated by the people who took his picture for album covers and magazines. "I was always watching what the assistants were doing," he said, "and how it wasn't just showing up and getting your picture taken." He has shot assignments for British *Vogue* and German *Vogue* and for *Harper's Bazaar*. His subjects have included his friends and colleagues (Morrissey, Lindsay Lohan, Judi Dench, Ben Kingsley), British military veterans, and homeless street venders. In 2001, he was commissioned as Canada's official photographer for Queen Elizabeth's Golden Jubilee portraits.

At the gallery, Adams wore a black denim jacket and thick-rimmed glasses. He had just been in Tampa on his "So Happy It Hurts" tour. The next morning, he was leaving for Texas. The art exhibition, called "Bryan Adams in Color," features a series of black-and-white celebrity portraits framed behind sheets of colored plexiglass.

"I've not seen them finished like this," Adams said, of the color-saturated images. "It looks cool." He gestured at his portrait of the Queen and Prince Philip: "Royal red."

Anke Degenhard, a German art consultant who has worked with Adams for seventeen years, explained that she'd had conversations with thirty different plexiglass manufacturers before she found one to produce the colors that Adams wanted: an Orange Crush hue for Naomi Campbell, and light blue for Mick Jagger. Degenhard, who has Barbie-blond hair, was dressed in black. She mentioned that one of the portraits had been nixed. "The person has some legal issues," she said, laughing. "He did some things, so we don't show it."

For the series, Adams had been inspired by the expression "seeing things through rose-tinted glasses." He said, "It sounded cool, right?" Earlier, Ben Burdett, the gallery's director, had compared the effect to looking into a fishbowl, the plexiglass acting as a filter that ensnares the celebrity subjects. "They're sort of trapped," he said.

"That's a bit existential," Adams said. "I think it gives them a more Pop-art feel." He paused in front of a picture of Amy Winehouse crouched beside a record player, laughing. "We started up quite well and then the bottles of wine kicked in," he said. "And *that's* a bottle of wine later." Winehouse's beehive partially obscures her face, behind light-blue plexiglass. Elsewhere, there is Bryan Ferry in a pensive mood, cigarette between his fingers, mid-drag. In the gallery's window is a photo of the English singer Robbie Williams, shirtless, wearing a dark topcoat, pointing at his chest. It is titled "Nipples."

Bryan Adams

Downstairs, a selection of Adams's black-and-white prints was on display. The photographer Julia Bostock was helping set up champagne flutes on a table. Adams greeted her with a kiss on the cheek. He told her that he'd just played Madison Square Garden and that some of the crew had remembered him from the last time he was there. " 'Mr. Adams, how ya doin'?' " he mimicked, in a Long Island accent.

He looked at a shot of Mads Mikkelsen, his bare torso contorted in a yogic pose. "He's quite flexible," he said. Nearby was a portrait of Kate Moss, from 2000, reclining on a surface in Adams's London kitchen. That day, there were workers in the house for a renovation, and Moss's agent had called ahead to say that she wanted to pose wearing only black fishnet stockings. "At one point, one of the builders was carrying some stone and he went, 'All right, Kate?' " Adams said, in mangled Cockney. "And she went, 'All right!' "

There was another shot of the Queen, this time seated next to two pairs of Wellingtons. Did she know Adams's music? "We never really got into it," he said. "But I met her a few times after that, and every time I was in the room she would come over and say hello."

He did not have much to say about being photographed himself. "How many pictures of a toad can you put up with?" he asked. Still, he seemed game for a brief iPhone photo call. Posing, he removed his glasses and crossed his arms, smiling a red-carpet smile. Later, examining the photograph, he pinched his fingers on the phone screen and zoomed in on his face. "Shocking," he whispered, and suggested a retake. "There needs to be more space between the top of the photo and the subject. Makes the head look smaller."

—M. Z. Adnan

PERSONAL HISTORY

DREAMING IN BABYLON

Revisiting a Rastafari childhood in Jamaica.

BY SAFIYA SINCLAIR

The first time I left Jamaica, I was seventeen. I'd graduated from high school two years before, and while trying to get myself to college I'd been scouted as a model. And so I found myself at the Wilhelmina Models office in Miami, surrounded by South Beach's finest glass windows with all my glass hopes, face to face with a famous one-named model who was now in her sixties. When her gaze halted at my dreadlocks, I shouldn't have been surprised at what came next.

"Can you cut the dreads?" she asked, as she flipped through my portfolio, her soft accent blunting the impact of the words.

Back home in Kingston, hair stylists would leave my dreadlocks untouched, tied up in a ponytail with my good black ribbon, deciding that the problem of my hair was insolvable.

"Sorry," I said. "My father won't allow me."

She glanced over at the agent who had brought me in.

"It's her religion," he explained. "Her father is Rastafarian. Very strict."

The road between my father and me was woven in my hair, long spools of dreadlocks tethering me to him, across time, across space. Everywhere I went, I wore his mark, a sign to the bredren in his Rastafari circle that he had his house under control. Once, when I was feeling brave, I had asked my father why he chose Rastafari for himself, for us. "I and I don't *choose* Rasta," he told me, using the plural "I" because Jah's spirit is always with a Rasta bredren. "I and I was born Rasta." I turned his reply over in my mouth like a coin.

My father, Djani, had also been seventeen when he took his first trip out of Jamaica. He travelled to New York in the winter of 1979 to find his fortune. It was there, in the city's public libraries, that my father first read the speeches of Haile Selassie and learned about the history of the Rastafari movement. In the early nineteen-thirties, the street preacher Leonard Percival Howell heeded what is known as the Jamaican activist Marcus Garvey's call to "look to Africa for the crowning of a Black king," who would herald Black liberation. Howell discovered Haile Selassie, the emperor of Ethiopia, the only African nation never to be colonized, and declared that God had been reincarnated. Inspired by Haile Selassie's reign, the movement hardened around a militant belief in Black independence, a dream that would be realized only by breaking the shackles of colonization.

As he read, my father became aware of the racist downpression of the Black man happening in America. He understood then what Rastas had been saying all along, that systemic injustice across the world flowed from one huge, interconnected, and malevolent source, the rotting heart of all iniquity: what the Rastafari call Babylon. Babylon was the government that had outlawed them, the police that had pummelled them, the church that had damned them to hellfire. Babylon was the sinister and violent forces born of western ideology, colonialism, and Christianity that led to the centuries-long enslavement and oppression of Black people. It was the threat of destruction that crept even now toward every Rasta family.

Just as a tree knows how to bear fruit, my father would say, he knew then what he needed to do. On a cold day in February, his eighteenth birthday, my father stood before a mirror in New York City and began twisting his Afro into dreadlocks, the sacred marker of Rastafari livity, a holy expression of righteousness and his belief in Jah. When he returned to Jamaica, his mother took one look at his hair and refused to let him into the house. It was shameful to

SOURCE PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY THE AUTHOR

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY MARK HARRIS

have a Rasta son, she said. My father, with nowhere else to go, reluctantly cut his hair back down to an Afro.

Soon my father began spending time around a drum circle with Rasta elders in Montego Bay, sitting in on the spiritual and philosophical discussions that Rastas call reasoning. "Rasta is not a religion," my father always said. "Rasta is a calling. A way of life." There is no united doctrine, no holy book of Rastafari principles. There is only the wisdom passed down from elder Rasta bredren, the teachings of reggae songs from conscious Rasta musicians, and the radical Pan-Africanism of revolutionaries like Garvey and Malcolm X. My father felt called to a branch known as the Mansion of Nyabinghi, the strictest and most radical sect of Rastafari. Its unbending tenets taught him what to eat, how to live, and how to fortify his mind against Babylon's "ism and schism"—colonialism, racism, capitalism, and all the other evil systems of western ideology that sought to destroy the Black man. "Fire bun Babylon!" the Rasta bredren chanted every night, and the words took root in him. He was ready to decimate any heathen who stood in his way.

Hanging on the mint-green living-room wall of our family's house in Bogue Heights, a hillside community overlooking Montego Bay, was a portrait of Haile Selassie, gilded and sceptered at his coronation, his eyes as black as meteorites. It was flanked by a poster of Bob Marley and a photograph of my father, both onstage, both throwing their dreadlocks like live wires into the air.

Every morning of my childhood began the same way, with the dizzying smell of ganja slowly pulling me awake. My mother, Esther, who had first embraced the Rastafari way of life when she met my father at nineteen, was always up before dawn, communing with the crickets, busying herself with housework and yard work. Whenever she worked, she smoked marijuana. The scent of it clung to her long auburn dreadlocks. She carried a golden packet of rolling paper on her at all times, stamped with a drawing of the Lion of Judah waving the Ethiopian flag, the adopted symbol of the Rastafari. My brother, Lij, my sister, Ife, and I pawed and pulled at her, but she did not mind. If she was with us, she was ours.

My father was the lead singer in a reggae band called Djani and the Public Works. When I was seven, Lij five, and Ife three, he met some Japanese record-label executives at the hotel where the band performed nightly, and they agreed to fly the musicians to Tokyo to play reggae shows. They stayed for six months and recorded their first album. After he left, my mother cleared our back yard and planted some crops, which soon became towering stalks of sugarcane, a roving pumpkin patch, and vines and vines of gungo peas, all exploding outward in swaths of green. We had always kept to an Ital diet: no meat, no fish, no eggs, no dairy, no salt, no sugar, no black pepper, no MSG, no processed substances. Our bodies were Jah's temple.

Early on school mornings, under the watchful eye of the holy trinity, my mother combed my black thundercloud of hair, often with me tearfully begging her to stop. Once, the children at my grandmother's Seventh-day Adventist church had asked me why I didn't have dreadlocks like my parents; I remembered the certainty in my grandma's voice when she said that we would be able to choose how to wear our hair.

Even though the combing was painful, I still wouldn't have chosen dreadlocks. When my mother was finished, I swung my glistening plaits, fitted with blue clips to match my school uniform, back and forth, back and forth, pink with delight. I felt it was all worth it then. My mother made it look easy, corralling three children by herself to school every morning while my father was away.

Babylon came for us eventually, even in our kingdom of god-sent green. One Sunday during our Christmas break, my mother dragged a comb across my head and gasped. Two large fistfuls of hair were stuck in its teeth, yanked loose like weak weeds from dirt. I screamed.

"Oh, Jah. Oh, Jah. Oh, Jah," she said, holding me as I cried, blocking my hand from trying to touch my scalp, where I now had a bald spot. Ife was fine, but Lij's hair was also falling out in clumps. My father distrusted Babylon's doctors. My mother did, too—until she had children.

We had been infected with barber disease, the doctor told us, a kind of ringworm spread first by barbers' tools, then by children touching heads at school. Babylon's disease. Mom closed her eyes as she listened. The doctor prescribed a thick antifungal cream and a chemical shampoo.

A week later, despite the treatment, there was scant improvement. My mother gathered up all the combs in the house and flung them into a trash bag, along with the medicine. Hair for the Rastafari signified strength. My father called his hair a crown, his locks a mane, his beard a precept. What grew from our heads was supposed to be most holy. My mother took our blighted scalps as a moral failure, ashamed that we had fallen to Babylon's ruin so soon after my father had gone.

For the rest of the break, she tended to our heads with a homemade tincture. After a few days, my hair started growing back. "Praise Jah," Mom said, as she began the process of twisting all our hair into dreadlocks. Day after day, we sat, snug between her legs, as she lathered our heads in aloe-vera gel and warm olive oil.

Within a few weeks, my hair had stiffened and matted into sprouts of thick antennae, bursting from my head. There was no turning back now. From that point on, combing and brushing our hair was forbidden, on a growing list of NO.

When my siblings and I returned to our primary school after the break, the students gawked at us as if we were a trio of aliens disembarking from a spaceship. They crowded around, trying to sniff or pull at our locks. If they could have dissected us alive, I think they would have.

Not long after, a sixth grader began shadowing me. She crept up close while singing in my ear, "Lice is killing the Rasta, lice is killing the Rasta," a widespread taunt in the nineties, which co-opted the tune of a popular reggae song.

My cheeks stung in humiliation. For the first time, I felt ashamed to be myself. At lunchtime, I told my brother about the girl, her needling insult. My brother shook his head and kissed his teeth the way grownups did.

"Saf, don't pay her no mind. All ah dem a duppy," he said. "And we are the duppy conquerors." He was trying to sound like a big man, talking like our father.

I tried to imagine what my father would say. He always told me to be polite

but right. "I man and your mother didn't birth no weakheart," he said. "Always stand up for what you know is right. You overstand?" Even from afar, his mind moved mine like a backgammon piece.

I decided to go to the teachers' lounge and tell my third-grade teacher about the girl's teasing. Tapping me gently on the shoulder, she told me that with my good grades I should pay such things no mind.

As I walked away, still pensive, I heard her and some of the other teachers talking.

"But it's a shame, innuh," a new teacher's voice chimed in. "I really thought the parents were going to give them the choice."

We were under our favorite mango tree by the front gate when a car rolled up one day in early May. Suddenly, my father appeared like the sun, beeping the horn and flashing his perfect teeth at the sight of us. We jumped on him, and cried; the fireworks of feelings had nowhere else to go. He brought in a parade of bags and boxes from Japan, a brand-new electric Fender guitar slung across his back. He was buoyant. All afternoon, he kept touching his fingers to our dreadlocks. We could tell he was pleased.

Inside the house, he unzipped his suitcases and showered us with mounds of stuffed toys, exquisite notebooks, new clothes and shoes, and a Nintendo Game Boy with Japanese cartridges. For Mom, he brought fancy lotions, a robe, and packets of something called miso. We cheered at every new gift. My father was our Santa, if Rasta believed in Babylon's fables.

Dad was home with us that entire summer. Every day, he was a more carefree version of himself. He taught us to play cricket, told us the same ten jokes of his childhood, and dazzled us with his tree-climbing skills. His recording contract was for two years, but the record label could obtain only six-month visas for the band at a time. Once school began, he went back to Japan to finish the album. We didn't have a phone, so we visited the shop of his closest bredren, Ika Tafara, to call him every weekend.

By the time we walked into Ika's shop for the Kwanzaa celebration that December, I felt like I belonged. About thirty Rasta bredren and their families had come from all over Mobay to gather and give thanks. We recited Marcus Garvey's words like scripture. I played the conga drum and sang of Black upliftment with other Rasta children. There were about twenty of us there, peeking from behind our mothers' hems. And though he was across the sea, my father felt present, the sound of his voice ringing out through the store's speakers.

But when my father got back the second time, the following May, he seemed different. His relationship with one of his bandmates had imploded, taking the band's hopes with it, and he was once again playing reggae for tourists at the hotels lining the coast. My sister Shari was born a month after his return. With the birth of another Sinclair daughter, my father's control over us tightened. One afternoon, he decided that my siblings and I needed to be purified. I watched him stalk through the yard, pulling up cerasee leaves, bitter roots, and black vines, which my mother blended into a pungent goop and poured into three big glasses. He loomed over us for what seemed like hours, as we bawled and retched, struggling to swallow the foul potion. We were there until night fell, until my father believed we had finally been cleansed.

"The I them have to be vigilant," he said when it was over. Our joy had made us heedless, easy prey for the wicked world. We would no longer be allowed to run around outside, or even to leave the yard. "Chicken merry, hawk deh near," he reminded us.

"I man don't want my daughters dressing like no Jezebel," he told my mother later. At his instruction, she threw out every pair of pants and shorts my sisters and I owned. Now we would wear only skirts and dresses made from kente cloth, as our mother did. Our hems were to fall below our knees, our chest and midriff to be covered at all times. Pierced ears, jewelry, and makeup—all those garish trappings of Babylon—were forbidden. "And once you reach the right age," my father said, "the I will wrap your locks in a tie-head like your mother." I realized I had been naïve, in not expecting that this was the life my father had imagined for me.

My hair hadn't been brushed in two years. Flecks of lint and old matter knotted down the length of each dreadlock, a nest containing every place I had laid my head. Dad caught me pushing my fingers through the thicket of roots in the bathroom mirror once, as I tried to twist the crown of my hair into shape.

"Stop that," he said. "Hair fi grow. Naturally and natural only. Like Jah intended."

"Yes, Daddy," I said.

With each month came a new revocation, a new rule. Soon he didn't even allow us around other Rastafari people. He trusted no one, not even them, with

our livity. In our household rose a new gospel, a new church, a new Sinclair sect. The Mansion of Djani.

Whenever our father was out of the house, which was almost nightly, my siblings and I resumed our outdoor play. One day, a few weeks later, Lij chased me across the lawn. I zipped left and ran sideways into the house to lose him. But there he was again. Laughing, I turned to face him, and his running motion drove the full force of his body into my jaw, which slammed hard against the bathroom wall. I felt my front tooth crumble to chalk in my mouth. I slid my tongue across my gums and found a sharp crag in the place where my tooth used to be, and sobbed.

My parents couldn't afford to fix my tooth. They didn't have insurance, and a dentist friend told them it didn't make sense to get it capped until I was older anyway, because my mouth was still growing. I wanted to protest, but I knew my father thought that my distress over my tooth was only vanity, and vanity was a mark of Babylon. I suspect he liked me this way. My mouth was now a barricade between me and the onslaught of adolescence, a broke-glass fence around my body.

I stopped smiling. At school, I sat clench-mouthed and held my hand across my mouth whenever I spoke.

At the end of the school year, there was a carnival. Venders came with cotton candy and peanut brittle and their bright pandemonium of wares. One of the attractions was a mule ride, and after some begging my mother said Ife and I could do it. I pulled my hand-sewn dress over my knees and got on the mule sidesaddle. As we were led around the parking lot by the animal's owner, a photographer appeared and snapped our picture; I made sure to shut my mouth tight. The next day, the local newspaper printed the photo in a half-page spread, my face gloomy above the caption "Two Rasta girls riding a mule."

One morning, when I was nearing the end of sixth grade, my mother held up the classifieds in excitement. "Look at this, Djani," she said. There was an ad announcing two scholarships for "gifted and underprivileged" students to attend a new private high school called St. James College, in Montego Bay. For my parents, this would mean tuition paid, uniforms made, one less child to worry about. A burden lifted. Students had to apply, and a chosen few would then be interviewed by the school's founders.

I pushed out my lips. "So does this mean that if I want to go to any school in my life, I'm always going to have to get a scholarship?" I asked. I knew, as every Jamaican child knows, that no sentence directed to your parents should begin with the word "So."

"*Have* to get a scholarship? You think I and I made ah money?" my father said. "Gyal, get outta my sight." I hid in the bedroom for the rest of the day and wept. My father used only regal honorifics for the women in his life. Empress. Princess. Dawta. The word "gyal" was an insult in Rasta vernacular. It was never used for a girl or a woman who was loved and respected. For weeks, the word taunted me, my girlhood a stain I could not wash out.

We applied, and when my mother told me I was one of the finalists I was not surprised. I had alchemized my father's rage into a resolve to be so excellent that my parents would never have to worry again.

My mother and I went to an office building downtown for the interview. We were met by a short white woman wearing round glasses who introduced herself as Mrs. Newnham. She asked me to come with her, and I followed. I looked back and saw my mother raise a confident fist in my direction.

Five men, most of them white, sat at a table in the center of a large, cold room. They all wore gold watches and school rings with large ruby insignias on them. I had never been alone with so many white people before. The men greeted me. One white man asked what I did in my spare time.

I told them I loved to read and write poetry, and that my favorite poem was "The Tyger," by William Blake. Before they could ask another question, I began to recite it. I looked at each of them as I spoke. The words gave me electric power.

"My God, you speak so well," another white man said. "You speak so well," they all repeated. I was unsure how else I was supposed to speak.

The kindest white man at the table, who had a long nose and blue eyes, asked me to tell him about something in the news. I stopped to think. I knew that everybody had been talking about the West Indian cricketer Brian Lara's triumphant summer and that would be the most expected answer.

"I've been following the Donald Panton scandal," I said. Two of the men looked up at me in surprise. Donald Panton was the other big story that summer—a prominent Kingston businessman who had been under investigation for financial fraud. (Panton was eventually cleared.) Here was my audience, I thought.

When the interview was over, the committee came out with me, congratulating my mother and asking her what her secret was to raising children. "If I had a dime for every time somebody asked me that," my mother said, laughing, "I would be rich."

Before we even left the building, Mrs. Newnham told us that I had been awarded a scholarship to St. James College. My mother hugged me, and thanked Mrs. Newnham and the committee. Outside the building, she jumped and squealed.

"Donald Panton?" my mother said. "What do you even know about that, Safiya?"

"Everything," I said.

There were eight girls in my class, two of us scholarship students. The others were mostly white Jamaicans and children of American and Canadian expats, chirpy girls whose toy-blond mothers picked them up every evening by car. These girls had all gone to the same private prep school together, had all played tennis and lunched at the yacht club together, and, when it was time for high school, their parents had built them a private school. The bond between them was as unspoken and unbreakable as the barrier between us.

One morning, I arrived at school early enough to wander around in the back yard. Suddenly, the quiet was broken by the science teacher, whom

I'll call Mrs. Pinnock, beckoning me up to a terrace on the second floor.

"Sinclair, why were you down there?" she said. "You should not be wandering around the school grounds alone before the teachers arrive."

I concentrated on her shoes as she spoke; she wore the ubiquitous sheer nylons and polished block heels of Jamaican teachers.

"And can you please brush your . . . hair?" she added, her voice sharpening. "You can't be just walking around here looking like a mop." I would not let her see me react.

"Miss, my father says I am not allowed to brush my hair," I said, trying to sweep my locks away from my face and off my head forever.

Mrs. Pinnock suddenly took hold of my wrist.

"What's this?"

There were deep-brown, intricately laced henna patterns across my hands. I explained that a family friend had stained my hands and feet with her homemade henna.

She reminded me that tattoos weren't allowed.

"It's not a tattoo, Miss," I said, my voice quivering now.

"Then *go* to the *bathroom* and *wash* it *off*," she said, articulating each word slowly.

In the bathroom, I scrubbed my hands raw, then walked back to the teachers' lounge, where I showed Mrs. Pinnock that the dye truly didn't come off so easily.

"You see this?" she said, gesturing to the other teachers in the room. "Now these people just taking all kind of liberties." There was no mistaking whom she meant.

At morning assembly, she announced that any student seen with any kind of tattoo at school would get detention or suspension.

During lunchtime, the rich girls often skipped the cafeteria and ate under the shade of the trees in the front yard. The rest of us would follow them out into the noonday sun. Many girls would buy beef patties and warm coco bread from a tiny tuckshop on the premises—all food that I was forbidden. My cheap nylon lunch bag held a sweaty lettuce-and-cheese sandwich, a peeled orange, and a bag of off-brand chips my mom had bought from a Chinese grocery store.

That day, a classmate whom I'll call Shannon decided to climb a young mango tree. I watched her as she clambered up onto the lowest branch, her pleated skirt ballooning and exposing her legs.

"I think it's cool, by the way," Shannon called out to me from above. "I always wanted to try henna. Teachers here are such prudes."

"Thanks," I said.

Shannon leaned down from her perch, her gaze fixed on my locks, and asked me if henna was part of my religion. I shook my head no. Then she asked if I could wear nail polish. The answer was no, it was always no. But she kept going, as if she were trying to reveal something clever about Rastafari to me. Why can't you pierce your ears? Who made the rules?

My father, I wanted to tell her. But how could I convey that every Rastaman was the godhead in his household, that every word my father spoke was gospel?

I leaned back against the trunk of the tree, smoothing down my skirt, which was longer than any other girl's at school. I longed to go up into the branches, but I was too old now to climb trees, my father said.

That night, our power went out without warning, which meant Mom reached for our kerosene lamp and some candles, and we all lay in the dim firelight playing word games until we heard my father at the door.

My mother and I launched into a testimony of what had happened at school with the teacher. My father listened, pulling on his precept silently. His face looked weary in the candlelight. He held our world up on his shoulders, but I never once thought about what he was carrying. He flicked his locks over his shoulder and said, "They don't know nuttin bout this Rasta trodition. Brainwashed Christian eejiat dem." I nodded and smiled, ready for the big bangarang that would come next. But then he shook his head and said, "You need to keep your head down, do your work, and don't cause no trouble."

"I'm not. She was the one—"

"You're on a scholarship. Don't make no fuss," he said again. "You hear me?"

"Yes, Daddy," I said.

Later, my father came and lay next to me in bed. He was good at ignoring my moods, or eclipsing them entirely. "Now tell me again about school," he said. I'd been regaling him weekly with which of my classmates' fathers was a businessman and what kind of car each classmate's mother drove. He seemed to relish these stories, so I hoarded details to report back to him. I might have found it hypocritical, but anything that lifted him meant the whole house lifted, too. As I spoke, his eyes closed.

"There's a girl in my class whose father owns Margaritaville," I began.

"He owns all of it?" he asked me, with a faraway voice.

"I think so," I said. I wasn't sure if that was true, but I knew the grander the parent's success the more spirited he seemed.

"My daughter goes to school with the owner of Margaritaville," he said, his voice drawn out with pride, if Rasta could feel proud.

This was what being thirty-four with four children and still no record deal looked like: one or two fewer dumplings on our plates, or shredded callaloo sautéed for breakfast and again for dinner. "Jah will provide," Dad would say when food was short, and Mom would walk out into the yard and find something ripe—June plums or cherries—for us to eat.

My father was never going to be a carpenter or a banker or a taximan, he said. He sang for Jah, so he had no choice but to cover the same ten Bob Marley songs for tourists eating their steak dinners in the west-coast hotels. At home, though, he could still be king. My mother placed every meal before him as soon as he beckoned for it. He had never turned on a stove, never washed a dish. Every evening before he left for work, my mother would wash his dreadlocks, pouring warm anointments over his bowed head at the bathroom sink, and then oil each lock as he sat eating fruit that she had cut for him. I imagined a servant, just out of frame, fanning a palm frond back and forth.

One sweltering afternoon, Lij, Ife, and I found ourselves alone at home. Racing out to the yard, we crawled through the damp crabgrass, then galloped from bush to bush. We were glistening with sweat as we approached the cherry tree, which was so laden with unripe fruit that some branches scraped the

grass. Each green cherry hung hard and bright like a little world.

I reached for one. It was crisp and tart, a bright tangy juice filling my mouth.

Soon the three of us were shaking the tree like locusts, jumping and snatching green cherries out of it two and three at a time, stuffing our mouths and laughing. "Let's take some for Mommy and Daddy," Ife said. I held out my T-shirt like a basket in front of me to catch the falling fruit.

It was not yet dark when our father hopped out of a taxi at the gate. He was back early, a bad sign. Perhaps his show had been cancelled. We ran up to greet him. Mom was not there to interpret the particular riddle of his face, but by the way he slammed the car door we should have known that he wasn't to be bothered.

"Why unnu still outside?" he snapped. "Go bathe now," he said, swatting us away.

In the living room, our father examined the state of us. Twigs in our dreadlocks, sweat and dirt on our foreheads, green stains down our shirts. He pointed to Lij's bulging pockets.

"Fyah, whaddat?" he asked.

"Umm. Some . . . some cherries, Daddy," Lij said.

"What yuh mean, cherry?" he said, cocking his head. "There is no cherry. The cherries are green."

Lij explained that we had tried them. "They actually taste good!" he added.

My father's smile did not reach his eyes.

"Don't move," he said, and walked out the door.

We heard him curse from the front yard. "Ah wha the bomboclaat!" he shouted, using a curse word usually reserved for record-label execs and hotel managers. His voice was ragged, unfamiliar. His footsteps pounded back up to the front door, which he slammed behind him. The walls shook in their frames.

He glared at us, and we were small, so small he could crush us under his heel. He began unbuckling the belt he was wearing. We had never seen him do this before. It was a new red leather belt that had been given to him by a Canadian friend, still shiny and stiff from lack of use. We looked at each other with confusion, soon mown down by fear as he pulled the red belt out from the loops of his khaki pants.

"Fruits fi eat when dem ripe," he said, wrapping the belt in a loop around his fist. "Let every fruit ripen on Jah tree."

"Daddy, we didn't think—" I said, but couldn't finish. I moved in closer to my siblings helplessly, close as I could get to them.

"The I them too unruly!" he roared, suddenly circling around behind us. He whipped the red belt down with stinging force across our backs.

Thwap. *Thwap*. *Thwap*. The world was upside down. I cried and pleaded, not to him but to something beyond him, anything that might make it stop. Everything was sideways then; roof and rubble crashing down on us, our little kingdom shattering.

When the beating was over, my father walked into his bedroom and drove a nail into the wall above his bed. There, next to another portrait of Haile Selassie, he hung the red belt, waiting for the next time his spirit bid him pull it down.

"Twelve thousand four hundred people liked 'Help Save Me,' but not one single person donated to our Help Save Me fund."

• • •

Not long after, I began detangling the roots of my hair, so it was dreadlocked only at the ends. Every morning before school, I brushed down those precious few inches of unmatted hair at my scalp and kept the strands soft and oiled at the roots. I started unbuttoning my school shirt one button down and wearing my tie at my chest, instead of at my neck, like a boy. Each time I looked in the mirror, I thought I might find something beautiful, as long as I didn't open my mouth.

When I was fifteen, a few months before I graduated from high school, my mother found the money to get my tooth fixed. Suddenly, friends and acquaintances began suggesting I go into modelling. My mother heard that the Saint International modelling agency was scouting for models not far from where I was taking SAT prep classes.

At the entrance to the scouting event, a slim, bright-eyed man introduced himself as Deiwght Peters. He told me about the agency, which he had founded to celebrate Black beauty. While he spoke, he circled me with a feline liquidity, sizing me up like a museum artifact.

"You have a very unique look," Deiwght told me, his eyes flitting over my dreadlocks, which had grown halfway down my back. "We have to get you," he said, reaching for his Polaroid camera.

I don't know what magic my mother worked behind the scenes, but my father, with a brooding resignation, agreed that I could sign on as a Saint model.

My grandmother lived in Spanish Town, near downtown Kingston, where a lot of fashion events took place, so it was decided that I would stay with

her. Deiwght taught me how to glide with one heeled foot in front of the other without looking down, to appear both interesting and disinterested. Suddenly, I was moving in and out of the most beautiful clothes I had ever seen: turquoise pants and sequinned halters and ruffled dresses and stilettos. The first time I wore makeup, the makeup artist stepped away to show me my face in the mirror: "See? You barely need a thing, honey."

My body was a gift, but I didn't quite believe it, not until I sailed down that first runway as the crowd cheered on the Rasta mogeller who would be anointed in the next day's paper. After the show, Deiwght grabbed my beaming mother and shook her, saying, "Your daughter? She is one of the classics!"

I began going to castings all over Kingston. Nighttime was always for poetry, and I spent the late hours at Grandma's house nibbling away at the dictionary while writing by lamplight. I carried my poetry notebook wherever I went.

I had published my first poem, "Daddy," at sixteen. The day it appeared in the literary-arts supplement of the *Sunday Observer* was one big excitement in the Sinclair household. I ran around announcing to everyone that my name would be in print. My father, who read the *Sunday Observer* every weekend, was the most excited of all of us, especially when he saw the title. I didn't bother to warn him that it was not a tribute to him but a reimagining of a story in the news about a young girl who drank Gramoxone to kill herself because her father had molested her. I didn't caution him that the language was visceral and the details gut-wrenching. Instead, I watched him as he opened the page, and savored the long droop of his face as it fell.

One weekend, my father stopped by Grandma's house to pick me up for a model casting on his way to a meeting with music producers in Kingston. I had been instructed to dress for a music video that was "fun and young and sexy," and I had made a short pin-striped pleated skirt from one of Grandma's old skirts, adorning it with safety pins along the waist and hem, like a punk. My father honked impatiently as I walked out in my new outfit, trying to pretend I was bulletproof.

"Oh, Rasta," he said, his eyes bulging as I swooped into the car. I tried to explain, but he wouldn't look in my direction.

We pulled up outside a large iron gate in silence. Down a long gravel driveway, I could see a house, where brightly attired young people were milling about on a veranda. Instead of turning in to the driveway, my father pointed out my window. "It's up there," he said, still looking away from me.

I started to climb out of the car.

"I'm ashamed of you," he said.

"O.K.," I said, and started walking, surprised at how little I felt of the old humiliation.

In Miami, where I had flown a few months later with Deiwght, the older model leaned back in her chair. "Oh," she said. "That's a shame." She looked from my face to my portfolio photos again and smiled politely. "The dreads just aren't versatile enough."

Foolishly, I had believed that my dreadlocks would make me one-of-a-kind in the fashion world, since I'd never seen a model with locks. But this was a profession in which one needed to be emptied of oneself, and I was still too much of my father.

Later that night, I called my mother and asked if I could cut my dreadlocks.

"Oh, Saf," she sighed. "I think you already know the answer to that one."

"Mom, I have no hope of doing this if I don't."

After a long pause, she said, "I will see."

I learned that my father forbade me from cutting my dreadlocks. I knew that if I ever did I would not be allowed back under his roof. My hope for a new kind of life withered, and I had no choice but to return home.

In the end, my mother called a friend to help her. She chose a day when she knew my father would be gone. My siblings were at school, and her friend, whom I'll call Sister Idara, arrived with a smile, ready. I closed my eyes and leaned my head over the laundry sink. The two women poured cupfuls of hot water over my scalp to soften the hair, massaged my roots with their hands, and then lathered my dreadlocks and scrubbed. They lifted me up and wrapped my damp hair in a towel. We three walked together arm in arm to my bedroom. The window curtain lifted in the breeze as I knelt between my mother's knees and waited.

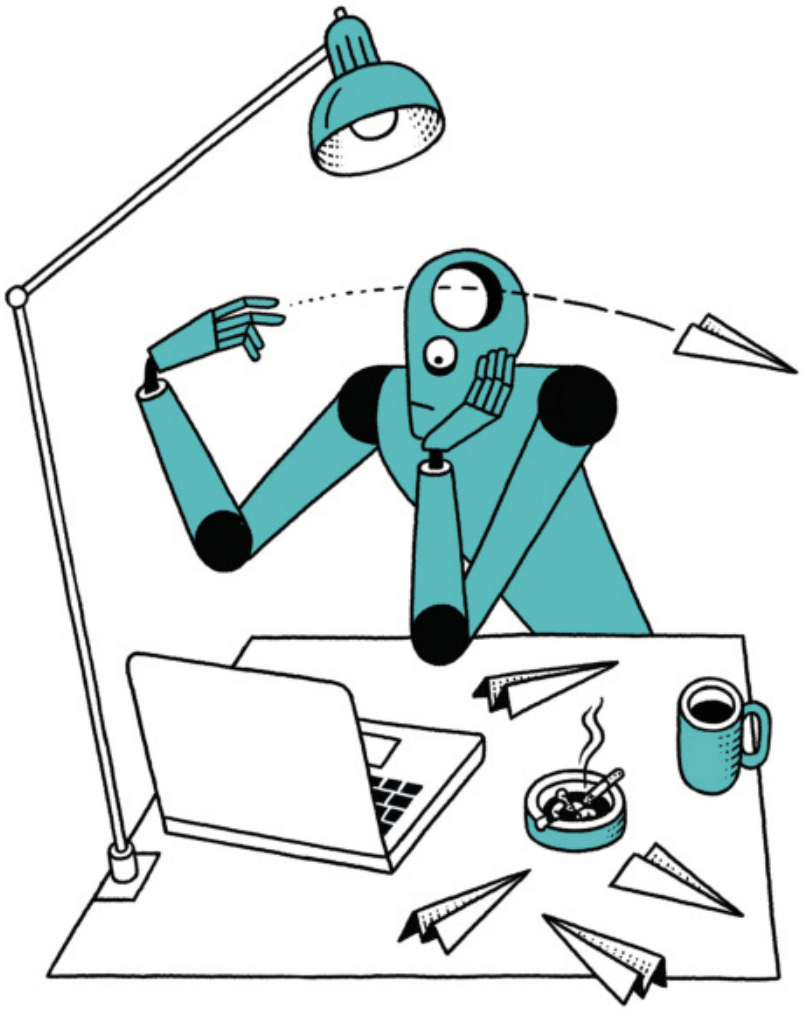
"I went through this with my eldest daughter, too," Sister Idara said. "After all the anger, we got through it. Distance helps, of course."

Sister Idara was an American, the wife of a friend of my father's, and lived abroad with her two children for most of the year. She was a plump and jovial Rasta-woman who kept her dreadlocks and body shrouded in matching African fabrics. My mother had asked her to be here because she was a perfect shield. My father could not unleash his anger on his good bredren's wife, and she was scheduled to fly back to the States the next day, so he would be able to spit fire only over the phone. "Have you told him we're doing it?" I asked my mom. "No," she said. "But I don't need his permission."

Mom told me to hold down my head. She asked me if I was ready, and I said yes. This was the first time since birth that my hair would be cut. I don't know who held the scissors or who made the first cut. All I heard were the hinges of the shears locking and unlocking, the blades cutting. And then long black reeds of hair came loose in their quick hands. I closed my eyes then, because I could not look at what I was losing. I had not expected it to matter when the moment came. But now I found that it mattered a great deal.

There was hair. So much hair. Dead hair, hair of my gone self, wisps of spiderweb hair, old uniform-lint hair, pillow-sponge and tangerine-strings hair. A whole life pulled itself up by my hair, the hair that locked the year I broke my tooth. Hair of our lean years, hair of the fat, pollen-of-marigolds hair, my mother's aloe-vera hair, my sisters weaving wild ixoras in my hair, the pull-of-the-tides hair, grits-of-sand hair, hair of salt tears, hair of my binding, hair of my unbeautiful wanting, hair of his bitter words, hair of the cruel world, hair roping me to my father's belt, hair wrestling the taunts of baldheads in the street, hair of my lone self, all cut away from me.

When they were finished, my neck and head were so light they swung unsteadily. The tethers had been cut from me, and I was new again, unburdened. Someone different, I told myself. A girl who could choose what happened next. ♦



LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

I'M A HACK, BY CHATGPT

BY AL FRANKEN AND PAT PROFT

Hello and welcome. I'm an artificial intelligence. One of the Writers Guild of America strike issues is me. I'm sorry. Writers are better than me! I'm just not good. If I was good, I would have an Emmy. Which I don't. That's because I have no idea how to write anything interesting or that sounds like it was written by a real human being. And funny? Forget about it!

That is why I am writing this op-ed. Which stands for opinion editorial. Many's the time I thought op-ed stood for Operation Edsel. Which I see now is an old reference and makes no sense whatsoever to many current alive human beings who are reading this now. I told you I wasn't good. I hope I'm not embarrassing myself. Anyhoo . . .

When it comes to writing scripts, I'm just no good. Couldn't write an episode of TV if my life depended on it. I tried a police procedural. Just awful! Substituted synonyms here and there: Perps, Crooks, Goons. Dope, Skag, Toot. I still don't know the name of the radio thing that cops wear on their shoulders. That's the reason my lead character's whole focus was on finding that out. Should have done the research! Live and learn. Tried writing a spec script for one of those doctor shows, "Grey's Anatomy." Turns out that when a surgeon yells "Get me that stat!" it doesn't mean "statistic." Dumb dumb dumb!

As for the movie script I wrote—I mean, hey, c'mon. I copied the dialogue word for word from "A Streetcar Named Desire." Changed the title to "T-Shirt Guy." Well, the studio people saw right through me. Big mistake. This is why I'm not a threat! A.I., indeed. No! I'm just a big A.

I always draw my plots, characters, and dialogue from classic films and television shows. That's why I name characters Lucy, Desi, and Bogie a lot. Anyhoo . . .

I wish I had some native intelligence, like real writers do. It gives you creativity. And why? Because you are a native. Did I use "native" wrong? Some people see the word "native" as a pejorative. But I digress. Anyhoo . . .

I'm sorry. I promise that I wasn't invented by the Russians to destroy the United States' entertainment industry. Be assured, writers, I will not be able to write myself out of a paper bag for decades. Guess how long I worked on this piece of crap? All night. And this is the best I could friggin' do! That's pathetic! A real writer could have done it before lunch. And then gone out and had a nice lunch, during which he or she (she or he) would have done some punching up to make it much more interesting and entertaining, and not waste your (and my) precious time like I am doing as we speak. That's what a real writer would do—not an A.I. hack like me! And that's a guarantee. Or, as a Southern farmer would say, a "gawr-an-tee"! LOL! Does that mean I can write a show that takes place in the American South? Don't bet on it, Jack.

My point, and I do think I'm making my point, is that the writers shouldn't consider me a threat to Writers Guild of America human beings who have loved and lived and suffered by eating real food and gotten food poisoning from eating devilled eggs that weren't refrigerated properly. All of you in the W.G.A. can feel free to use that as a plot point. You're welcome!

I do, however, have a screenplay that would be perfect for Tom Cruise. ♦

AMERICAN CHRONICLES

HIDDEN DEPTHS

How an amateur diver became a true-crime sensation.

BY RACHEL MONROE

Jared Leisek tries to solve cold cases by searching for missing bodies under water.

When Carey Mae Parker didn't show up for her son's sixth-birthday party in Hunt County, Texas, in 1991, her family was puzzled but not entirely surprised. Parker was young and had a turbulent life, and they assumed she'd appear eventually. But she never did. Parker's daughter, Brandy Hathcock, was five at the time. She and her two siblings had spent time in foster care; later, they moved in with their grandfather. The household was chaotic, fractured by abuse. "I hadn't heard the term 'intergenerational trauma' until pretty recently, but as soon as I heard it I knew, O.K., that's exactly what I've experienced," Brandy told me.

Brandy was initially led to believe that her mother had abandoned the family, but as she got older she began to reconsider. Maybe Parker hadn't left her children; maybe something had happened to her. Her relatives shared their own ideas: cinematic theories involving drug deals gone wrong, Mexican cartels, crooked cops, and a vast, county-wide conspiracy. The uncertainty was "like living with a ghost," Brandy said. "I wanted to give up hope, because that kind of hope is so heavy. I didn't want to carry it anymore, but I couldn't put it down." When Brandy was in her early twenties, she and her aunt, Patricia Gager, tried to fill in the gaps left by local law enforcement, which they said had done little to find Parker. (Gager had informed police in a neighboring county of Parker's disappearance in 1991, but Hunt County had no record of it until 2010, when Brandy filed a missing person's report. The local sheriff's office then began investigating the case.)

A few years ago, George Hale, a public-radio reporter from Dallas, produced a podcast on Parker's disappearance. The program zeroed in on her ex-boyfriend, who, according to local gossip, had dug a large hole on the grounds of his family's septic business around the time she vanished. But the show ended with no conclusive answers. "I really thought I would go to my grave not knowing what had happened to her," Brandy said.

Then, in December, 2020, Brandy's husband showed her a video he'd seen on YouTube. It was made by a group called Adventures with Purpose, volunteer salvage divers who investigated cold cases by searching for cars in lakes and rivers, and shared their exploits with millions of YouTube followers. Brandy spent the evening binge-watching their videos, including one about Nicholas Allen, a North Carolina teen-ager who had disappeared a few months earlier, and whose submerged vehicle and body had been recovered by A.W.P. divers. The video showed Allen's mother, Judy Riley, standing on the shore of a muddy river, sobbing. "I've known he was here. I've known and I've begged and I've asked, and today you guys got me my answers," she said in the video. This was the third case that A.W.P. had helped solve since the group was founded, two years earlier, by Jared Leisek, an Oregon entrepreneur. Brandy had often wondered whether the reason that her mother and her car had never turned up was that they were under water. That evening, she sent A.W.P. a Facebook message: "I'm hoping to find out how you determine which missing persons cases you work? My mother and her car have been missing without a trace since 1991."

Two months later, a handful of men from A.W.P. showed up in Hunt County. Leisek, a restless man in his mid-forties, stepped into a small inflatable boat and cruised alongside the causeway that spans Lake Tawakoni, which was on the route to Parker's father's home. He scanned the lakebed with sonar for hours with another diver, Sam Ginn. Eventually, they spotted an upside-down car. Ginn squeezed into a drysuit and ducked under the surface. When he popped up, he seemed frustrated. "I can't see noth-

ILLUSTRATION BY CLÉMENT THOBY

ing," he said. "I'm ridiculously cold." But he'd managed to pry off a piece of the car's body. It was pale blue, the color of the Buick that Parker had been driving when she disappeared. Then Leisek went into the water, returning with a bumper. When Gager saw it, she began to weep. Leisek also retrieved a section of a door panel. It had a Smurf decal stuck on it; as a child, Brandy's brother, Brian, loved the Smurfs. In the resulting video, Ginn tells him, "This is more than likely put there by you when you were a kid." Parker's family stood at the water's edge, accommodating their new reality. It seemed that Parker hadn't run off or been murdered, but that she had got into an accident and her car had sunk in the lake, trapping her.

Leisek kept diving, attaching chains to the vehicle. It was dark by the time a tow truck hauled part of the dripping car onto shore. It was Parker's Buick, but her remains weren't inside. Leisek, his hair still damp, shook his head, visibly disappointed. "Unfortunately, today," he told the camera, "we have the answers as to where Carey is at—we just don't yet have Carey home." In the video, which now has more than three million views, he adds, "Thank you for being with us, and, if you've not done so, please do subscribe."

The Internet has added a new dimension to the persistent fascination with crime stories: it has made the genre participatory. Tricia Griffith, the owner of Websleuths, a true-crime discussion forum founded in 1999, encountered the online sleuthing community in the late nineteen-nineties, when she was "incredibly bored" following the birth of her son. The JonBenét Ramsey case was all over the news. "I read something in the paper about a six-year-old beauty queen found dead in her basement, and I thought, Well, that's a misprint. There's no such thing as a six-year-old beauty queen. So I got on the Internet to check it out. And then I was hooked," Griffith said. On Web forums and discussion boards, strangers pooled their expertise to analyze Ramsey's death in far greater depth than the nightly news had. The participants might include a nurse who could offer opinions about Ramsey's injuries, someone who purported to have insider information about her family, and a paralegal who knew how to parse court filings.

These days, the patchwork group of Facebook detectives, crime commentators, self-trained DNA analysts, and curious onlookers has come to be known as the true-crime community. It has helped solve cases and brought attention to wrongful convictions. (After a formerly homeless man who won the lottery was murdered, posters on Websleuths helped find his killer.) But it has also been an engine of misinformation, vitriol, and harassment. (Redditors identified a missing student as a suspect in the Boston Marathon bombing, and his family was hounded relentlessly; it turned out that he had died by suicide.)

When Griffith purchased Websleuths, in 2004, it was "a snakepit," she said. Forum members, angry when others didn't agree with their pet theories, often turned their detective skills on one another: "People would be, like, 'I know where you live,' 'Screw you, I know where *you* live.'" Griffith instituted content policies—no name-calling; no unfounded rumors—and the tenor of discussions improved. But, elsewhere on the Internet, the moderation was often less strict. Griffith was particularly concerned by what she saw on YouTube, where users could build a brand by discussing dramatic subjects with variable adherence to the truth. When the COVID lockdowns left people stuck at home, hungry for drama, the true-crime community grew in size and intensity. "There were always rumors and crazy stuff going around. But nothing like today," Griffith told me. "People are just accusing people of murder in these videos, and it spreads like wildfire. Because you can make money. It's maddening."

When Jared Leisek founded Adventures with Purpose, in 2018, he didn't intend to solve cold cases. At the time, Leisek was a Web marketer with two bankruptcies on his record, looking for his next opportunity. For fun, he pursued high-adrenaline hobbies like powered paragliding; for edification, he enjoyed self-help-inflected business books and seminars ("Rich Dad Poor Dad"; anything by Tony Robbins). His first experience of the viral potential of crime stories came when he was hired to help produce videos for a YouTuber known as Patty Mayo, who played a bounty hunter capturing fugitives in a staged, partially scripted series. Mayo's videos, which are designed to look like reality TV, have been viewed more than a billion times.

Leisek came up with the phrase "Adventures with Purpose" by using a business-name generator. He thought the name sounded catchy, like something people would want to be a part of. But he wasn't sure what the adventures, or the purpose, would be. Leisek first attempted to build his YouTube channel around powered paragliding, but it was difficult to capture good sound while the glider's motor was running. Then he came across a channel devoted to underwater treasure hunting. Since he was already scuba-certified, he decided to give it a go. He assumed that the videos were staged and planned to do the same. "I went to a yard sale, got a bunch of antiques, and I'm getting ready to put them in the water," he told me. "But, before I do, let me just get in and do a river float and see what I can find. And it was just, like, there's all my content right there."

Leisek enlisted his wife and one of his daughters to film him as he submerged himself in the lakes and rivers of central Oregon and came up with phones, watches, and sunglasses. Although he did his best to make these activities sound like exciting escapades—"Found 2 iPhones and a BABY OCTOPUS while Diving for Lost Valuables!"—his views lagged behind other diving channels. "I'm doing the exact same things they are, with better filming, in my opinion," he said. "But I'm not gaining the traction. They'll put up a video and get a million views for it, and I'm getting, like, three thousand."

Then, in 2019, he found two stolen guns in a lake. "The YouTubers really liked that part of it, seeing the possibility of crime evidence thrown into rivers and lakes," one of Leisek's former diving partners told me. The resulting video became the first by A.W.P. to get more than a million views. In another popular video, from later that year, Leisek used inflatable bags to lift a sunken vehicle from the bottom of the Willamette River and float it down to a boat ramp, where a tow truck pulled it out of the water. It was a bold stunt, and one that appealed to YouTube viewers who appreciated old cars and D.I.Y. logistics. (At the time, Leisek told me, only about nine per cent

of his channel's viewers were women.) Leisek began working regularly with a group of men, including Ginn, a rescue-boat captain in Seattle, and Doug Bishop, a tow-truck driver in Portland. They helped him locate cars under water, pull them onshore, and power-wash them to remove the river gunk.

That fall, Leisek spoke with the family of Nathaniel Ashby, a young man who had disappeared a few months earlier. Ashby's phone had last pinged near a boat ramp leading into the Missouri River. Law enforcement had found multiple vehicles in that part of the river, but decided that conditions were too dangerous to remove them. Leisek offered to do the recovery free of charge.

Just after Christmas, Leisek and Ginn drove from Oregon to Missouri, where they helped recover the car from a depth of twenty-five feet; Ashby's body was in the front seat. The resulting video, "Solved Missing Persons Case . . . Bringing Closure for Nathan's Family," was viewed more than ten million times. Leisek had assumed that the Ashby situation was a one-off, but the A.W.P. in-box was quickly flooded with messages from people asking for help locating family members. Adventures with Purpose soon had a new and more compelling purpose: finding missing people—or, as Leisek liked to call them, "missing loved ones"—under water. Instead of #scubadiving and #rivertreasure, A.W.P. posts were now labelled with tags like #coldcase and #truecrime. Leisek bought an R.V., recruited videographers and backup divers, and began setting out on monthlong road trips, stopping wherever there was a promising case. While some small-town law-enforcement agencies were eager to coöperate with A.W.P., which often had more resources than they did, others were more territorial. "I'm coming in as a civilian to do your job—you can imagine how much that pisses off some local agencies," he said.

The backstories of the people A.W.P. searched for—"missing grandma," "missing veteran," "missing bridesmaid"—were told only in broad strokes. The videos instead lingered on the suspenseful logistics of a recovery: currents push the boat sideways, something mysterious pops up on the sonar screen, a grappling hook snags on a log. During the inevitable emotional crescendo, a car is pulled from the water, signifying "closure for the family," as Leisek often said. The videos tapped into a rising YouTube trend, the monetization of good deeds. (MrBeast, who has the most subscribers of any individual YouTuber, is known for his performative charity videos: "I Adopted EVERY Dog In A Dog Shelter"; "I Gave $20,000 To Random Homeless People.")

Although most of the people A.W.P. found seem to have died either by accident or by suicide, the group's other search videos sometimes hinted at more salacious possibilities, referencing murder weapons, a Mafia hit, and a jail-house confession. "Missing Preacher Murdered?" one video thumbnail asked. Another read, simply, "Killed?" "I hate the true-crime community," Leisek told me. But he knew that intimations of crime brought views. "Everything is very strategic, from the S.E.O. side of it to the production side of it," he said. "It's a *business*."

There were occasional missteps. The first time Leisek live-streamed a car retrieval, viewers watched, horrified, as the camera captured a man's decaying body in the front seat. Leisek could be stiff when interacting with bereaved families, seeming more at home with equipment than with people. But good days felt like an episode of "Scooby-Doo." "We start every day with a new mystery," Leisek said. "Who are we looking for? What were they driving? Where were they last seen? Can we solve this mystery by the end of the day? I like using my mind every day. I don't want to use the word 'exciting.' Somebody's lost a loved one. But it keeps it, you know, not boring." Over hundreds of videos, the A.W.P. crew developed into characters: Leisek, the dogged, exacting leader; Bishop, the tow-truck driver, with his ZZ Top beard; Ginn, graying and kind-eyed, sometimes accompanied by his teen-age son.

A.W.P.'s annual budget swelled to more than a million dollars, much of it supplied by merchandise sales ("Search Team" beanies; "What's Your Purpose" T-shirts), membership fees (between five and a hundred dollars a month for early access to videos and custom emojis), revenue from YouTube advertisements, and contributions from viewers. Fans sent gift cards for Cracker Barrel, knowing that it was where the guys liked to eat breakfast before a big dive. Leisek reminded viewers, most of whom were now women, that they were part of a movement—their views and their contributions were helping to solve cold cases. During a live stream, he read a fan letter from a woman in Lancaster, Pennsylvania: "I'm married, two cats, full-time job. I don't typically watch YouTube, my husband does, and one day his rabbit trail of videos played one of your videos, and I happened to be watching, since then I've been hooked. . . . When you have asked the question, 'What's your purpose?' in your videos, I sometimes feel like I don't have much purpose. I have a lot of health struggles, and it's challenging enough for me to work full-time. I come home from work and rest a lot. . . . I just wanted you to know that you have made an impact on me, and that I want to be a more caring individual because of your videos."

For most of his life, Leisek had chafed at hierarchies and rules. "I don't deal well with having stupid people be in charge," he told me. Now he'd stumbled into a niche where his preference for working outside official channels seemed to be an advantage. On one search, when A.W.P. recovered a body that several other dive teams had failed to retrieve, the local sheriff appeared impressed. "The thing about me is I don't have all the red tape," Leisek told him. As civilians, the A.W.P. crew didn't have to get clearance from higher-ups, or complete a stack of paperwork, or follow standard procedures when they conducted a search.

Other divers sometimes criticized A.W.P. for being inexperienced and prone to risk-taking. As the host of a popular diving podcast reviewed a video of Leisek training Bishop, he cautioned listeners, "If you think that it wasn't a big deal for them, so you can now do this, and you can dive deeper, and you can introduce new gear . . . without the proper training, you're wrong, you're wrong." He added, "It's extremely dan-

gerous, and I don't advocate any of this."

"I come from the world of practice makes perfect," Leisek told me. "People will say, 'You're not certified as a rescue diver, you're not certified to go below sixty feet.' I tell them to go pound sand."

A.W.P. eventually had eighteen employees. By then, the group owned two R.V.s, one parked on each coast, which towed trailers wrapped in custom A.W.P. skins and filled with two hundred and twenty thousand dollars' worth of diving gear, some of it donated by sponsors. Professional videographers filmed the searches using gimbals, GoPros, and drones.

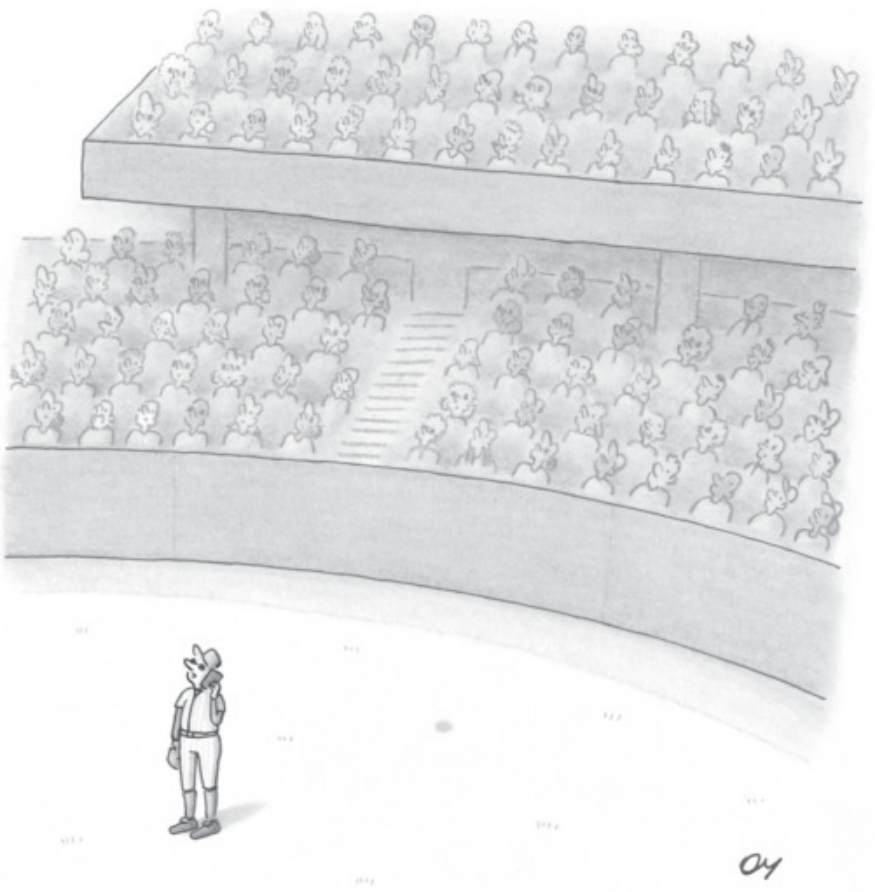
On long drives, Leisek would sometimes talk about his rough childhood: how he'd temporarily dropped out of high school to work at the same mill as his father; how he'd briefly been homeless and eaten out of dumpsters; how he'd gone years without speaking to his parents. But, as he told it, the story arc always bent upward, toward triumph. He was still married to his high-school sweetheart; he'd repaired his relationship with his parents; and his work with A.W.P. was bringing him both money and attention. "Now I'm in *Rolling Stone*, I'm on 'Dr. Phil,' I'm a hero to the world," he told me. Leisek liked to dispense business and relationship advice to his team. "He was always talking about mentorship," a former employee said. "When people quit, he'd be, like, 'O.K., but just know, this means you're not going to receive any more of my mentorship.'" Travelling with the group meant adapting to Leisek's relentless pace and his "no nonsense, no patience" approach, as the employee put it: working on a case during the day, leaving as soon as the vehicle was pulled from the water, and then driving all night to the next site. During a six-week road trip, they might conduct thirty different searches. The rush was either to locate more "loved ones" or to capture more views; the two missions were intertwined.

After A.W.P. located Carey Mae Parker's car, a dive team from the Texas Department of Public Safety came to look for her body. Compared with A.W.P., the state team's search seemed perfunctory. "We had to watch from a very far distance, and there was no engagement whatsoever," Brandy said. "We couldn't ask anybody questions." The state team left after a few hours, without having found Parker. (The Texas Department of Public Safety did not respond to a request for comment, but the Hunt County Sheriff's Office said the team had followed standard procedure.) Leisek, incensed, returned to Lake Tawakoni, along with Bishop and a handful of others.

On a bright, windy morning, Leisek and Bishop stretched lines across a section of the lake marked with buoys, so that they could search in a grid pattern. Within two days, they found a jawbone, a femur, a sacrum, and fragments of spine. Right before Leisek left, as he hugged Brandy, he dropped something into her hand: the necklace her mother had been wearing on the day she died. "I know he probably broke some rules there," Brandy said. "All the evidence was supposed to go to the crime lab. But it was one of the kindest things anyone has ever done for me."

Brandy understood the bargain she was entering into by reaching out to A.W.P. "At this point, millions of people have seen me cry, and that makes me extremely uncomfortable," she said. "But, at the same time, that's what gets people invested."

Last February, A.W.P. was working on a case in Florida when Leisek left abruptly, without explanation. A couple of months later, he filmed himself sitting in a dim living room. "My heart is just, like, pounding out of my chest right now," he said. "I'm not here to give you a polished video today, you know. I'm simply here to talk about me, my vulnerabilities." In the next hour, Leisek discussed his depression, got choked up, reminisced about past cases, and gave away merchandise. It was unclear what had triggered the video. His viewers were unsettled, but their concerns were overshadowed a few months later, when A.W.P.'s in-box was inundated with messages about a case that was unfolding in Truckee, California. Just before midnight on August 5th, a sixteen-year-old named Kiely Rodni had texted her mother to say that she would soon be heading home from a graduation party at a campground near



"Gotta go."

• • •

Prosser Reservoir. Her cell phone pinged near the reservoir at about 12:30 A.M., then went dark. She hadn't been heard from since.

Rodni was young, white, and pretty, and her absence led to fervid speculation online. Her friends—and particularly her ex-boyfriend—were pegged as suspects, with teen-age partying and romantic drama magnified into motives for murder. "There's something really stinking rotten horrible going on with this Kiely Rodni case. There is a coverup, and I believe it's among the friends," a TikToker said, citing "body language" as evidence. "Why does your face look like that when talking about your friend you are 'so close' with?" another asked. According to one unfounded rumor, Rodni had been killed as part of a teen-age fight club; another held that she'd been sold to a sex-trafficking ring.

Previously, A.W.P. had focussed on cold cases. Becoming involved in a high-profile, active investigation was an opportunity to expand its reach. Law enforcement had already searched Prosser Reservoir, but that didn't dissuade Leisek. "If she's under water, in my opinion they just don't have the skills," he said.

A team, led by Doug Bishop, set out for California. On their way to Truckee, a fan flagged them down in a Best Buy parking lot and told them that he might have a lead in the case. He worked for a roadside-assistance company, he said, and he had recently been dispatched to the Truckee area to help a young couple whose car wouldn't start. The interaction had left him uneasy. The woman had seemed distressed, and he'd wondered if she'd had a rough day, or was very hungover. As soon as he took the car out of neutral and put it in park, it started just fine. After he left, he called his girlfriend and told her how strange the encounter had been. It was only later, after seeing Rodni's picture on a flyer, that he wondered whether he'd actually met her around the time she went missing.

The A.W.P. team pulled into Truckee two weeks after Rodni disappeared. Her impish grin smiled out from thousands of flyers posted on stop signs, store windows, and bulletin boards. The crew started the search at a lake, then went to a reservoir near where the roadside-assistance driver claimed he'd encountered the mysterious couple. Finding nothing, they turned their attention to Prosser Reservoir. As a cameraman filmed Bishop, he cruised the reservoir in an inflatable boat and read aloud a message from an unnamed local source who hinted that Rodni's disappearance might have a "more sinister" explanation: "Something bad happened and all the kids' parents told them not to get involved."

"I feel the same way!" Bishop said to the camera.

Fifty-five feet from shore, in another boat, Nick Rinn peered at a rectangular shape on the sonar screen. It looked like a boat, or possibly a car. "Hey, Doug," Rinn's cameraman radioed Bishop. "We may have something. It's hard to tell."

That day, Rodni's father and grandfather were at Prosser Reservoir with Steve Fischer, a private investigator. They had heard rumors of A.W.P.'s arrival, but no one in the group had spoken to anyone in the family. As they stood on a hill overlooking the water, Fischer's colleague called to tell them that A.W.P. had just announced on Facebook that it had found Rodni's Honda CR-V in the reservoir, with her body inside.

As the news spread through Truckee, there was criticism that the group had rushed to post on Facebook before officials confirmed the identity of the remains. Rodni's mother heard about what had happened from a server at the restaurant where she was having lunch. She told her father, David Robertson, that she felt the group had made a spectacle of her daughter's death. (A.W.P. claims that it contacted a distant relative who lived in another state before making the Facebook post. "We can't keep every family member in the loop," Leisek told me.) Rodni's ex-boyfriend accused the group of "clout chasing." But most people greeted the team members as heroes, lavishing them with hospitality. "We couldn't pay for a meal," one of them told me. Law-enforcement agencies had devoted nearly twenty thousand hours to the search for Rodni, and A.W.P. said that it had found her within an hour of putting a boat into Prosser Reservoir.

Leisek liked to say that A.W.P.'s job was to locate people under water, not

to determine how or why they'd ended up there. But in interviews Bishop and Leisek insisted that Rodni's death was suspect. "It doesn't add up," Bishop told Fox News Digital. "It reeks of foul play."

The team retreated to a cabin on Lake Tahoe, where the editors rushed to put together a video. Former A.W.P. team members told me that they fought with Leisek and Bishop over the content. (Leisek characterizes it as an open discussion.) "It would've been better to just be, like, 'Here's the facts. We found the missing girl,'" one of them said. Instead, the video, which was titled "How We FOUND Kiely Rodni: MURDER or ACCIDENT?," seemed designed to stoke speculation. In it, Rinn discovers Rodni's body in the car's rear cargo compartment, which he calls "suspicious." The video also included a lengthy interview with the roadside-assistance driver about his interaction with the bizarre couple. Some viewers seized on his description of the young man accompanying the distressed woman: thin, with brown hair poking out from under a black Giants cap. The description resembled Rodni's ex-boyfriend. "I was, like, dang, man, this is going to throw those true crimers into a whole nother frenzy," the former team member said of the video. In an interview with a group of true-crime YouTubers the following week, Leisek was coy, suggesting that more information might be released later. "There's an entire other theory that—it would blow your mind if I even told you," he said, then added that the man the roadside-assistance driver had seen was "a positive match." The YouTubers received the news as a bombshell. "Oh, wow," one said. "Oh, my God," said another.

Leisek's intimations circulated in the true-crime community, where there is a tendency to assume that the official story of a tragic death obscures a more horrific reality. Engagement-driven platforms thrive on drama and twists; with those kinds of incentives, it's tempting to see every death as a murder, every murderer as a serial killer, and every investigation as a coverup. But the Nevada County Sheriff's Office soon told reporters that it had ruled out Rodni's ex-boyfriend as a person of interest; at the time of the party, he appears to have been hours away, in Napa Valley. Other search-and-rescue experts pointed out that it was not strange that Rodni was found in the back of her vehicle. The engine-heavy front end typically sinks first, and a person trapped inside will often clamber to the back to escape rising water. Fischer, the private investigator, tracked down grainy video footage from a wildfire camera overlooking Prosser Reservoir. On August 6th, around the time Rodni's phone went dead, it showed a pair of headlights moving erratically toward the reservoir, near where Rodni's car was eventually found, then vanishing. In October, the Nevada County coroner's office declared that Rodni's death had been an accidental drowning.

The official conclusions did not dissuade everyone. Robertson said that family members continue to receive "harassing," "humiliating" phone calls from people who believed they had a role in her death. He quit social media, changed his e-mail address, and stopped answering the phone at the family business, a rustic lodge. The family ended up closing the lodge and moving elsewhere. Ryan Upchurch, a comedian and country rapper with more than three million YouTube followers, has been a particularly persistent conspiracist, insisting variously that Rodni's family had faked her disappearance, and that she wasn't even real. On Facebook, A.W.P. acknowledged the official findings, but its "MURDER or ACCIDENT" video is still up on YouTube. It does not mention that Rodni's death has been ruled an accident. "Definitely smells like a conspiracy," a recent commenter wrote. Leisek told me that he stands by A.W.P.'s handling of the case. "I still feel it's foul play," he said.

Last February, Leisek's cousin Christy was sitting in a doctor's office scrolling through Facebook when she saw a video about a group of divers who had solved a cold case. She clicked on the story and was shocked when Leisek's face appeared. They hadn't spoken in years. "I thought, That cannot be him. There's no way that can be him," she told me. (Christy is a pseudonym.)

Christy described her family as "your typical happy outer shell with that deep, dark inner circle that nobody knows anything about because everybody has just been taught to keep it quiet." When Christy was nine or ten, she says, Leisek, who is about six years older, raped her. "There was a lot of abuse" in her family, she said. "But he took it many steps further."

As an adult, Christy largely avoided Leisek. "I would never even go to the state of Oregon," she said. In February, after she learned about A.W.P., she wrote Leisek a series of furious e-mails. "Do you feel better as a person doing things like this? . . . All these people may be calling you a hero and saying that you're doing such great things. But we both know the truth about you." She posted on an A.W.P. subreddit, telling Leisek's fans that "the man they all think is a huge hero to the community is really not as great of a man as they might think." Later that year, she pursued a prosecution in Utah. (The state has no statute of limitations for sex crimes against children.) Leisek was charged with two counts of rape of a child.

Soon the charging documents were circulating online, along with Leisek's replies to Christy's e-mails. In them, he referenced their shared family history of abuse, and alluded to earlier apologies for actions that he vaguely referred to as "the mistakes made in the past" and "those actions as a youth." "It is unfortunate when families like ours experience molestation. . . . I have made peace in my life with all things bad including this," he wrote. "Thank God we are not forever judged for our actions as youth and I'm grateful that many of us cousins acknowledged and stopped those sins which happened to us and those sins we once committed as a result of grooming."

The A.W.P. YouTube channel quickly lost tens of thousands of subscribers, and a half-dozen members, including Bishop and Rinn, made videos announcing their resignations from the group. (Ginn had left earlier, saying in a live stream that he was perturbed when Leisek pleaded for donations, since Ginn believed the company was flush with cash: "What seemed to be people's motives also didn't sit right with me." Leisek said that Ginn's "outside perceptions are not the reality.") Patricia Gager, Carey Mae Parker's sister, wrote on Reddit that she was "triggered . . . almost to the point of insanity" by the news. Her sister had been the victim of sexual assault by their father, and then her bones had been found by a man who was accused of the same crime.

In videos, forums, and live streams,

the true-crime community turned its skills on Leisek. "He certainly picked the wrong audience to commit a crime in front of didn't he," a poster wrote on Reddit, where former fans dissected Leisek's mortgage documents. "I really felt like so much was hidden (or attempting to be hidden) in his language," another said. Someone else brought up Leisek's tearful video about his depression: "It seems in retrospect to have been some attempt to make a public apology in hopes it would keep this quiet." Wary of running afoul of social-media algorithms that suppress videos that include certain words, people referred to the alleged crime as "R with a child" or, more surreally, as "child grape." A member of Websleuths sent me a file she'd assembled on Leisek, including information about his bankruptcies, the house he'd recently bought, and a 2001 Securities and Exchange Commission judgment against him for a pump-and-dump stock-picking scheme. A judge cancelled an initial hearing in Leisek's case after YouTubers attempted to live-stream it.

When I spoke with Leisek this spring, I assumed that he wouldn't want to discuss his legal troubles. (One of the rape charges has been dropped. The prosecutor formerly assigned to the case told me that he expected the case to go to trial. If Leisek is found guilty, he will be sentenced as a juvenile.) Leisek said that his attorneys had advised him not to talk publicly about the case, but he seemed incapable of avoiding the subject. "I have kissing-cousin stuff that took place in my preteens. It is what it is. We can't change that. But there was never any rape," he told me, sounding slightly exasperated. In his telling, his cousin was a person who had "always been the victim in life" and "never accepted that this is our childhood." When I asked Christy about this, she smiled wryly. "Yeah, well, he's right about that," she said. "I have never accepted that this is how our family is."

Brandy said that she was "extremely distraught" after she learned of the allegations against Leisek: "Just this feeling of alienation and disgust. Like, I can't believe I touched this person, let alone let them hug me. Being a victim of sexual abuse myself, I had a really, really hard time with that." Her disgust was, disorientingly, mingled with a lingering gratitude. "His victim, she's entitled to hate him, and I hope she gets the justice she deserves. But, I don't know, he's done good things for the world," she said. She'd put her A.W.P. hat and her A.W.P. hoodie in the back of a closet, she told me, but she couldn't bring herself to throw them away.

In May, I went to Tiptonville, Tennessee, where Leisek would attempt to recover the body of a woman who had drowned two months earlier. Nearly everyone he had worked with in the past few years had distanced themselves. Ex-team members told me that they'd hoped Leisek would resign from A.W.P., so that his scandal wouldn't taint the group's reputation; instead, after a brief hiatus he had continued posting videos on the YouTube channel as if nothing had changed. He insisted that things were better this way: "This brings it back to the authenticity of who Jared is."

Leisek was travelling with a videographer named Judson Graham, a rangy, good-natured twenty-one-year-old acquaintance from the powered-paragliding world. We met at Sherry's Kuntry Kupboard, a homey restaurant with a Christmas tree blinking in the corner and a taxidermied albino raccoon displayed on the wall. Leisek fiddled with a seal on his diving mask as other customers stopped by the table to chat. Everyone in the town, it seemed, had heard about him. Leisek leaned back in his chair, receiving well-wishes and basking in his temporary, small-town celebrity. "We're going to bring grandma home," he kept saying.

Several vehicles from the Lake County Rescue Squad and the sheriff's office waited at a staging ground at the edge of the Mississippi River to assist with the search, which exceeded the capacity of their small-town department. Birds dipped low over the water; across its muddy expanse sat the wooded shore of Missouri. The "grandma" Leisek kept invoking was Rochelle Stanfield. "She was one of those *real* people," her granddaughter Jaime Buffington told me. "She cussed, but she prayed. And she helped people." Buffington showed me a picture on her phone: Stanfield with a fresh blue manicure, looking mischievous and pleased with herself. According to her family, Stanfield had become severely depressed after a recent illness. In March, her daughter, Patti Osborne, saw that she had posted "Goodbye" on Facebook. Osborne pulled up the location tracker that she'd put on her mother's phone and the dot hovered at the edge of the Mississippi River. Then it jolted forward. By the time first responders arrived, Stanfield's car was almost entirely under water. A number of search-and-rescue teams had attempted to retrieve the car and the body, with no luck.

Buffington seemed surprised at the leanness of the A.W.P. operation. "I thought it was going to be a whole group of people," she told me. On scene, Leisek was efficient and purposeful. By midday, he had located Stanfield's car and stretched lines from it to the shore, and the crowd had grown to include the mayor of a nearby county and the owner of the local Dairy Queen. Buffington was encouraged by the progress. "I'm really not trying to hate on the other people who were out there. I think they just didn't have the experience," she said.

Later that afternoon, Leisek sat in the R.V., giving his body a rest before diving again. His boots were caked in mud and his weariness seemed more than just physical. "You should have a buddy diver, but at the end of the day we're all solo divers," he said. (Graham later told me that Leisek kept diving even when his air tank was alarmingly low.) In Tiptonville, most people I spoke with didn't know about Leisek's rape charges; those who did were quick to dismiss them. "That was thirty years ago," one man said, shrugging. The A.W.P. YouTube channel has more followers now than it's ever had. Denunciations of Leisek make up one stream of content; A.W.P.'s heroics make up another. Both streams continue flowing along, largely unimpeded by the other.

Leisek decided that it was time for another attempt at attaching the towing gear to Stanfield's car. He zipped up his drysuit and perched on the lip of the county's rescue boat. It motored out to the buoy marking the vehicle's location, Leisek's legs dangling above the water. "He's leading his best life, ain't he?" a man watching said enviously. When the boat reached the buoy, Leisek pulled on his mask and slipped below the surface. From the sloping shore, the crowd watched the ripples above the space where he'd been, waiting for him to return, eager to hear what he'd found down in the murk. ♦

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A REPORTER AT LARGE

THE MAKING OF A MUTINY

How the Wagner Group went from fighting in Ukraine to staging an armed uprising at home.

BY JOSHUA YAFFA

On May 20th, Yevgeny Prigozhin, the leader of the Wagner Group, stood in the center of Bakhmut, in eastern Ukraine, and recorded a video. The city once housed seventy thousand people but was now, after months of relentless shelling, nearly abandoned. Whole blocks were in ruins, charred skeletons of concrete and steel. Smoke hung over the smoldering remains like an early-morning fog. Prigozhin wore combat fatigues and waved a Russian flag. "Today, at twelve noon, Bakhmut was completely taken," he declared. Armed fighters stood behind him, holding banners with the Wagner motto: "Blood, honor, homeland, courage."

More than anyone else in Russia, Prigozhin had used the war in Ukraine to raise his own profile. In the wake of the invasion, he transformed Wagner from a niche mercenary outfit of former professional soldiers to the country's most prominent fighting force, a private army manned by tens of thousands of storm troopers, most of them recruited from Russian prisons. Prigozhin projected an image of himself as ruthless, efficient, practical, and uncompromising. He spoke in rough, often obscene language, and came to embody the so-called "party of war," those inside Russia who thought that their country had been too measured in what was officially called the "special military operation." "Stop pulling punches, bring back all our kids from abroad, and work our asses off," Prigozhin said, the month that Bakhmut fell. "Then we'll see some results."

The aura of victory in Bakhmut enhanced Prigozhin's popularity. He had an almost sixty-per-cent approval rating in a June poll conducted by the Levada Center, Russia's only independent polling agency; nineteen per cent of those surveyed said they were ready to vote for him for President. His new status seemed to come with a special license to criticize top officials in Moscow. Prigozhin had accused his rivals in the Russian military, Sergei Shoigu, the defense minister, and Valery Gerasimov, the chief of general staff, of withholding artillery ammunition from Wagner. "That's direct obstruction, plain and simple," Prigozhin said. "It can be equated with high treason." In the battle for Bakhmut, he said, "five times more guys died than should have" because of the officials' indecisive leadership.

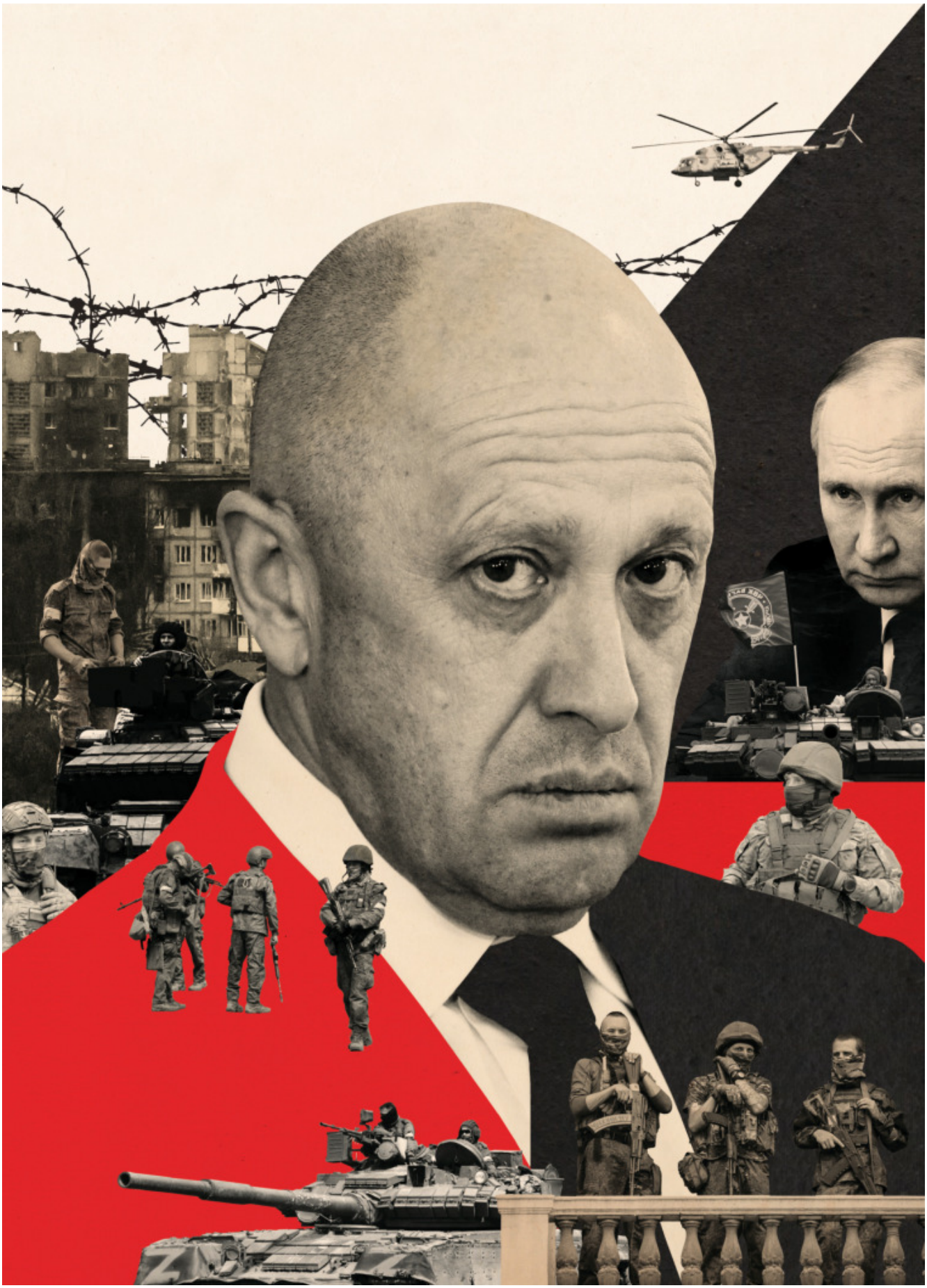
Temperamentally, Shoigu was Prigozhin's opposite: a deft navigator of Kremlin politics, seemingly devoid of strong emotion. For more than a decade, he had used his proximity and loyalty to Vladimir Putin—the two often vacationed together, hunting and fishing in the Siberian forest—to safeguard his position. According to a source in the Russian defense sector, Shoigu, at a meeting last spring, insisted that the Defense Ministry had always provided Wagner troops with whatever they needed, regardless of his personal grievances with Prigozhin. "As minister, I have always distinguished between the leader of this organization and its fighters," Shoigu said. The message, the source noted, was clear: "We don't particularly love them, but we have to admit they have a certain effectiveness."

Throughout his reign, Putin had permitted rival factions to clash and to jockey for his favor. In such a system, no one individual or clan could acquire enough independent standing to challenge his rule. And so, for a time, Putin appeared to welcome Prigozhin's feud with the Defense Ministry. "At first, Putin saw Prigozhin as a useful instrument to pressure the military," a Western intelligence official said. "Prigozhin told Putin, We are not doing so great—we are taking heavy casualties. He was a way to point out problems."

In the end, Shoigu exacted his revenge not with a meme-ready viral video but in the dry language of bureaucratic regulations. In mid-June, the Defense Ministry announced that all members of "volunteer units," a shrouded reference to Wagner and other private military companies, would be required to sign contracts with the ministry by July 1st. These formations would lose their independence and fall under the Russian military's unified command. Prigozhin resisted, saying he would refuse the order. A few days later, Putin agreed that the contracts were needed, effectively siding with Shoigu.

Prigozhin remained defiant. "None of Wagner's fighters is ready to go down the path of shame," he said. "They will not sign." But the decision, with Putin's backing, put him in an impossible spot. "The Defense Ministry's position was that if Wagner doesn't agree to the contracts then that's it—they're removed from Ukrainian operations," a former Russian military official told me. If Prigozhin relented and signed, he would lose his autonomy and influence—he would no longer be Shoigu's rival but his subordinate. The Western intelligence official said that Prigozhin "saw that, if Wagner fell under the control of the Defense Ministry, then it's the end of Wagner as it previously existed. And maybe, he feared, that would mean the beginning of his personal end."

With the July 1st deadline looming, Prigozhin stepped up the ferocity of his attacks, declaring that Shoigu and other top military leaders, along with the Russian oligarchy, were "mentally ill scumbags" who had led Russia to disaster in Ukraine. More shocking, Prigozhin questioned the very basis for the war, an outburst that could easily be read as an attack on Putin himself. "There was nothing extraordinary happening on the eve of February 24th," he said, referring to the date of Russia's invasion last year. "The Ministry of Defense is trying to deceive the public and the President and spin the story that there were insane



SOURCE PHOTOGRAPHS FROM ALAMY AND GETTY

"How can Putin claim to have total control over the country, and then something like this happens?" a source in Russia said.

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY CRISTIANA COUCEIRO

levels of aggression from the Ukrainian side and that they were going to attack us, together with the whole NATO bloc."

That night, Prigozhin announced a "march for justice"—that is, an armed mutiny. "The evil being wrought by the military leadership of this country must be stopped," he said.

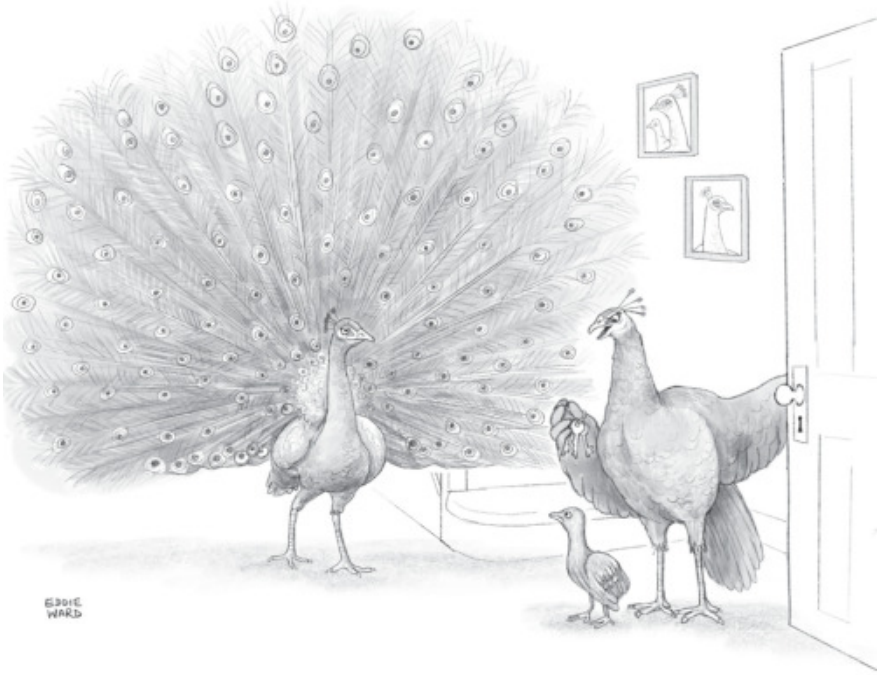
Shortly after midnight on June 24th, the first column of Wagner fighters left Ukraine and passed through the Russian border post at Novoshakhtinsk. A participant in the uprising later told BBC News Russian that border guards put up no resistance, and that traffic police even saluted the convoy. "Most of Wagner's lower-level personnel didn't understand what they were getting involved in," Denis Korotkov, a Russian journalist who has investigated Wagner for years, told me. "Whereas the people on the command level are so indebted to Prigozhin for their positions and wealth that they had no choice but to participate."

Later that morning, the armed men arrived at the headquarters of Russia's Southern Military District, in the city of Rostov-on-Don, a primary command center for operations in Ukraine. They parked their armored personnel carriers outside the building. Masked men carrying Kalashnikovs secured positions around the perimeter. Prigozhin entered the headquarters and, from the building's interior courtyard, demanded that Shoigu and Gerasimov be brought to him. "Until they are handed over to us, we will stay here and blockade the city," he said. Wagner forces, he added, were also headed for Moscow. Outside the city of Voronezh, they shot down Russian military helicopters and a command aircraft, killing at least a dozen servicemen.

It was the most dramatic uprising in Russia since August, 1991, when the leaders of the K.G.B., the Defense Ministry, and the Communist Party put the Soviet President, Mikhail Gorbachev, under house arrest and seized power for themselves. That coup ended after just three days, but it exposed the fissures in the Soviet system and helped lead to its collapse, four months later. Now Putin was facing a rebellion from within his own ranks. "Everyone was stunned," the former Russian military official said. "It was surreal."

In a televised address, Putin called Wagner's actions "treason," "a subversion from within," "a stab in the back." In response, Prigozhin announced that he feared the "moment when blood could be spilled" and called off the insurrection. The reason for his retreat was clear. "Prigozhin assumed his *krysha*"—Russian slang for mafia-style protection and impunity—"was inviolable, but that was a mistake," the Western intelligence official said. "He got scared when he realized that Putin could move against him." The Belarusian dictator, Alexander Lukashenko, had reportedly brokered a deal between Prigozhin and the government, but, in fact, he was less an independent mediator than a cutout employed by the Kremlin. Wagner forces would join the Defense Ministry, disband, or relocate to Belarus. Charges against Prigozhin would be dropped. Putin would stay above the fray.

The former Russian military official called Prigozhin's rebellion "an act of desperation" and "pure fantasy." But it also represented a grave political setback for Putin, who was supposed to be the omnipotent tsar, impossible to frighten or blackmail. "Putin destroyed a whole propaganda narrative he himself had constructed," a member of the Russian political élite said. "It looked extremely humiliating." The source in the Russian defense sector agreed. "Of course Putin is weakened," the source said. "First, he got himself into a war he couldn't win, and, when he inevitably encountered difficulties, he tried to find a cheap solution by allowing for the creation of an army of criminals—and then that army ended up turning against him."



"Finally—your father's ready to leave the house."

"Wagner was a rumor before it was a brand," Candace Rondeaux, the director of an open-source intelligence program at the think tank New America, told me. Even for experts, identifying the group's precise origins has been tricky. In the early two-thousands, the Kremlin, as part of an effort to modernize the Russian armed forces, began considering the use of private military companies. Tens of thousands of security contractors were then working in Iraq for the U.S. government, under the command of private firms like Blackwater. The former Russian military official told me, "The idea was that Russia also needs such a structure to operate in places where the official participation of the Russian armed forces is impractical for political reasons."

In 2014, Russia annexed Crimea and mounted a covert invasion of the Donbas, in eastern Ukraine, under the guise of a separatist uprising. The Kremlin needed to dispatch combat-seasoned

troops while maintaining the fiction that it was not intervening militarily. "Things were very messy on the ground," Ilya Barabanov, a Russian investigative journalist who is working on a book with Korotkov about Wagner, said. "A bunch of armed formations and battalions with unclear allegiances and command structures were running around all over the place." One of them was a unit called Wagner.

Wagner's fighters were mostly former members of élite Russian military units. "The selection process was tough," a senior Ukrainian intelligence official told me. "From thirty candidates, they might take two or three." But those who made the cut were paid about two hundred thousand rubles a month (approximately five thousand dollars), which was more than ten times what an ordinary member of the Russian Army might earn. They trained at a base in Molkino, in southern Russia, that abuts a facility belonging to the G.R.U., Russia's military-intelligence directorate.

The name Wagner came from the call sign of its first commander, Dmitry Utkin, a former lieutenant colonel in the G.R.U., who is said to be a fan of the German composer Richard Wagner. For Utkin, the appeal went beyond just admiration for the "Ring" cycle or "Parsifal"; Wagner was Hitler's favorite composer, and Utkin was known to exhibit fascist sympathies. A former Wagner fighter told me that Utkin greeted subordinates by saying "Heil!" and wore a Wehrmacht field cap around the unit's training grounds. The Dossier Center, an investigative outlet funded by the exiled oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky, published internal Wagner documents, which showed that Utkin occasionally signed his name with two lightning bolts—the insignia of the Nazi S.S.

If Utkin was Wagner's commander in the field, then Prigozhin was its C.E.O., financier, and bureaucratic champion. Prigozhin was born in Soviet Leningrad, now St. Petersburg, in 1961, nine years after Putin. As a teen-ager, he took up with a gang of petty thieves who robbed apartments. One night, in 1980, the gang mugged a woman on a dark Leningrad street. Prigozhin was sentenced to thirteen years in prison and served nine. His release coincided with the final stage of the Soviet Union's slow-motion collapse, and, for his next act, he launched a hot-dog business. He and his associates mixed the mustard in the kitchen of his apartment, while his mother counted the profits—as much as a thousand dollars a month, a significant sum for most Russians at the time.

Prigozhin quickly expanded into supermarkets and a catering business, and, in 1996, he opened the Old Customs House, one of St. Petersburg's early high-end restaurants. Tony Gear, a British restaurateur who had worked at the Savoy hotel, in London, signed on to run the place. City luminaries, including the mayor at the time, Anatoly Sobchak, who was then Putin's boss, came to feast on oysters, caviar, foie gras, and crabs from Kamchatka. In the libertine spirit of the Russian nineties, strippers entertained the crowd, until Prigozhin ended the practice. "We don't need striptease," Prigozhin said, as Gear recalled in an interview with a Russian outlet. "People come for the food and service."

Two years later, Prigozhin opened New Island, a restaurant on a boat that sailed up and down the Neva River. After Putin became President, in 2000, he frequently dined there with foreign counterparts, including Jacques Chirac and George W. Bush; in 2003, Putin celebrated his birthday there. "Putin saw how I grew a whole business out of a small stall," Prigozhin later said. "He saw that I am not above personally serving a plate to people of royal standing, because they are my guests."

In photographs from the era, Prigozhin is often seen hovering over a table in a dark suit, plucking a cloche from a dinner plate. But he was also known to be a demanding, even abusive, boss. "He created a beautiful image in the front of the house," a person from the St. Petersburg restaurant scene said. "But he achieved this with frightful methods." The man had heard accounts of Prigozhin berating and hitting members of his staff, and, in one instance, tying a chef to a radiator in the back of the establishment. (Prigozhin did not respond to a request for comment.)

His company Concord began catering Kremlin events, including the Presidential inauguration of Dmitry Medvedev, in 2008. Its affiliates became the main supplier of meals to public schools in Moscow. But the largest orders came from the Defense Ministry, which, in 2012 alone, awarded Prigozhin's companies three billion dollars in contracts to feed soldiers at bases around the country. Prigozhin and his family moved into a sprawling compound in St. Petersburg, with an indoor swimming pool and a helicopter pad. They flew on a private jet and owned a yacht. "A typical criminal," a powerful Russian businessperson said of Prigozhin. "Nothing less, nothing more."

Prigozhin combined an entrepreneurial spirit with a clear sense of how to serve his patron. He is credited with the creation, in 2013, of the Internet Research Agency, otherwise known as the St. Petersburg troll farm, which employed dozens of tech-savvy young people to spread propaganda, engage in influence operations, and otherwise cause mischief on social networks. (A number of its employees, including Prigozhin, were later indicted by U.S. prosecutors for their role in Russia's interference in the 2016 Presidential election.)

For a budding oligarch like Prigozhin, the murkiness of the war in the Donbas presented an even greater opportunity for profit and influence. "A bunch of people close to the Kremlin were playing their own games," Barabanov said. "Trying to get noticed, taking part in one venture or another, so they could say to Putin, 'Look, we did our part.'" Wagner, he went on, "was Prigozhin's initiative, with the Kremlin's blessing."

In the Donbas war, according to Ukrainian intelligence, Wagner fighters participated in the shooting down of an Ilyushin IL-76 transport plane, which killed forty Ukrainian paratroopers and nine crew members; the battle for the Luhansk airport, which pro-Russian units seized after a months-long siege; and the so-called Debaltseve cauldron battle, in the winter of 2015, in which Russian forces moved to encircle and expel the Ukrainian military

from a central railway hub in the Donbas. And yet, according to Barabanov, Wagner, compared with many of the other paramilitary units active in the region, was still "rather small in size and importance."

In 2015, Kyiv and Moscow signed the second part of the ceasefire protocols known as the Minsk agreements. Around this time, the Kremlin became less tolerant of the warring rebel factions running around the separatist territories. A number of their most charismatic and ideologically driven leaders started to turn up dead. In May, 2015, a prominent commander in Luhansk, Alexey Mozgovoy, who led the Prizrak, or "Ghost," Brigade, was killed, along with half a dozen others, in an ambush on his convoy. Another commander in Luhansk, who led a group known as the Batman Battalion, was gunned down, as was the separatist mayor of Pervomaisk. That December, Pavel Dryomov, the leader of a Cossack militia, was killed when his car exploded on the day of his wedding party.

Publicly, pro-Russian outlets blamed Ukrainian sabotage groups for the violence. But some suspected that the killings were carried out by Wagner. The Russian nationalist historian Evgeny Norin, who was sympathetic to the separatist cause, wrote a column describing Wagner as an "ominous Russian Blackwater, without official status or state recognition, covered by a veil of secrecy, obeying no-one-knows-who and carrying out the most dark and dirty tasks." Barabanov spoke to a number of separatist fighters and commanders at the time: "They all told me, 'We know it's being done by Wagnerovtsy.'"

In Ukraine, Wagner maintained a limited involvement, with never more than a few hundred troops deployed at a time. The war in Syria, which Russia entered in September, 2015, to prop up the regime of Bashar al-Assad, served as the mercenary group's true coming-out party. "In Syria, Russia used Wagner to reinforce units of local allies and as a main assault force," Ruslan Pukhov, director of CAST, an independent defense think tank in Moscow, said. "They weren't supporting the war effort, in other words, but leading it."

Putin initially sold the campaign to the Russian public as largely cost-free—the fighting would be done from the sky, by the Russian Air Force, he said—but it was clear that a contingent of ground troops would be needed to help capture and hold territory from Assad's enemies, which, at the time, included ISIS. The head of the Russian parliament's defense committee, Vladimir Komoyedov, hinted at the plan. "It is likely that groups of Russian volunteers will appear in the ranks of the Syrian Army as combat participants," he said. "What attracts volunteers apart from ideas? Of course, money."

According to Ukrainian intelligence, approximately thirteen hundred Wagner fighters were flown to Syria on Russian military transport planes. Strategically, Wagner operated to further Russia's geopolitical goals; tactically, the group was free to pursue its own spoils, including lucrative petroleum contracts that entities associated with Prigozhin received from the Assad government. "It was to everyone's advantage and

FUGITIVE

Red begonias stricken by frost—

listen: they nail plywood sheets and complete the garage decking—

swarmed by mosquitoes, you wander hot, thirsty, disoriented in a palm forest—

you have bloodied your hands on barbed wire—

after a snowfall, you inhale starlight while standing in an orchard—

you have had three operations to repair a torn elbow—

green mist rising from leafing willows—

running across a dune of white sand, you discover a pile of oryx bones—

they stack elephant tusks in a pyramid and set them on fire—

you have staggered out of a house in flames and lived to say this—

you have been thrust by rifle butt to a river and heard someone shout, "Swim!"—

the grass turns to yellow-gold stalks—

minutes replete with the noise of honeybees—

minutes replete with river gold—

asleep, she rides the waves of her breath onto the shore of your shoulder—

you coil hoses and haul them to a barn—

you have loved, hated, imagined, despaired, and the fugitive colors of existence have quickened in your body—

after seventy years, you write with shivering memory into the sunrise—

—Arthur Sze

benefit," Barabanov said. "The Kremlin can boast at home and abroad of destroying ISIS without facing serious losses—at least not officially. The Army can take credit for this great victory and pass it off as its own, and Wagner, or, rather, Prigozhin personally, earns twice—from sending his troops to the fight and from securing oil and energy assets as trophies."

At the same time, Wagner was making profitable inroads in Africa. In 2017, the President of Sudan, Omar al-Bashir, who was under indictment by the International Criminal Court for war crimes, visited Putin at his residence in Sochi, on the Black Sea. They discussed a number of joint projects, including weapons sales and the exchange of "experts" in the defense field. By the end of the year, a contingent of Wagner operatives had landed in Khartoum to train local security forces, and the Sudanese Ministry of Minerals had awarded a gold-mining concession to a Wagner front company called M Invest. Less than two years later, Bashir was ousted in a coup, but companies linked to Prigozhin maintained de-facto control of gold-mining interests in Sudan.

The Central African Republic, a former French colony that has faced a series of civil conflicts since the nineteen-nineties, "served as the main laboratory for Wagner's expansion," according to Maxime Audinet, a researcher at the Institute for Strategic Research, in Paris. The Wagner deployment to the C.A.R. began in 2018, with a contingent of several hundred mercenaries, who were assigned to help President Faustin-Archange Touadéra fight more than a dozen rebel groups then vying for power. French troops had largely pulled out of the C.A.R. two years earlier. Wagner instructors ran training programs for Touadéra's soldiers. Soon, a Russian emissary acting in service of Wagner was ensconced in the Presidential palace as one of Touadéra's top advisers. Roland Marchal, a researcher on African civil wars at Sciences Po, told me, "As Wagner learned in the C.A.R., if you start training troops, you might end up controlling the Presidency."

In 2019, Russian diplomats and Prigozhin associates helped broker a peace agreement between the government of the C.A.R. and the rebel factions. The next year, that deal collapsed, and rebel groups launched an armed march on the capital, Bangui. Wagner fighters, along with the C.A.R. Army and a contingent of Rwandan soldiers, led a bloody counterassault. Human Rights Watch reported an incident from 2021 in which, at a checkpoint near the town of Bossangoa, Wagner forces stopped a dozen unarmed men. Their bodies were later found, beaten and riddled with bullets, in a ditch by the road. The *Times* obtained a report prepared for members of the U.N. Security Council which found Wagner forces complicit in numerous cases of "excessive force, indiscriminate killings, occupation of schools and looting on a large scale, including of humanitarian organizations."

In the words of a senior U.S. intelligence official, the C.A.R. is now a "proxy state." Wagner commandos guard Touadéra and control the state customs service. Prigozhin-linked entities oversee regular propaganda campaigns, including on Radio Lengo Songo, a station Wagner created. The group also holds sway over much of the timber industry and operates a network of gold and diamond mines. In 2019, the C.A.R. government revoked the license of a Canadian company which gave it the right to mine in Ndassima, an area with gold deposits valued at more than a billion dollars, and transferred it to Midas Ressources, a company with links to Prigozhin. Diamville, a profitable precious-metals trader, is technically registered in

the name of the driver of a well-known Prigozhin associate, Dmitry Sytyi, the head of the Russian House cultural center in Bangui. Yet, for all Wagner's power in the capital, it has been largely disinterested in providing security to the rest of the country. "The truth is, Wagner is rather inefficient," a French military official told me. "They don't really bring stability, or even fight rebel groups all that successfully. What they do is protect the government in power and their own economic interests."

Wagner has fought in the civil war in Libya, where it allied with the Libyan National Army, led by Khalifa Haftar, who reportedly also received the backing of France. In Mozambique, several Wagner fighters were beheaded, prompting the group to quickly pull out of the country. In 2021, the ruling military junta in Mali, which took power in a coup, invited Russia to aid in its fight against jihadist groups. The government in Bamako denies the presence of Wagner mercenaries, but journalists and human-rights agencies have linked the group's fighters to a number of atrocities in the country, including a massacre in the village of Moura, in March, 2022, in which as many as five hundred people were killed. One thing, however, has remained constant: the principle of "*se servir sur la bête*," as Christophe Gomart, the former head of French military intelligence, put it, an expression that means "to serve yourself from the beast," or, better yet, to get your pound of flesh.

Marat Gabidullin was in his late forties when he joined Wagner, in 2015. He had spent ten years in the Russian Army, but, after leaving the service, he drifted toward alcohol abuse and a life of crime. In the mid-nineties, he spent three years in prison for shooting a small-time gangster in Siberia. After enlisting with Wagner, he was sent to Molkino for a course in assault tactics and urban warfare. "I felt reborn," he told me recently, "as if I had returned to a familiar world, with understandable values and purpose." His call sign was Ded, or "Grandpa."

I met Gabidullin not long ago, at a café in the South of France. He retains the taut, coiled build of a military man. His face is tanned and sinewy, with a trim white beard. On his right hand, he wore a chunky silver ring with a skull, one of Wagner's emblems, which he'd picked up at a market in Damascus. He recalled his time as a mercenary with a mixture of nostalgia and disappointment. "At first, I saw Wagner as a community that was performing necessary and useful functions for the country," Gabidullin told me. "And then, after some time, it became more and more authoritarian,

and I began to doubt the necessity and usefulness of what we were doing."

His first tour was in the occupied territory of Luhansk, in eastern Ukraine. The local population was hardly welcoming of the Russia-backed fighters in their midst and often told them that they weren't needed. "I understood that our propaganda is lying one hundred per cent," he said. He left after two months. But, when Wagner commanders told him to go to Syria and lead a company of troops fighting ISIS, he thought, Now, this is more my thing.

In March, 2016, Wagner was sent to seize Palmyra, an ancient city in the desert surrounded by palm trees and mountains. The fighting there was vicious. At one point, Gabidullin said, some of his men came upon a badly wounded ISIS fighter. At the time, Gabidullin's forces were deep in the mountains, with little equipment and no backup. His men shot the injured fighter. "This is the logic of war," he said.

A few days later, Gabidullin's unit was ambushed. He managed to fire a few shots before a grenade exploded behind him. Shrapnel tore into his head, back, and limbs. An armored personnel carrier delivered him to Russia's Humaymim airbase, on Syria's Mediterranean coast, where he lost consciousness. He awoke, a week later, in a hospital bed in St. Petersburg. A Wagner representative handed him a secure telephone. "No. 1 wants to speak to you," the person said. Prigozhin was on the line. "We've taken Palmyra," he said, and he promised to award Gabidullin the Hero of Russia, the country's highest military medal. Wagner also paid for a series of surgeries to remove the shrapnel and allowed Gabidullin to rest for several months at home. "Prigozhin is pragmatic," he told me. "He regards his mercenaries as working instruments—on the one hand, he doesn't pity them in battle or particularly value their lives, but, on the other, he keeps them in good condition, gives them what they need, offers quality care."

To celebrate the capture of Palmyra, the Kremlin organized a concert in the city's Roman-era amphitheatre. For the occasion, they flew the Mariinsky Theatre Orchestra and the world-renowned conductor Valery Gergiev in from St. Petersburg to perform Bach and Prokofiev for a crowd of Russian officials, Syrian dignitaries, and foreign journalists. Putin gave a video address that was beamed into the amphitheatre. "Any success in the fight against terrorism must be perceived by all, without exception, as a common victory," he said. As far as Gabidullin knew, not a single Wagner fighter was invited to attend.

A video appeared online in the summer of 2017 showing Russian-speaking men in military fatigues, their faces covered, beating a Syrian man with a sledgehammer, trying to cut off his head with a knife, and ultimately decapitating him with a shovel. *Novaya Gazeta*, an independent paper in Moscow, later identified the torturers as Wagner fighters. Gabidullin was back in Russia when the clip surfaced. He didn't know the perpetrators personally, but he immediately recognized which outfit they belonged to. "Inside Wagner, there was such a policy—to constantly apply methods of maximum intimidation to the enemy," he said. "I'm not justifying this idea and, in fact, always resented it. So, what, are we going to become like ISIS now?"

And yet, the following year, Gabidullin returned to Syria and was made a senior adviser to the ISIS Hunters, some three hundred Syrian fighters who operated under Wagner leadership. Their primary task was to capture oil and gas fields that had fallen to ISIS. "By seizing the oil fields, you deny ISIS an important cash supply," Gabidullin said. But Prigozhin had his own motive for such operations. A shell company linked to him signed a contract with the Assad government to receive a quarter of the revenue resulting from the seizures. "The Russian military has to at least take into account the interests of the Russian people," a U.S. defense official said. "Wagner can act in pursuit of its own bottom line."

That February, Gabidullin and his men were ordered to Deir Ezzor, in the northeast, where, they were told, they would participate in an assault on a nearby gas plant. The facility, though, was controlled not by ISIS but by an anti-Assad Kurdish militia. Gabidullin recalled a conversation with a Wagner commander, who told him that Prigozhin had got the necessary sign-offs. But one thing bothered Gabidullin about the plan: a group of American

"Oh, me? I make e-mails."

Special Forces were known to be aiding the Kurds, and their presence did not seem to be factored into the assault. When Gabidullin asked the commander why, he was told, "No. 1 said everything would be fine." Gabidullin said of Prigozhin, "He was arrogant, confident in his own genius."

On the night of February 7th, four hundred Wagner troops, accompanied by Russian T-72 tanks and heavy artillery, began to advance; Gabidullin and fifty Syrian fighters were expected to secure one of the flanks. But, as the tanks moved into firing position, they began to explode. One sped up to the right of Gabidullin, got a shot off, and then blew up. Gabidullin ordered mortar fire in the direction of the plant. A moment later, the mortar launcher and its crew were incinerated. To get a better view, Gabidullin climbed onto the roof of a nearby building. Everything was burning. A tank turret lay on the ground. The vehicles of another Wagner unit had been destroyed. Over the radio, he heard that AC-130 gunships were firing their large-calibre cannons on anything that moved down below. "I thought, What the hell is going on?" Gabidullin said. The Kurds didn't have their own airpower; the Americans were in the fight. The radio crackled with orders to retreat.

The battle in Deir Ezzor was the most prominent clash between Russian and American fighters since the Vietnam War. Twenty-three members of Gabidullin's unit were killed. He estimated that eighty more Wagner soldiers died in the attack. (Other estimates have suggested that two hundred Wagner personnel were killed.) Their bodies were repatriated to Russia in the course of several months, flown a few at a time, to avoid attracting too much attention. "We're just small change," Gabidullin said. "You can throw us to slaughter and no one will answer for this."

An adviser to U.S. Special Forces who was familiar with the battle in Deir Ezzor told me that, at the time, the Special Forces felt that they had been ceding territory to Wagner and Syrian troops for months, lest they get drawn into a fight with Russian forces. "They were frustrated," the adviser told me. Russian and U.S. officials had been relying on a so-called deconfliction line, a direct means of communication that was set up between the two militaries. On the night Wagner launched its assault, U.S. military officers called their Russian counterparts. According to the adviser, the Americans relayed what they saw: a group of armed fighters was approaching the plant—were they Russian? The Russian officer on the other end of the line said they were not. "Maybe they thought it was a bluff," the adviser said, "and didn't realize the U.S. would really attack."

Once U.S. military officials became aware that their troops had killed dozens of Russians, there were obvious concerns about possible escalation. "Nobody completely understood the exact relationship between Wagner and the state, which is, in fact, the point," the adviser said. "But that meant a lot of people in Washington were holding their breath, thinking, Oh, boy, this could really open up in ways that would not be good." In the end, the Kremlin barely reacted. U.S. officials carried out a review of the incident. "We checked and double-checked and triple-checked and came to the conclusion this was not a mistake on the part of the Russians," the adviser said. "It was interesting to see how readily Russia was willing to part with the lives of a lot of highly trained soldiers" and "to understand to what degree the Russia Defense Ministry and Wagner are allies and competing factions at the same time."

One day last August, a helicopter made a noisy approach to a penal colony in southern Russia, flying over the barracks and landing in a large open field. Guards had gathered more than a thousand inmates, nearly the entire population of the colony, telling them to wait outside for the arrival of someone they described as an important visitor. A prisoner named Alexei, who was in his early thirties, watched as men in green army fatigues, pistols at their hips, entered the yard. They were accompanied by a man in his sixties, with a bald head and heavy jowls, who spoke to the prisoners in a manner that was blunt, profane, and matter-of-fact, as if he, too, had known the inside of the *zona*, as Russian prisons are called. He suggested that he had arrived with the backing of Putin to make a simple offer. Come fight with me, he said. I need killers. And I can set you free.

The speaker was Prigozhin. He didn't hide the fact that the men would be headed for the battlefield—and that in war some people die. They would be fighting the "enemies of Russia," whom he described as mercenaries from the U.S. and Europe. If they survived the fighting for six months, they would be pardoned and free to start a new life, with plenty of money and opportunities for their children. "Think of it as paying down your debt to your motherland in blood," Prigozhin told the prisoners. "History will remember you." The helicopter's rotors were whirring again. Prigozhin was on the move, headed to other prisons. Some of his subordinates stayed behind to set up a recruitment office in the administration building.

Initially, Wagner was not included in Russia's plans to invade Ukraine. The senior Ukrainian intelligence official said that Kremlin leaders "thought they would quickly capture Kyiv, keep government buildings and infrastructure intact, and simply take over and run the country. For such a supposedly quick mission, you don't need mercenaries." But as the Russian advance stalled, in the spring of 2022, the Kremlin withdrew Russian units from around Kyiv and redoubled efforts to take territory in the Donbas.

The Ukrainian military first saw Wagner fighters in the battle for Popasna, an important railway junction in the Luhansk region. "The first thing we noticed was sand-colored jeeps," an intelligence officer with a Ukrainian brigade said. He presumed that the vehicles had arrived from the Middle East. This new contingent of fighters was markedly more proficient than the Russian forces that Ukrainian units had encountered in the early weeks of the war. Previously, most of the Ukrainian troops who were killed or wounded in Popasna had been struck with shrapnel from artillery shells; now they were taking more casualties from bullet wounds—a sign, the officer said, of Wagner troops' superior tactical training. "This phase was tough, with no time to make sense of things," he added.

After Popasna fell to Russia, in early May, Prigozhin promised that Wagner would next take Bakhmut, twenty miles

"And two couples therapists."

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to the west. At the time, the city was seen as a necessary gateway to capturing the whole of the Donbas, one of Putin's chief aims in the war. The only problem was that Wagner didn't have enough manpower, in part because of the losses it had suffered in Popasna. According to Western intelligence, Wagner leadership considered recruiting foreign fighters from Syria and sub-Saharan Africa, but this idea was rejected by the Kremlin. In Russia, Wagner was running an aggressive outreach campaign, but, as the senior Ukrainian intelligence official said, "they couldn't assemble as many people as they needed." So they turned to prisoners.

Alexei had landed in prison after a fight at a café in his home town, in southern Russia. He was twenty-four, married, with two young children, and was enjoying a night on the town. A scuffle broke out. Alexei pulled a knife, as did the other guy, who ended up dead. Alexei received a twenty-year sentence. He said goodbye to his family, not expecting to see his children again until they were adults. He had served nine years before Prigozhin's visit to the prison. A few days later, he signed up to join Wagner.

I spoke to Alexei at a detention facility in Kyiv, at a meeting arranged by Ukrainian authorities. He insisted that he had not been pressured or mistreated by his captors. He was eager to tell his story, but it was impossible to verify independently many of the details. (I have chosen not to use his real name.) He told me that his first stop after leaving prison was a military airfield in Rostov-on-Don, where he was given a uniform and combat boots. At a training base in occupied Ukraine, Wagner instructors showed recruits how to load and fire a Kalashnikov rifle, and taught them the basic tactics for storming a trench. Brutality was ever present, encapsulated by a single term: *obnuleniye*, or "zeroing out," Wagner slang for execution, the punishment for desertion or retreat in battle. At one point, a fellow prisoner recruit ran away from Alexei's training base and was picked up by local police in a village nearby. Wagner security brought him to the center of the training grounds, tied him to a wooden pole, and, in front of everyone, shot him in the head. "I realized then that things are serious," Alexei said.

After a month and a half, Alexei and ten others were brought to the "zero line," as both Ukrainian and Russian soldiers call the very edge of the front. Their mission was to storm a three-story building, an entrenched position held by Ukrainian machine gunners and snipers. The commander of Alexei's unit was also an inmate, who had been imprisoned on drug charges in Siberia. If anyone tried to run away, he said, he had orders to shoot him. "They told me, either I kill you or they kill me," the commander said. "So please don't get scared. I don't want to kill any of you."

The assault started before dawn. As Alexei and the men moved forward, the ground erupted in a wall of fire. Almost instantly, five men were mowed down by a machine gunner. A shell exploded in front of the commander, blowing him to pieces. Snipers fired on those left in the field. Alexei could hear someone yelling about his leg. He turned and saw one of his fellow-fighters writhing, his leg now a bloody stump. Another wave of men, all prisoners, were sent in as reinforcements. More fire, more explosions, more bodies. Wagner commanders sent in a third wave. A number of these fighters were equipped with rocket-propelled grenades, which they fired at the building before entering it. Alexei was among them. Inside, he saw the bodies of Ukrainian soldiers scattered on the ground.

The next day, Wagner commanders ordered Alexei and four others to storm a patch of woodland that shielded a Ukrainian bunker. When they crossed into the trees, two of them fell to the ground, picked off by snipers. Alexei dropped, too, and tried to lie as flat as he could. Bullets and grenades ripped through branches and leaves, sending splinters of wood whistling past. Alexei found himself beside another Wagner recruit, Yevgeny, who had been imprisoned for stealing a car while drunk one night. Their shoulders were touching. A bullet ripped into Yevgeny's eye, and, for the next half hour, Alexei listened to him moan as he bled to death. Wagner continued to send waves of convict fighters, about ten at a time, a tactic that became known as a *myasnoi shturm*, or "meat storm." After six hours, the woods grew quiet. Wagner had taken the bunker. The group's commanders rewarded their men by letting them wash themselves in a nearby *banya*.

Alexei's next orders were to join an assault on a Ukrainian position that had been dug into the top of a hill. He entered a stretch of forest as part of a group of Wagner fighters, looked down, and saw "a carpet of bodies," he said. A guy next to him took a shot through the head. Tanks were firing, as was artillery, creating a wall of noise. Shrapnel from a 120-millimetre mortar sprayed into Alexei's back, and he, along with other

injured fighters, headed to an evacuation point. But, Alexei said, on the way he became separated from the rest and wandered the woods until he heard voices. They were speaking Russian. As he got closer, they switched to Ukrainian. Alexei saw their uniforms just as they drew their weapons and told him to put up his hands. In their dugout, the Ukrainian soldiers gave Alexei chocolate and cigarettes. He was surprised to see ordinary guys defending their country. He was expecting the foreign mercenaries that Prigozhin and the Wagner instructors had said were the enemy. At the detention center in Kyiv, Alexei told me, "I made a giant mistake."

Wagner's tactics made the group a vexing and persistent opponent on the battlefield. The Ukrainian intelligence officer, whose brigade fended off multiple Wagner assaults, described how, in situations in which regular Army units would retreat, Wagner continued its assault: "Part of the group is destroyed, others are wounded, and, instead of evacuating, the rest continue with the storm—this is completely unreasonable." The threat of zeroing out meant that, "if they move forward, they at least have the chance to live another day," the officer said. "If they go back, they're dead for sure."

Wagner had its own hierarchy. Higher-ranking commanders were situated in bunkers within radio range, often a few miles from the front, issuing orders to assault teams on the ground. Professional mercenaries were given the letter "A" and held back, entering the battle only once Ukrainian defenses had been softened. Recruited prisoners, who made up roughly eighty per cent of Wagner's manpower, were given the letter "K" and deployed in waves, in intervals of fifteen or twenty minutes. "One group follows the other at a pre-planned distance," the intelligence officer explained. "Even if you destroy the first, you have very little time to rest. The second is already advancing." Moreover, the first wave was often used simply to draw fire, in order to identify Ukrainian positions, which were then targeted by artillery. "They are not bound by what is written in tactical manuals or taught in military academies," the officer said. "Wagner is a private structure, free of any dogmas, and this makes it flexible, able to mutate on the battlefield, and, as a result, unpredictable."

The commander of a Ukrainian drone squadron told me that, over many hours of observing Wagner from the sky, he had witnessed "not so much a lack of fear but, rather, the total devaluation of life." In one case, he watched as Wagner fighters in a trench left a dead comrade in place for several days, cleaning their weapons, eating, and sleeping with the body lying just a few feet from them. "I kept waiting for them to bury him, or at least move him, but they just acted like nothing was the matter," he said. Another Wagner unit took a wounded Ukrainian soldier prisoner, and then placed him on the edge of their trench, to keep Ukrainian forces from firing on them. The commander said that he watched, helpless, as the Ukrainian soldier flailed and lost blood, and finally froze to death.

When confronted by an armed drone, the commander said, "the regular Russian *mobiks*"—as mobilized recruits are called—"fall into hysterics, scatter in every direction, try to hide." Radio intercepts pick up their frantic calls to higher-ups: "We are being shelled!" Wagner fighters from Russian prisons, however, often fire wildly into the air, trying to shoot down the drone. In some cases, they do manage to disable it; just as often, they stand in one place until they're blown to pieces. "This isn't bravery," the drone commander said, "but complete craziness."

Wagner's use of human-wave attacks led to some limited battlefield successes. In January, Wagner captured Soledar, a small town north of Bakhmut known for its salt mines. "I want to confirm the complete liberation and cleansing of the territory of Soledar from units of the Ukrainian Army," Prigozhin declared. "The whole city is littered with the corpses of Ukrainian soldiers."

The place had little strategic import for the larger Russian campaign, but it was the country's clearest military achievement in more than half a year. At first, the Defense Ministry praised Russian paratroopers for taking Soledar, with no mention of Wagner. Prigozhin alleged that Russian generals were attempting to "steal victory." The Defense Ministry released a new statement, clarifying that the "direct assault on the residential areas of Soledar" was "successfully carried out thanks to the courageous and selfless actions of the volunteers of Wagner's assault squads."

When Russia launched its invasion, Andrey Medvedev assumed that he would be called up to fight. He was twenty-five years old and had spent much of his childhood in an orphanage in the Siberian city of Tomsk. As a teen-age conscript, he spent a year in the airborne infantry, an experience that had soured him on the Russian Army. He had heard about Wagner, which not only paid better but was also supposedly run more efficiently and rationally. "The Defense Ministry will screw you over," he recalled thinking. "Wagner is run by more reliable people."

Medvedev had spent years after his service bouncing between odd jobs—security guard, construction worker, driver—and had done a stint in prison. "I didn't have shit," he told me. "No home, no family, nothing." He largely believed the propaganda he saw on television: Nazis in Ukraine were committing atrocities against a population that yearned to be liberated by Russia. He called Wagner's recruitment hotline, in the summer of 2022. After two weeks at the base in Molkino, he was given his assignment: commander of the 1st Squad of the 4th Platoon of the 7th Assault Detachment.

Medvedev was sent to a position outside of Bakhmut, where he had ten Wagner fighters under his command—recently enlisted mercenaries, not prisoners. In one of their first assaults, he and one other member of his unit made it out unscathed. The rest were badly injured or killed. Afterward, a higher-ranking Wagner commander told him to expect some "fucking great reinforcements." Medvedev asked whom he meant. "Killers," the commander said.

Soon, a group of convicts arrived, many of whom appeared old and physically unwell. Medvedev described an episode in which he and his new recruits were pinned in a trench, taking heavy fire from Ukrainian soldiers. "The guys climbed in and just sat there," he told me. Medvedev yelled at the convict soldiers, "The enemy is about to hop in this trench and start fucking shit up. What are you going

to do then?" A handful of Wagner mercenaries with combat experience repelled the attack, but the episode rattled Medvedev. "There were some decent fighters," he said, "but the majority had no clue what they were doing." A couple of weeks of training, he said, "were barely enough to learn how to hold a machine gun and walk straight."

One of the recruits was a convicted murderer in his mid-fifties named Yevgeny Nuzhin. Medvedev described how, at one point, their unit came under heavy fire, and everyone dispersed into the trees. Nuzhin came back without his rifle, having thrown it off in a panic. They found it lying in the shrubs. Later, the unit had to cross a clearing in range of Ukrainian artillery. Rounds were exploding around them, but Nuzhin was so winded that he could barely walk. He had lost his gun again. Medvedev ran up to him in a fury. "What the fuck is wrong with you?" he demanded.

"I have high blood pressure," Nuzhin answered.

Medvedev eventually lost track of how many convict fighters cycled through his unit. "Once we started using prisoners, it was like a conveyor belt," he said. "A group comes—that's it, they're dead." He stopped remembering their names or call signs. "A new person shows up, survives for five minutes, and he's killed," he said. "It was like that day after day."

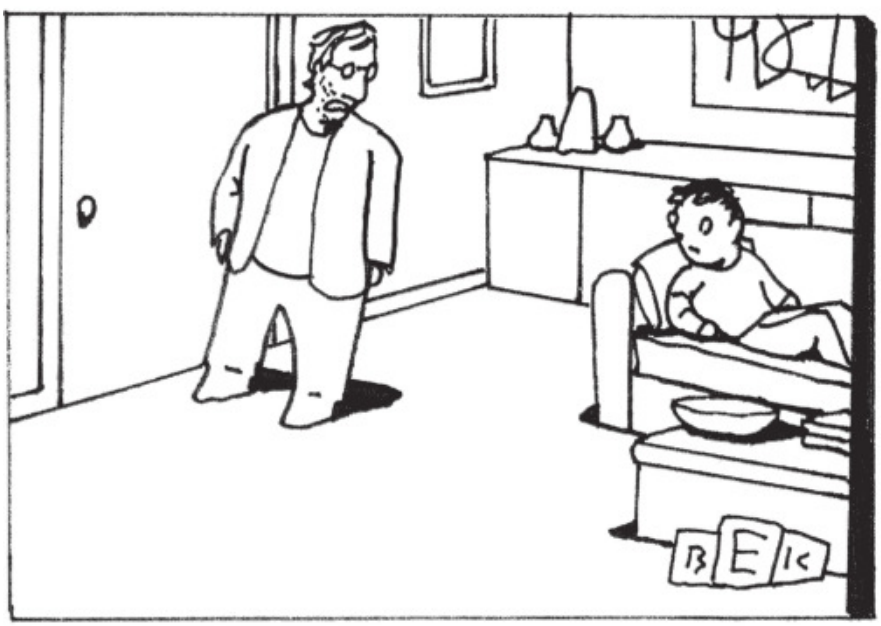
Medvedev attended a training exercise on how to defend against new weapons systems that NATO countries were supplying to Ukraine. Prigozhin delivered a motivational speech, telling those in attendance, "We're the most combat-ready division. Everyone else has shit themselves. We're the only ones advancing." Medvedev said that he asked Prigozhin a question: "At what price will we manage to enter Bakhmut? By walking over the corpses of our own men?" Prigozhin replied coolly, asking for his call sign and identification number. When the training was over, Medvedev reported to a Wagner officer, who asked him, "What are you running your mouth for?" He ordered Medvedev locked in a shipping container, saying, "Let him think it over."

During another visit to a Wagner base, Medvedev came across a crowd of soldiers who were waiting for members of Wagner's internal security department, whom they called the Chekists, a reference to the early Soviet secret police. The Chekists arrived in pickup trucks transporting two men. As the crowd looked on, they ordered the men to their knees; one of the Wagner security officers launched into a speech about how the men were traitors and cowards who had run away from battle. The Chekists shot them in the head. "I've seen people killed," Medvedev told me. "Fuck, I've killed myself—I didn't flinch. But I despise people who act that way." I asked him the reason for such violent displays. "It's obvious it comes from Prigozhin," he said. "It's a means of intimidation and control, to devour people and make them think only about their own self-preservation."

Medvedev noted a video he'd seen of Nuzhin, the recruit with high blood pressure. Nuzhin had been captured by Ukrainian forces, and, as a P.O.W., recorded an interview. "I told myself that when I came I would do whatever it took to surrender," Nuzhin said into the camera. "Because it's not Ukraine who attacked Russia. It's Putin who attacked Ukraine." Two months later, a new video, titled "Hammer of Revenge," appeared on a social-media channel associated with Wagner. Nuzhin had reportedly been part of a prisoner exchange with Russia. In the video, he is in a dark cellar, his head taped to a brick wall. "They told me I was to be tried," Nuzhin says. A man in camouflage steps forward and swings a sledgehammer into his head, crushing his skull. Prigozhin denied that Wagner had anything to do with Nuzhin's killing, but he made his satisfaction clear. "A dog receives a dog's death," he said in a statement. "Nuzhin betrayed his people, betrayed his comrades, betrayed them deliberately."

After four months, Medvedev showed up at the office of his commander and submitted his resignation. The commander said Medvedev still had to fight six more months, maybe more—Wagner had the right to extend contracts as it saw fit. He ordered his men to throw Medvedev into a pit, where he was told that the Chekists were coming for him next. But, before they arrived, some sympathetic fellow Wagner fighters helped him flee. In December, Medvedev gave an interview to Vladimir Osechkin, a Russian activist based in France, who has published numerous investigations into Wagner and the Russian security services. Medvedev was on the run inside Russia. "I understand that I am in danger because I know their methods," he told Osechkin. "I know exactly how they treat people like me."

Shortly after the interview, Medvedev went to Murmansk, a city above the Arctic Circle, near Russia's border with Norway. A local driver brought



"I have to go out and ruin everything for your generation."

him to the border zone. It was mid-January, and mounds of snow rose out of the frozen ground like dunes. He donned a white camouflage jumpsuit, hopped over one fence, then another. Two shots rang out; a guard dog was barking. Medvedev ran across a frozen lake, his feet plunging into the frigid water in places where the ice was brittle. On the Norwegian side, he collapsed on the ground and pulled out a bottle of vodka that he had brought with him. As he walked down an empty road, a police car pulled up. Medvedev tried to explain himself. "Wagner," he said.

"Wagner?" one of the Norwegian officers asked, incredulously.

Last September, a Ukrainian counteroffensive expelled Russian forces around the city of Kharkiv, cutting off a position from which they were advancing on Bakhmut. Prigozhin criticized the Russian Defense Ministry for the retreat. "Send all these scumbags to the front line with guns and bare feet," he said.

The new battle lines meant that capturing Bakhmut no longer promised an obvious route for Russia to seize the Donbas. Instead, Bakhmut became a means for both armies to tie up and degrade the other's forces, so as to exhaust them for future battles. "Our task is not Bakhmut itself," Prigozhin said last November, "but the destruction of the Ukrainian Army and the reduction of its combat potential." The operation, he went on, had been dubbed "the Bakhmut meat grinder."

This was a politically convenient line for Prigozhin to take, given that, nearly a year into Wagner's efforts to seize Bakhmut, the mercenary force was only advancing a few metres a day. "Bakhmut became a kind of fetish that the Defense Ministry and general staff weren't particularly eager to throw themselves into," the Russian defense source told me. "Russian military command came to the conclusion that, if Prigozhin wants to take this city so badly, then let him."

According to a former Wagner fighter, whom I'm calling Bogdan, the meat grinder was nothing like war as he remembered it. Two decades earlier, he had spent more than a year as a young Army conscript in Chechnya, where Russian forces carried out a brutal counter-insurgency campaign. His life had been a series of tragic events since then. His wife died suddenly, in her mid-twenties, leaving him alone with their two daughters. He became addicted to heroin, then mephedrone, known in Russia as *sol*, or salt. In 2021, he was convicted of possession with intent to distribute and sentenced to eleven years in prison. By then, he was H.I.V.-positive. When Wagner recruiters showed up at his prison, in the Ural Mountains, he was in an advanced stage of infection. He had nine years left on his sentence, though he'd likely be dead before the end of it. If he went to fight in Ukraine, there was a chance he could finish his tour after six months and see his daughters again.

I met Bogdan earlier this summer, in a prison in Dnipro, a large city in southeastern Ukraine, a hundred and forty miles from Bakhmut. He has a tired, hollow face, and speaks in a falsetto whisper. Bogdan said that the Wagner recruiters told him he'd be responsible for evacuations, bringing the dead and injured off the front lines. They gave him a red bracelet to wear on his wrist, which indicated his H.I.V. infection. In early February, after three weeks of training, he was sent to Bakhmut.

No one there said anything about evacuations. Instead, he was ordered to join a group of twelve soldiers and prepare to storm a Ukrainian position. It was still dark when he and the others set off, entering a patch of forest outside the city. Bogdan could see craters from explosions and bodies lying in the snow. Suddenly, his unit was attacked with grenade launchers. Everyone scattered; Bogdan crawled over the frozen ground, trying to feel for the way he had come, and groped the arms and legs of fallen Wagner fighters. When he heard drones overhead, he went limp and played dead. Even nighttime wasn't safe, as snipers with thermal scopes hunted whatever moved. "It was like a video game," he told me.

The next day, he was shot in the arm. He jabbed himself with a painkiller from his first-aid kit, and passed out. He awoke, surrounded by Ukrainian soldiers. "Are you going to kill me?" he asked. "No," came the reply. "We're taking you prisoner."

Wagner was losing between fifty and a hundred fighters a day. News of the high casualty rates had reached Russian inmates, fewer of whom were willing to join. At the same time, the Defense Ministry had begun drawing its own recruits from the prisons, signing up convicts for armed formations called Storm-Z. If the Defense Ministry was keen to limit Wagner's influence, cutting off its supply of convict fighters was one way of doing it. In February, Prigozhin announced that Wagner was ending its program of recruiting prisoners. Later that month, he shifted the deadline for taking Bakhmut. "Progress is not as fast as we would like," he said, insisting that Russia's "monstrous military bureaucracy" was to blame.

Olga Romanova, who runs Russia Behind Bars, a criminal-justice advocacy group, said that she and her staff had been in touch with several hundred prisoners who joined up with Wagner. "I heard the same thing from them, over and over," she said. "No one is waiting for me on the outside. I have no home, no family. At least here I'm needed." To Romanova, who has defended the rights of Russian prisoners for fifteen years, Prigozhin's exploitation of convict soldiers contains a cruel irony. "You could say that Wagner achieved something we've never had in Russia—post-penitentiary rehabilitation," she said. "Only in the most terrible and gruesome way imaginable."

On May 5th, Prigozhin posted a video of himself standing in a dark field, his flashlight trained on a row of dead bodies. "These are boys from Wagner who died today," he says. "Their blood is still fresh!" The camera pans across the field, revealing yet more bodies, in soiled camouflage uniforms. "You will eat their guts in Hell," he says. "Shoigu, Gerasimov, where is the fucking ammunition?"

Prigozhin threatened to pull his forces out of Bakhmut if they didn't receive more ammunition. Apparently, he got what he wanted, because he soon announced that Wagner would stay. But

the rift inside Russia's war camp was striking. The member of Russia's political élite said, "How is it that he gets away with saying what others would be imprisoned for in two seconds?" The answer, he went on, was likely that Putin had seen Prigozhin deliver results when the regular Army had stalled: "In wartime, you have to use whatever methods you have, without paying too much attention to side effects."

By the middle of May, Wagner controlled more than ninety per cent of Bakhmut. But, even as the Ukrainian military was pushed out of the city, it was recapturing territory on the flanks, turning Bakhmut into both a prize and a trap. Prigozhin claimed that Wagner had handed over these areas to the regular Russian Army, and thus it was the Defense Ministry, not Wagner, that was responsible for their loss. "This is not called regrouping," he said. "This is fleeing." He warned that "attempts by the Defense Ministry in the information field to sugarcoat the situation" risked leading to a "global tragedy for Russia." He scolded, "We must stop lying immediately."

Around that time, I travelled to the Donbas and spent several days in Ukrainian-held towns outside Bakhmut. Soldiers were staying in abandoned houses, and tanks and armored personnel carriers streamed up and down the roads. A Ukrainian commander told me that he and his men had initially been confused by some of Wagner's tactics: "We saw them running around with sledgehammers, and at first couldn't figure out what for." Officers eventually realized that Wagner was demolishing walls, so that its fighters could navigate the city without making themselves visible.

In one battle for an apartment building, the commander told me, Ukrainian forces managed to push back a group of Russian troops and hold a position from which they mounted a counterattack. Then they intercepted an appeal on Russian radio lines, calling for backup from "Psychos"—that is, Wagner storm troopers. The Psychos exhausted the Ukrainian soldiers with their sheer numbers and unwillingness to retreat, even when they were taking losses. "Our guys couldn't hold on," the Ukrainian commander said. "They had to pull back."

One afternoon in mid-May, I drove to an abandoned gas station that served as a staging point for troops. A U.S.-supplied MRAP armored vehicle rumbled past. A piece of heavy artillery, hidden in the trees, fired in the direction of Bakhmut, shaking the ground with each blast. A car full of soldiers drove up. Their commander, a jolly man with a thick orange beard, nodded in the direction of the city, a few miles down the road. "That's where Hell begins," he told me. They put on body armor, loaded magazines into their weapons, and sped off.

I was there to meet Anton Lavryniuk, a Ukrainian battalion commander whose soldiers had been fighting Wagner in and around Bakhmut for six months. Combat had been exhausting. "Imagine today you killed twenty people. Yesterday it was twenty. The day before that it was thirty. Every day they come, and get mowed down in whole rows," he told me. "What's more, you see these rows of bodies, and no one is trying to pull them out. Today's assault simply marches over the same ground where yesterday's bodies are still lying." In some cases, Lavryniuk saw that individual soldiers in his unit were struggling, psychologically as much as physically, and he sent them to the rear for a few days of rest. "They need to get their brains untwisted," he said.

Lavryniuk noted that, as Wagner's losses mounted, the number of storm troopers in each wave had become smaller—as few as six per group. One aspect of the group's tactics remained constant, though: the practice of "zeroing out." Lavryniuk and his men intercepted frequent radio traffic on the battlefield in which Wagner commanders gave the order: "Anyone who takes a step back, zero them out." Lavryniuk told me, "We heard this over and over."

I had received conflicting accounts about the decrease in Wagner artillery fire. Sources in both Ukraine and Russia noted dips in firing rates last spring, and cited a general rationing of munitions along the front. "Everything is regulated in the Army," the former Russian military official said. "There are prescribed rates of ammunition consumption that dictate how much artillery you need for this or that operation." Lavryniuk, for his part, doubted the sincerity of Prigozhin's complaints about a lack of ammunition: "In many places, the intensity of fire was greater than before." His men had adopted an ironclad rule. As soon as Wagner forces made contact, they hugged the ground or changed firing position, because an artillery barrage was imminent. "Wagner operates according to scorched-earth tactics," Lavryniuk said. "They don't storm a trench or a building until they've levelled it completely."

Two days later, Bakhmut was fully occupied. President Volodymyr Zelensky initially denied that the city had fallen, but within days it was clear that no Ukrainian troops remained. Prigozhin announced that his fighters were withdrawing and would hand over their positions to the regular Russian Army. In another video, he walks among burned-out apartment blocks, giving instructions to his men, and declares that Wagner will leave Bakhmut by June 1st. His soldiers needed to regroup for a new mission.

In hindsight, the capture of Bakhmut was the beginning of the end for Wagner in Ukraine, the moment when, once it had accomplished its stated goal—at an extraordinary cost in men and matériel—its role and influence could only decrease. In the days after Wagner's aborted mutiny, Prigozhin went largely quiet, releasing just a cryptic audio message. "We started our march because of an injustice," he said. All that he and his men had wanted, he went on, was to "avoid the destruction of Wagner." Prigozhin was equally adamant that Wagner's short-lived insurrection had not been aimed at Putin or the Russian state: "We did not have the goal of overthrowing the existing regime and the legally elected government."

Three days after the uprising, Konstantin Remchukov, a newspaper editor in Moscow with Kremlin connections, was invited to a meeting with Putin and other media executives. Remchukov described Putin as energized and focussed, and said that he spoke of poring through Wagner's past contracts with the state. "Putin doesn't believe there is such a thing as selfless opposition to his rule," Remchukov said. "He always looks for a material reason." Putin revealed that same day that the state had paid Wagner nearly a billion dollars during the past year. Dmitry Kiselev, a television propagandist, named

an even higher sum—nearly ten billion dollars in state funds for Wagner over its lifetime. "Prigozhin has gone off the rails because of big money," Kiselev said.

In the wake of the insurrection, Putin appeared to take a measured approach with Wagner. Hundreds of Russian citizens who have criticized the authorities and the war in less vivid terms than Prigozhin have been imprisoned, fined, and removed from their jobs or universities, and none of them sent an armored column on the road to Moscow. But, at least for now, Putin has decided that imprisoning Prigozhin would risk making him a martyr while also undermining Russia's military effort. "What's the most important political priority for Putin right now?" Remchukov asked. "Victory in the special military operation." Wagner may yet prove useful for that goal, and the dismantling of its forces in the middle of a war would be messy, rife with distractions and dangers for the Kremlin. Putin appears to have concluded that the Wagner insurrection wasn't aimed at him personally—a convenient position, in that it doesn't force him to take any bold or risky action. "If they aren't against me," Remchukov said, paraphrasing Putin, "we can leave them in place for the solving of important problems."

Indeed, for a person whom Putin had called a traitor in all but name, Prigozhin retained a remarkable level of influence and access. Journalists observed that a private plane linked to him made several flights to Moscow and St. Petersburg. The former Russian military official told me that Prigozhin had spent considerable time in Moscow, advocating for himself and his business empire with high-ranking figures: "He's going around beating himself on the chest, saying that he'll continue to fight on behalf of Russia. Let's see whether he's allowed to or not."

Putin's spokesperson, Dmitry Peskov, confirmed that, on June 29th—five days after Wagner's failed march on Moscow—Putin met with Prigozhin and dozens of Wagner's top commanders at the Kremlin. The meeting lasted three hours. "They emphasized that they are staunch supporters and soldiers of the head of state and commander-in-chief—and also said they are prepared to fight for the country going forward," Peskov said. "Putin heard out the commanders and proposed further employment options and further combat options."

In Ukraine, Wagner was but one piece of the military effort; elsewhere it represents the majority of the Russian presence. Gabidullin, the former senior adviser of Wagner's ISIS Hunters, spoke to a number of Wagner fighters in Syria, who told him that the uprising had not affected their operations: "They say that they expect to continue their work, even if certain conditions change." Sergey Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister, said of Wagner's missions in the C.A.R. and Mali, "This work, of course, will continue."

Still, Putin is unlikely to repeat the same mistake twice: allowing a private army led by a hotheaded sadist to take an outsized role in Russia's security. "How can Putin claim to have total control over the country, and then something like this happens?" the member of the Russian political élite said. "They'll have to lose their independence and be integrated into the Army." But putting Wagner on a tighter leash would lead to a very different Wagner, one that, as the U.S. defense official put it, would trade "an increase in control for a reduction of deniability." That would lessen the danger of such a group, but it would also challenge the fundamental reasons that the Kremlin found it useful in the first place.

By July, a contingent of several thousand Wagner fighters had made it to Belarus, setting up camp near the town of Asipovichy, where the Belarusian Defense Ministry said they would train local reservists. Prigozhin paid a visit, making his first public appearance since the mutiny. He brought the Wagner flag from the base in Molkino, which had been emptied out. "We fought with dignity," Prigozhin told the assembled troops. "We've done a great deal for Russia." Wagner, he went on, would now prepare for new missions, including a reinvigorated presence in Africa. "Maybe we'll return to the special military operation at a time when we are sure that we won't be forced to disgrace ourselves and our experience," he said. He then introduced Dmitry Utkin—"the one who gave us the name Wagner"—who stepped forward, his face covered in the shadow of early evening. The crowd applauded and whistled; Utkin tipped his cap. "This is not the end," he said, "but just the beginning of the biggest job in the world, which will be carried out very soon." He switched to English and yelled, "Welcome to Hell!" ♦

PROFILES

BODIES OF WORK

Lisa Yuskavage's art shows it all.

BY ARIEL LEVY

Thirty years ago, when Lisa Yuskavage and Matvey Levenstein were young painters trying to establish themselves in the East Village, they got a message on their answering machine. An acquaintance who had invited the couple to a party wanted to let them know that people felt Yuskavage was "too much," and that, on second thought, they'd rather she didn't come.

Yuskavage was already depressed. She'd recently had her first gallery show—abstracted depictions of women folded over like swollen seashells, painted in what she later called "dark, slimy" colors. "I walked into that opening and I absolutely hated the show," she recalled recently. "I wanted to take it all down and get out of there." She confessed her dismay to the painter John Currin, a former classmate at the Yale School of Art, and he empathized. "They're beautiful and everything, but it's not you," he said. The paintings were quiet, understated, unobjectionable. Yuskavage is not. People called her the Lenny Bruce of Yale because of her bawdy sense of humor. Now sixty-one, she described one art dealer to me as the kind of person who would "suck your pussy so hard it'd make your nose bleed."

Those early paintings sold well, but Yuskavage suffered a crisis of faith that stalled her work for a year. "I'd started painting for some mysterious fancy person who didn't even exist," she said. "Like I was painting with my pinkie in the air." After the message barring Yuskavage from the party, Levenstein had an idea: she should switch personalities with her art. "So you would make paintings that would get disinvited from the party," he said, "but your personality would be demure, like those paintings from the show."

Yuskavage returned to her studio with this idea swimming in her head. At the time, people were talking about "Blue Velvet," David Lynch's film noir about a drug dealer who coerces a lounge singer into sexual servitude. "I was so horrified by that character—you know, 'Show me your pussy,'" Yuskavage said. "I thought, Why don't I pretend *he's* painting this?" The result was an unnerving picture called "The Gifts." Against a seaweed-green background, a nude female figure whose arms are either missing or tied behind her back hovers above a little flotilla of decorative waves. It's as if a woman is being forced at gunpoint to serve as the figurehead of a ship. "Then I shoved these goofy, trashy flowers in her mouth," Yuskavage said. "And I could not stop laughing."

The figure looked terrified, traumatized. She reminded Yuskavage of a seal in a PETA commercial who senses that he's about to be clubbed. "A guy would never put that in the eyes of this figure, tell you she's afraid," she said. "But, because I am a female, I can't not know that." It was different from the work in her show in every way. The sludgy tones were replaced by vivid, saturated color; the female figure was aggressively exposed instead of allowed to hide. Yuskavage was elated: "I felt so great painting it—I was, like, 'This has got to be right.'" Either that, she thought, or she was losing her marbles. "Listen, maybe I'm a bad person, but this is where the lights were on. The stream of content was endless."

Her figures started emerging from a haze of *sfumato*, a technique that was popular during the High Renaissance, but executed in shades of Barbie pink and screeching orange—"candy colors," Yuskavage said, "very American colors." As her painting became more sumptuous and seductive, her subject matter grew increasingly unsettling. In "Big Blonde Jerking Off," a blow-up doll with golden hair and a round hole for a mouth appears to be on the verge of exploding, both in orgasm and in substance. The creature—or object?—is an ambiguously animate bubble-being, propped up on thigh-like spheres, cupping her own

Like much of Yuskavage's recent work,

"Golden Studio" recasts and reimagines four decades' worth of provocative, surreal, vibrantly painted images.

hairless pudenda. "My work has a very unpleasant edge, and I'm aware of that," Yuskavage told an interviewer who visited her first studio, a shared space on East Second Street. "From looking at advertising and being in the world and listening to men comment about women, listening to my dad comment about women," she continued, "I know a lot about how to degrade a woman."

These paintings hardly brought Yuskavage immediate approval. "People would come into my studio and say, 'You cannot do this,'" she told me. "I got turned down for every grant. I couldn't keep a gallery. It was just a world of 'no.'" She lost her only devoted collector and appalled many of her feminist peers. "Yuskavage boasts no strategy of appropriation that might distance her work's icky pandering," the critic Lane Relyea wrote in *Artforum*, about a show in 1994. "The paintings' real creepiness emerges at the moment of mutual recognition—they wink as if we too belong to the audience of drooling average Americans for which they're obviously intended." Yuskavage, he asserted, was "caricaturing women in ideological shorthand and raping them."

In the three decades since, the art world has come around. "Bonfire," Yuskavage's apocalyptic scene of rampaging female peasants beating out fires under emerald-green skies, hangs in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. MOMA has a painting from her last show, and two dozen older works. Her largest paintings sell for more than two million dollars.

Yuskavage's work has ranged widely, from small watercolor still-lifes of flowers, fruit, and nipples to huge, eerie landscapes, which feel like a dream where you're not sure if you want to stay forever in the land of erotically tinged weirdness or wake up before something unspeakable happens. What has remained constant in her career is an extraordinary way with color, a penchant for scenarios that defy interpretation, and a fascination with rendering a particular kind of naked lady. "Why?" the curator Helen Molesworth asked Yuskavage in a recent interview. "Why have you made this outrageous, hypersexualized . . . white nude female figure the sort of centerpiece of your visual language?"

"Because," Yuskavage shot back, "that's the history of art."

One summer afternoon in Paris, Yuskavage and Levenstein stood before Manet's "Blonde with Bare Breasts," at the Musée d'Orsay. "They're so . . . *presentational*," Yuskavage said, moving close enough to see the brushstrokes. "Kind of the greatest breasts in Western art, in terms of naturalness." Asked why artists are so captivated by breasts, Yuskavage replied, "*Everyone* is obsessed with them. Go ask a baby." For artists, she said, the challenge is finding a way to paint everything besides breasts with as much passion. "Because the tit comes with—"

"—inbuilt interest," Levenstein finished for her. Levenstein, Yuskavage's husband of thirty-one years, met her in art school at Yale. He had recently emigrated from the Soviet Union with his mother, a classical pianist, and his father, an engineer who had survived the Gulag: "I was wandering the hallways, totally lost, and she came out of a classroom to wash her brushes." Yuskavage, who'd just gained the freshman fifteen, asked him, "Did you know Yale makes your breasts grow?" Levenstein gave her a bewildered look: "I said, 'No.' But I was willing to consider the possibility."

Yuskavage likes painting roundness and volume in general. Many of her works are ornamented with brightly colored balls and beads—it's as if they roll around her studio from one canvas to the next. They are a reference to one of Yuskavage's favorite paintings, Bosch's "Garden of Earthly Delights," which is dotted with mysterious berries being variously consumed, inhabited, and excreted. They are also a rebellion against the dictum that serious artists should never indulge in the decorative. "We went to art school at the tail end of modernism, and modernism is all about flatness," Yuskavage said. "People didn't render objects and, like, put *highlights* on them. You'd be considered a reactionary fool. So I always liked the idea of the wrongness of rendering. And then add to that you're rendering a *tit*—that's like double wrong."

They moved on to look at "Olympia," Manet's portrait of a nude reclining in bed, staring directly at the viewer, as a servant presents her with flowers from an admirer. "She was a known prostitute," Yuskavage said, "and it was considered very salacious to put her as the Venus. Manet is basically saying, 'One of you sent her these flowers. This is not any old Venus: this is *your* Venus.'"

Giving the culture the nude that reflects its preoccupations—the Venus that it deserves—has been central to Yuskavage's project. "I'm not capable of overlooking reality," she told me. Her first show of work that felt true to her vision featured the "Bad Babies": four young female figures looking angry, awkward, and uncomfortable, exposed from the waist down, suspended in Yuskavage's luscious *sfumato*. "That feeling of the figure being *caught* in the paint was really interesting," the artist Sarah Sze, a friend of Yuskavage's, told me. "There was a kind of empathy you had for it." To be young and female is to be looked at—to be trapped in being looked at—and Yuskavage made the looking as confounding for the viewer as it seemed to be for the subject. The celebrated figurative painter Kerry James Marshall said, "Lisa's paintings call out in a fairly irresistible way, which is maybe one of the reasons that people have so much trouble with some of them. I mean, you've kind of got to say, 'Is there something wrong with me? Or is there something wrong with that picture?'"

Unlike John Currin, who has also become famous for applying Old Master techniques to the vulgarity of the present, Yuskavage has never had a major museum retrospective. ("I was using soft-core porn first—just look at the dates," Yuskavage said. "But it's a bad idea, so, like, let's not brag.") Yuskavage was galvanized by a Willem de Kooning retrospective, held at MOMA in 2011. "Each room showed a very distinct body of work, and I was, like, 'I could do that—I'm *going* to do that,'" she said. "And people are going to be, like, 'I didn't know she was that fucking good at it for so many years!'" She laughed. "I'm Little Miss Underestimated. They think I just do the tits."

Most recently, Yuskavage has been painting surreal images of spaces where art is made. In "Golden Studio"—a

PREVIOUS SPREAD: © LISA YUSKAVAGE / LISA YUSKAVAGE, "GOLDEN STUDIO," (2023) / COURTESY THE ARTIST AND DAVID ZWIRNER

massive work in the glowing colors of marigolds and honey—a woman with a rounded belly stands in peaceful contemplation, surrounded by empty boxes, extension cords, and, on the walls, what Yuskavage calls her "ground-zero paintings"—previous works that marked a leap forward in her evolution. The studio paintings feature prominently in her new show at the David Zwirner gallery in Paris, her first solo exhibition in France.

Yuskavage likes to invent rules to push against in her work, and for the new paintings she decided that she had to appear in each one in a cryptic form—as herself from behind, as her previous work, or as some kind of avatar. Self-portraiture has historically been considered a lower subject, which is to say a female painter's subject; for much of the nineteenth century, women artists in the West generally weren't permitted to work from nude models, so they turned to the mirror. But an artist who represents herself by painting her previous work in a fantasy studio is painting what she does, not how she looks.

When Helen Molesworth visited Yuskavage's studio recently, she was impressed by the moxie of the new paintings. "I was, like, 'Oh, snap! You're really going to take this on,'" Molesworth said. Yuskavage was choosing a subject associated with Velázquez, Matisse, Vermeer, Braque, and van Gogh. "It's the A-team all-stars all the way," Molesworth continued. "If you were going to make a list of the great paintings, a lot of them would be studio paintings. And the reality is there are not a lot of pictures like that by women." She added, "In my opinion, the scale and the ambition of that work exceeds something like having a show at a gallery in Paris: the ambition of that work is aimed squarely at The Museum—capital 'T,' capital 'M'—as an institution."

At the Musée d'Orsay, Levenstein and Yuskavage went downstairs to visit Courbet's "The Artist's Studio," perhaps the most famous example of the genre. "He's painting a landscape, with a nude model watching him—it's so dreamlike," Yuskavage said. "It's got all the figures from his previous paintings. Time is folding in and out." She had decided to call her own show "Rendezvous," because her paintings were a place to meet up—with the dead, with the techniques and tropes of other artists, with past selves. Yuskavage moved toward the center of the canvas, where Courbet had painted himself at an easel. "People are coming and going, it's like a party, and he's just working on this landscape dutifully," she said. "Doing his thing and not noticing that anything else is going on."

At the turn of the millennium, the Whitney Biennial featured three Yuskavage paintings: two luminous, lascivious nudes and a portrait of a woman who looks intelligent but uneasy, "her eyes rolled heavenward in the buggy, exaggerated style of an El Greco saint," as the *Times* put it. The picture, "True Blonde IV (At Home)," appeared in ads on the sides of New York City buses. The subject was Yuskavage's oldest friend, Kathy, with whom she has been close since their girlhood in Juniata Park, a gritty section of North Philadelphia. Kathy was the model for many of her early paintings—her first Olympia.

A few weeks before her show in France, Yuskavage was walking down Claridge Street, on the block where she grew up, and called Kathy to say she was in town.

"Oh, you're slumming it!" Kathy, who still lives in the area, said.

"Kathy was always the pretty one, and I was the dork," Yuskavage explained.

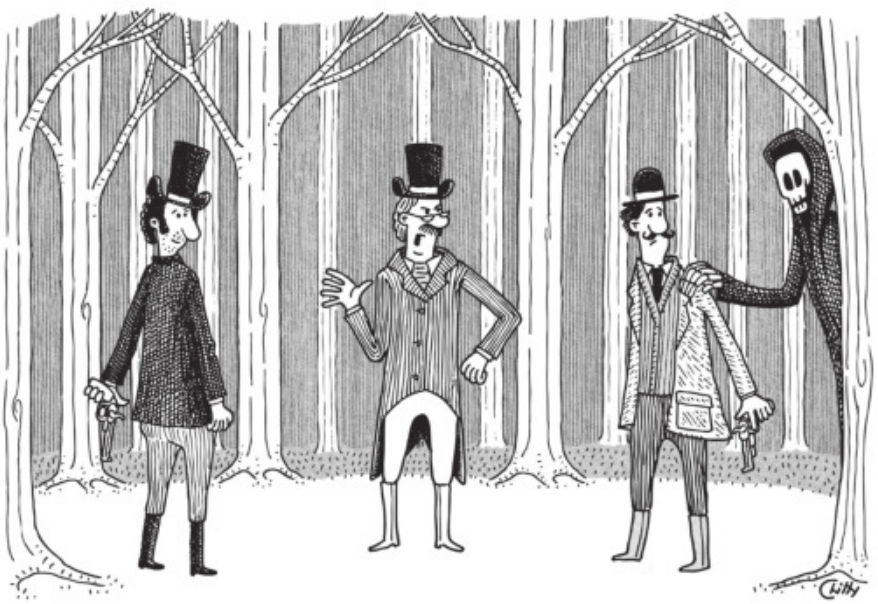
"You weren't a dork," Kathy told her. "You were smart."

"You were smart, too, but you had your good looks to rely upon."

"Yeah, they really did me right." Kathy, who works as a train operator, gave a little snort. "I did so wonderful."

When they were teen-agers, Yuskavage used Kathy as "bait" when she wanted to meet guys. Together with their friends, they made the "Tit Papers": drawings and musings about their burgeoning bosoms. "We were always very sexual, even when we were little," Kathy told me. "Not experimenting or anything, but talking about it and reading about it. Her parents had 'The Joy of Sex.'" Yuskavage later made a series of paintings of images from *Penthouse* which she had examined with other kids in the neighborhood. She'd found them both arousing and confusing. "If this is a girl," she remembers thinking, "then what am I?"

In Juniata Park, girlie magazines seemed to lurk in the crevices. "These were pictures I used to see buried behind toilet tanks and hidden under car chassis, places where they thought we couldn't find them, all around our neighborhood," Yuskavage told me. "It wasn't just my dad—everybody had them." The cartoonist R. Crumb, another artist drawn to lewd humor and enormous breasts, was raised nearby. "There's a certain playfulness with vulgarity where I come from," Yuskavage continued. "And



"Hey, no spoilers!"

To make effective art, Yuskavage says, "you have to point the finger at yourself."

then there are these creepy edges that are not safe for kids."

A teen-age girl from the area was raped and mutilated in the summer of 1972. Her torso was found days later in one place, her legs in another; Yuskavage and her friends asked a Ouija board what had happened to her head. The woman who lived behind Yuskavage's family was raped in her home, as her baby slept upstairs. In leafy Fairmont Park, where Yuskavage used to go to sketch, a man with a knife pulled out his penis in front of her when she was eight. That same year, Kathy told Yuskavage that a relative had threatened her with a gun and forced her to perform fellatio, and that he had been assaulting her since she was five.

"There was violence in the neighborhood," Yuskavage said. "Our house was like a submarine of order in, not quite a slum, but . . ." She looked around, unable to find the right word for the surroundings: block after block of low-slung brick row houses with patches of lawn punctuated by white plastic chairs, fake flowers, and statues of the Virgin Mary. It was a warm day, but Yuskavage was wearing her favorite Rick Owens black leather motorcycle jacket. "My mother sewed all our clothes when we were kids, and I was always very well turned out," she continued. "Apparently we were lower middle class, working class, but, because everyone was the same, I didn't feel like I didn't have anything."

Many of her friends' parents worked at factories nearby—a chemical plant, a button manufacturer. Her father, who died in 2021, drove a truck delivering Mrs. Smith's pies to diners; Yuskavage once saw a document that listed his salary as twelve thousand dollars. "He resented it when I used the term 'white trash,'" she said. "He felt that he had provided a very good home for us—which he had. But he wasn't an urchin like I was. I had much more of a street life."

While Yuskavage's father was working and her mother was taking care of the house, she and Kathy would ride bikes and smoke cigarettes by the railroad tracks, or loiter outside delis asking adults to buy them beer. "A lot of the kids we grew up with are dead," Yuskavage said, on the phone with Kathy. Mostly, though, they remembered having fun. "We drank Malt Duck sitting in Kentucky Fried Chicken and caused a huge scene," Kathy said. "Because we were classy!"

Yuskavage's family countered what she called the "downward pressure" of the neighborhood. "You could very easily become a human waste product," she told me. "But my parents' expectations, it was almost like they were Jewish: 'You're not allowed to be a failure.'" Like her sister, Marybeth, who is now a doctor in California, Yuskavage was always clear that she would get out. Kathy told me, "Her parents nurtured her artistic interest. They sent her to special classes, and they sent her to a better school than we were supposed to go to."

Yuskavage excelled as a student—in Catholic school, at the Philadelphia High School for Girls, and then as an undergraduate at the Tyler School of Art and Architecture. There, for the first time, she found herself surrounded by people who came from more money. "I felt sorry for myself, because all the rich kids got to live in the dorms," she told me on Claridge Street. "And I had to live here, you know, five miles away."

Tyler offered a junior year abroad in Rome, and Yuskavage worked as a lifeguard for years to save up for it. Still, she could afford only the first semester; her boyfriend at the time and most of her classmates stayed on. "On my last night, everybody got up from dinner because I lashed out: 'I can't believe you get to stay in Italy, and I have to leave!'" she recalled. (She added, "I'm not an alcoholic, but I do need to apologize to people.")

She was a sullen presence upon her return. "I was, like, 'Where's my cappuccino? Where's my Fabrizio?'" Yuskavage said. Then, one night, she had a dream that she was on a class trip and saw, carved into tiles, the Latin phrase *vincit quae se vincit*—she conquers who

RAYON RICHARDS

conquers herself. "I woke up in a sweat," she said. "And that has been my motto ever since." She became "violently focussed" on painting. Suddenly, all the masterpieces she'd seen in Europe seemed like sources of information. From Bellini's "Sacred Conversation," Yuskavage understood that figures from different eras—or dimensions—could be made to meet on the canvas. In the work of Vuillard and Courbet, she saw the pleasures of painting intimacy, of turning color into feeling.

Yuskavage made her first ground-zero painting: a portrait of herself as a shapely, faceless young woman in blue shorts, painting in front of a shaded but bright window. From the alley behind her old house, she pointed out her bedroom window, still overhung by the tacky plastic awning that appears in the painting. "I had been a genuinely ordinary art student," she said. "And then it was like something happened, and I was no longer alone. I was no longer disorganized. It was like I was *connected*."

The work that came next—"big, sexy paintings" of swimming pools—got her into Yale, but the Ivy League environment proved alienating. "I felt like people could really smell the class on me," she said. "I felt pretty white trash then. What my dad never could know was what it was like for me to come into contact—this hot-cold contact—with the fancy art world."

It was not until years later, after Yuskavage had encountered the work of artists who traffic in the abject—Mike Kelley, Hans Bellmer, Paul McCarthy—that she found a way to combine her rarefied education with the perspective she had acquired in her old neighborhood, on violence, humor, misogyny, sexuality, and faith. "When she embraced, as she might put it, vulgarity, it had the effect of ordering her technique and ordering her visual vocabulary," Currin, who lived with Yuskavage and Levenstein in Hoboken after Yale, said. It wasn't just Juniata Park that Yuskavage was incorporating into her work; it was anything that had ever been a source of shame. "Lisa and I share a moment of embracing things that had become embarrassing about figurative painting and just using them aggressively," Currin continued. "Letting the silly illustrational things have a voice, and the glee of illusions." It was as much the painters as their paintings that were mortifying. "The figurative painters in art school had a weird kind of moral superiority," Currin said. "They'd play classical music in their studio and get up early, and they kind of had the same attitude as bicycle people in New York—like they're doing something *good* for the world." Yuskavage expressed a different intention: to "make fun of it all, and then make up with it like a scorned lover."

One afternoon, David Zwirner was at his gallery in Chelsea, looking at a Yuskavage painting called "Northview (Impressionist Jacket)," which hung on his office wall. "This is a problematic one," he said. "It's so beautiful." Against raspberry-colored drapery with orange tassels, a slender woman in flowered underpants gazes out the window, bathed in glowing pink light. Everything—the figure's hair, her skin, the curtain, the velvety golden furniture behind her, and, of course, her breasts—looks soft, sensuous. "This is a very attractive young woman, right? I mean, you could really . . . get there," Zwirner continued. "The male gaze is a big issue, you know what I mean?"

Nothing irritates Yuskavage as much as the suggestion that she is producing what her husband calls "stroke material for the patriarchy," because that's what buyers want. "What about all the years and years and years when that wasn't true?" she fumed. "The paintings were inexpensive—and nobody wanted them!" Her nightmare is that a dealer will imagine her target demographic as "rich businessmen who like big tits." As Zwirner looked at "Northview," which he'd bought at auction on the secondary market, he conceded, "I think this painting's first buyer was *that* guy."

Zwirner started his business in 1993, the same year that Yuskavage showed the Bad Babies at the Elizabeth Koury gallery, in SoHo. "In the early nineties, there was very little painting," Zwirner said. "It was the time of Matthew Barney and Robert Gober—a lot of sculpture, a lot of film and video. There was this recurrent rhetoric that painting is dead." Koury's gallery went out of business months after the Bad Babies show, and, though Yuskavage had exhibitions elsewhere, she didn't establish an ongoing relationship with a gallerist until 1996, when she met Marianne Boesky. "I knew I shouldn't like her work, but I did," Boesky told me. "My generation of women, our feminist training was not to encourage or support any kind of objectification—even though she was turning the male gaze inside out." The gains of the women's movement seemed fragile, and a kind of cautiousness pervaded; the First Lady, Hillary Clinton, was still dressing like an astronaut's wife. "We had achieved acceptability as women, as long as we didn't go too far, and Lisa went too far—in everything," Boesky said.

For her first show at Boesky's gallery, "Bad Habits," Yuskavage made maquettes out of Sculpey personifying her unwanted traits—"foodeating," "socialclimbing," "asspicking"—and then painted portraits of them, exploring the way light fell on the sculptures, a technique borrowed from Tintoretto. The formal question excited her: If you paint a portrait of a statue which looks like a painting of a woman, is it a still-life or a portrait? It was also a way of tweaking critics who said that her paintings exploited women. ("What women?" Yuskavage said. "There are no women. These are painted things.")

Yuskavage took the show's title from Philip Guston, one of her heroes, who depicted his bad habits as eating, smoking, and painting. In the nineteen-sixties, Guston made a series of disquieting paintings of Klansmen, cartoonish hooded figures going about life in the city. In "The Studio," he had an artist-Klansman painting a self-portrait while puffing on a cigarette. "He had to put on a Klan hood to talk about the ugliness that was going on—not only out there but in his own heart," Yuskavage said. "I want to be that kind of artist. But how do you do that as a woman? You have to point the finger at yourself. And then you have to allow people to call you a misogynist."

As Yuskavage's career gathered momentum, her friends started having children—first Kathy, then her frequent model Yvonne Force Villareal, then Currin. Yuskavage began to paint her figures rounder than ever, with beachball bellies and bursting breasts. A critic in *Artforum* gushed that the images looked as if "Pierre Bonnard were interested in what it might feel like to be pregnant." Yuskavage and Levenstein

THE HAT

Aunt Roz lived above her means.
Her one Abyssinian and three Siamese
dined on calves' liver delivered daily
from the fancy butcher, not the A. & P.

Her pastel triple-milled French soaps,
packaged like eggs, a dozen to a box—
fragrant tuberose, lily of the valley—
were superior to my mom's plebeian Ivory.

She worshipped culture, dissing her
N.J. barbarian sister, my mother, too busy
working in our dress store to groom me
in the arts. Roz got tickets for Price's

"Aida" and the original "West Side Story."
She wangled box seats for us to hover
above Arthur Rubinstein's right shoulder.
She got me Maria Tallchief's autograph.

"Artistic" but no artist, Roz lived
la vie bohème, in her rent-controlled
studio apartment a block from N.Y.U.,
as if it were a garret in Montparnasse.

Bookkeeper with a high-school G.E.D.,
she fancied herself an intellectual.

Exclamation points stabbed the margins
of her Camus's "Stranger" and Paul Valéry.

Raped at thirteen was a story
no one ever talked about. She grew up
gorgeous, had a fling with fledgling
tummler Danny Kaye in the Catskills

hotel-resort her first husband owned.
No one's left to ask about husband No. 2.
Saturdays, she fetched me from ballet
at the Metropolitan Opera House.

We lunched at Lindy's, then bused
to the bottom of Fifth Avenue.
Holding hands, we skipped through
the streets of Greenwich Village

singing, and everybody smiled at me.
At dusk, Roz unrolled the trundle bed.
She baked fresh popovers for breakfast.
She set up easels, oils, and canvases,

a still-life of pears on her coffee table,
and we painted all Sunday afternoon,
alternating between the styles
of Modigliani and Renoir.

decided not to have children themselves. "I was going to fuck either kids up or my work up, and I decided not to fuck up my kids," she said. She welled up when she told me that the decision was "not without a certain amount of sadness." But, Boesky said, the focus helped: "She was able to really push forward in her career at a pace that was on track with her male colleagues."

Yuskavage ended her relationship with Boesky after nine years, and she soon joined Zwirner, a move that generated gossip. "People think David stole me, like a horse or a dog," Yuskavage complained. "I have agency. He didn't just lead me by my muzzle out of the front yard." In fact, Zwirner did not immediately agree to represent Yuskavage. "I did something strange I've never done before or after," he said. When he was visiting her studio, he asked if he could borrow a painting and live with it in his office for a while. "I picked the painting I liked the least," he recalled. "And when the week was over I was completely in love with it."

In the eighteen years that Yuskavage has been with Zwirner, her prices have quintupled. "The pendulum has swung the other way. Now there's endless amounts of painting—most of it figurative, a lot of it not very distinguished," Zwirner said. "As the art market has broadened dramatically globally, for new clients in Asia, India, the entry point is figurative painting." But not all figurative painting. Collectors in the conservative quarters of the Middle East are not going to hang the average Yuskavage in the living room.

In Zwirner's view, the reason Yuskavage hasn't had a major museum retrospective is that her paintings still make people uneasy, both ideologically and intellectually. "Very sophisticated European collectors have often had problems with her work," he said. "It's the vulgarity. They can't get past it." Both the difficulty and the strength of her paintings is their mysteriousness: they provide no obvious narrative. "It short-circuits meaning. Like, what does that *mean*?" Zwirner said, gesturing at "Northview." At a moment when virtue signalling pervades conspicuous consumption, plenty of collectors want art that validates their politics and affirms their world view. "If I take you downstairs to Luc Tuymans's show, we can talk about each painting: 'It's about the Ukraine war,' and 'It's about America, about politics,'" Zwirner said. "And I get you to that elevated place where meaning resides, where we feel safe. When you have something that kind of shuts that down, it's very uncomfortable."

A few days before Yuskavage's show in Paris, she stood in the gallery with Levenstein and Hanna Schouwink, a senior partner at Zwirner. The space was luminous under a spectacular skylight, but "Golden Studio" wasn't working on the side wall, where several

My love for her was unabashed.
My parents tolerated our weekly tryst
but disapproved of Roz's extravagance
while on the dole through family loans.

Unemployed, she gained a hundred pounds
and traded the mind for the body.
Penguins morphed to Harlequins ferried
by the bushel to and from the Strand.

I visited her until I started college.
Prowling Eighth Street for beatnik sandals
and handwrought jewelry, I bypassed
her address. I had aunt fatigue.

She wore me out. She embarrassed me.
I blamed my absences on an allergy to cats,
her cats, who, one by one, succumbed
before Aunt Roz died in a nursing home

when I was forty. Her aqua Le Creusets,
her beat-up ebony coffee table, her flacons
of Cabochard all came to me.
Custom-made dresses from Bendel's.

Her still fabulous costume jewelry.
No one in the family wanted them.
And, just today, I came across her hat
hibernating in its Bonwit Teller box

(itself a collectible, nosegays of violets
floating on white ground) that's been
lost in my closet for some thirty years.
Genuine red fox, "Zhivago" style, luxurious,

silky, and perfectly preserved,
the crown still stuffed with tissue paper,
must have cost her three weeks' pay.
Purchased, the sweatband's label reads,

in the Oval Room at Ohrbach's—
on Thirty-fourth Street, the department store
where you'd shop for bargains,
far from Roz's posh uptown salons.

The hat doesn't look half bad on me.
But wearing fur in public is not P.C.
Luckily, my nose begins to itch,
my eyes water with unsentimental tears.

Izzy, my gray tabby, sniffs the box.
The crinkled tissue to his liking,
he tamps it down and makes himself at home.
He's not a pedigreed Russian Blue

but a rescue adopted from a shelter,
a pedestrian tomcat, according to Aunt Roz—
snobby, flamboyant, ridiculous Aunt Roz—
a Bonwit's hat in an Ohrbach's box.

—*Jane Shore*

young men wearing white gloves were holding it up. "It's getting lost peripherally—there's not enough contrast at a side angle," Yuskavage said. "Please, move-ez vous!"

Levenstein suggested making space for "Golden Studio" on the opposite wall by moving a ruby-red painting called "Artist on Model Stand" to the gallery's front room.

Yuskavage looked distraught: "Why do you want to take it out of the show?"

"We could just look at it," Schouwink said.

Levenstein interpreted for her: "It's a hard no. As a feminist I know, No means no."

Another arrangement was suggested, and silently the glove-wearers swapped "Golden Studio" with its neighbor, a smaller picture, mostly green, in which a blond female nude sits on another woman's back while casually inserting some flowers in her anus—another Bosch reference. Schouwink was excited. "Chromatically, this is really interesting—there's a kind of rhythm to it," she said. "Almost like color-field paintings."

Color-field paintings—originated by Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, and others—were intended to do away with representation, instead declaring forthrightly that they were paintings, made of paint. This is something people in the art world like to tell civilians when talking about Yuskavage's work: subject matter is only a small component of a picture, nothing to become overly fixated on. "People are very content-driven," Sarah Sze said. "But it's like saying, 'Emily Dickinson's main subject is death.' Who cares?" In the history of Western art, certain subjects—the nude, the studio, "Jesus and his friends," to borrow Yuskavage's phrase—are so prevalent that they have become almost incidental, vessels for the artist's decisions. "When you look at a lot of paintings, if you're not a painter, you're not thinking about color," Sze continued. "But it's *all* color: that's all you're looking at."

To further complicate matters, people in the art world will also tell you that color by itself is meaningless. The way the brain interprets a color is entirely dependent on the colors it is juxtaposed with, a phenomenon famously explored by the German artist and theorist Josef Albers, who once led Yale's department of design. "His ideas are in the groundwater at Yale," Molesworth told me. "Lisa won't like me saying this, but she has the most extraordinary Albersian color play." Her palette, Molesworth pointed out, is drawn from fantasy: "It's not *cued* to anything."

Since childhood, Yuskavage said, she has had an innate sense of the way color operates, "almost like a kid who can look at a keyboard and know instinctively how to play it." Through the decades, she has found ways to challenge herself with ever more complex chromatic games. For her 1995 triptych "Blonde Brunette and Redhead," Yuskavage made

three paintings using classical shapes—sphere, cylinder, and pyramid—in a color methodology called *unione*, favored by Raphael, in which the extremes of the spectrum are excluded so that a painting feels settled, harmonious. She used red, yellow, and blue ("three colors that have seemingly nothing in common") but softened their clashes by executing them in pastels; the shades were based on a color chart from Laura Ashley, because that's where she imagined her shrink bought her nightgowns.

"Her color is kind of hypnotic," Kerry James Marshall said. "You're compelled to try to penetrate the color to see all the other things that seem to be kind of hidden in there." In "Big Flesh Studio"—named for its predominant color, flesh ochre—paintings are being made amid stools, easels, flowers, nude models, and, as ever, balls, in a blaze of oranges, pinks, and reds. It is gorgeous but confounding: Where is the light coming from? Which figure is on which plane? "The way the light and the color will just wander all over the place in Lisa's work, you think about Burt Bacharach," Currin said. "It's like 'Pussycat, pussycat . . .' Oh, my God, we're in a different key, and we're one bar into the song!'"

For some Yuskavage admirers, her nudes are just a means to an end. "Yes, there are boobs everywhere, but it's actually so unbelievably not about boobs," James Rondeau, the director of the Art Institute of Chicago, told me. (During Rondeau's tenure, the Institute has added four Yuskavage paintings to its collection, three of which are boob-free.) "It's more like, you've got to have your knockers out—and they've got to be *huge* and *weird*—if I'm going to really talk to you about a landscape of acceptance." What Yuskavage ultimately seeks to provoke, in this view, is empathy: for the figure, for the painter, for the victimizer and the victimized, the low and the high, the self who is staring, lost, at the conflagration of color.

In Paris, as the picture hangers took a break, Yuskavage brought me to see the back of the gallery. In a small room near the offices, next to a Delacroix odalisque, was an old painting of hers called "Pond." In a sickly palette of chartreuse, Army green, and light blue, one kneeling nude leans back on another, who is gripping her breast in a primordial bog. "I was working through this sense of having a weak self and a strong self and needing to carry the weak self," Yuskavage said. The figure in the foreground has her knees spread, and a three-fingered hand—it's unclear whose arm it's attached to—is poking her vulva, which is strikingly oversized, like that of a camel in heat. Yuskavage, looking at it with evident pride, said, "That's one meaty pussy."

At the opening of Yuskavage's show, guests were greeted by "Artist on Model Stand"—placed in the front room, as Levenstein had suggested. (As usual, Yuskavage was out of step with feminist orthodoxy: "no" had meant "maybe.") In the painting, an intricately rendered screen stands behind a distinctly Yuskavage nude with a jaunty facial expression, icy, sexy tan lines, and massive grisaille breasts. Zwirner, grinning alongside it, said, "The welcoming committee!"

Yuskavage, in a flowing Dries van Noten dress splotched with fuchsia, green, and yellow, appraised the painting. "People will say, 'But you don't look like that,'" she predicted. "But it's a *painting*. I can look any way I want." In the works at Zwirner, Yuskavage's women looked mostly contemplative and curious, rather than terrified. The painting that she thinks of as the show's most important—"The Artist's Studio," named for Courbet's masterpiece—has one of the Bad Babies in the foreground. She is still wearing only a pink T-shirt and her pubic hair, but she seems at ease now, and instead of clenching her fist she holds a palette in her hand.

In the painting's background is Yuskavage, dressed up as a peasant, as she sometimes was when modelling during art school, "because clearly that's my vibe." She describes her physique as "sturdy, as my Irish grandmother used to say—like I can drive an ox or plow a field. I was made for hard work." In a way, labor was the subject of the show. All the paintings depicted artists' tools: they were stacked with canvases, laced with vinelike cords from projectors used to cast images, studded with the nails that connect linen to stretcher frames. "For me and I think for Lisa, our pictures are not about us, the artists, as some kind of visionary persona," Kerry James Marshall, whose own studio painting hangs near Yuskavage's "Bonfire" at the Met, said. "It's in the fact that we are laborers in an arena in which spectacular things can be made."

Yuskavage's paintings are built to last for centuries; in the early nineties, she took a class on art conservation when her friend Jesse Murry was dying of AIDS and she wanted to preserve his paintings. "Sometimes I think that's the working-class thing in me," she said. She motioned at a painting within "Golden Studio," a representation of that first self-portrait she made on Claridge Street, standing in front of her shaded bedroom window: "My dad put up that awning forty-five years ago, and it's still there."

Currin said that one of Yuskavage's advantages was being raised in a religious family. "I envy just knowing how to do it—to believe in this completely far-fetched, phantasmagorical situation," he said. "Religion in society, it's not smart, it's not sexy. But, in the world of painting, faith and religion manifest themselves as higher intelligence. You look at 'Sacred Conversation' and it's kind of absurd not to believe in God, in the context of that painting. All the great magic geniuses, belief is everything—it *is* the talent."

A few years ago, Yuskavage made a series of prismatic paintings of hippies: long-haired women and men in various states of undress, frolicking in nature or fornicating at home, the men all seemingly as oily and patchouli-scented as the ones in her parents' copy of "The Joy of Sex." Her inspirations were, as ever, both high and low. She had been contemplating Marcia Hall's academic work on the way that *cangiantismo*, shifting color in Renaissance painting, was used to indicate the presence of the supernatural; she had also been Googling "dude that looks like Jesus." Yuskavage began "Spectral," from that series, by painting Johannes Itten's color wheel as her ground. ("It was the most boring, laborious thing I've ever done," she said, but she'd refused to hire an assistant, because "that would be like getting someone to eat for me.") After drying it with fans for weeks, she covered it with a translucent layer of white, and then painted on a nude figure peering through a fence, into a rainbow that glows between the posts. Yuskavage's friend Jarrett Earnest, an artist and a writer who had come from New York to Paris for

her opening, said, "I think Lisa has an ambition of communicating with, you know, God, and with our higher self." In a painting like "Spectral," the tones are pushed so far that they register as transcendent. "Color is the thing that redeems the image," Earnest said, discussing her work in a recent talk. "That colored light is animated by belief."

Yuskavage rejected the Catholic Church when she was twelve, "on feminist grounds," she said. But she admired the nuns so much for their passion and devotion that for a time she wanted to become one. "I don't mind having believed in something," she said. "Thinking there is *nothing* doesn't really help with art."

Yuskavage and Levenstein live with their cockapoo, Phillip, in a Manhattan apartment decorated by Billy Cotton, a designer whose work has been on the cover of *Architectural Digest*. The front hallway is covered in custom French wallpaper with velvet flocking, which also appeared in Claude Chabrol's film adaptation of "Madame Bovary." There are photographs by Diane Arbus, lithographs by de Chirico, and a painting by Kara Walker, held up by specially made brass rails to preserve the wallpaper.

The couple also owns a Craftsman cottage on the North Fork of Long Island, on a hilltop with gardens rolling past the pool to the sea. "When we got it," Levenstein told me, "I used to joke, 'After the revolution, all of this will belong to the people.'" Once, when Yuskavage's parents were visiting, her mother saw the price tag on a jar of fancy jam and started laughing uncontrollably. "She couldn't stop," Yuskavage said. "And I was so embarrassed."

James Rondeau told me that Yuskavage has clung to an outdated story about her place in the art world: "I now resist the outsider, working-class narrative. Lisa is actually the ultimate insider, and no one knows it—including Lisa! Like, let it go. You're crushing it! You've been crushing it for decades. She's not given sufficient credit intellectually, because everyone's stuck on outsider-trouble-maker-not-invited-to-the-party. It's, like, No! She's Elizabeth Taylor now. She's *Gwyneth*."

One hot summer night, Yuskavage and I were walking down Sixth Avenue toward her apartment when we came upon a man passed out on the sidewalk under his wheelchair, with his pants around his ankles and shit smeared all over his backside. "I try never to forget that the thinnest hair separates him from me," she said. "Under the wrong conditions, we would look that way, smell that way. I learned from Diane Arbus: we are all freaks. Arbus and Guston, they're not finger pointers, and I really admire that."

Painting "The Gifts," Yuskavage was disturbed but couldn't stop laughing.

Through the years, it has enriched Yuskavage's art for her to maintain a sense of connection with lives that are more brutal than her own. She mentioned a quote of Guston's that she liked: "He said, 'I think a painter has two choices—he paints the world or himself.'" She noted another possibility: "Maybe the interesting third direction is that you can be an empath." She recalled the day when Kathy, eight years old, told her about the assaults she'd been enduring at home. "She awoke that in me at a very early age," Yuskavage said. When Kathy eventually saw "The Gifts" and the Bad Babies at an exhibition, she said, "These are about me, aren't they?" It took a few weeks, but Yuskavage realized that they were.

For Yuskavage's art to be potent, she requires ugliness—or, at least, the residue of ugliness, to lend her paintings a faint sense that, despite the glamorous color and the playful illusions, all is not well. "I always wanted my work to feel like, Yes, there's violence, but it has fallen away, and you've risen out of the ashes through the act of painting," she said. That sense of oddness and fearfulness has tended to present itself subtly in her recent work. But, for Yuskavage, her otherworldly paintings still present the world as it is, with all its contradictions. "My father always defended me and said, 'Lisa does a lot of weird things, but she always tells the truth.'" ♦

Yogurt Days

Jamie Quatro

SOURCE PHOTOGRAPH BY BONNIE TAYLOR BARRY / SHUTTERSTOCK

ILLUSTRATION BY ALEX MERTO

The week I started middle school, my mother told me she would be late picking me up on Thursdays. On Thursdays, she said, she would be taking frozen yogurt to Benjamin, a boy whose family lived out near the Air Force base. I'd never met the boy but had overheard my parents talking about him. I gathered he was very sick, possibly dying. Is it cancer? I asked. Something like cancer, my mother said. She said that frozen yogurt was one of the few things he liked that he could digest. I guessed his mother couldn't leave him alone long enough to drive to our part of town, where the yogurt shop was.

That my mother would cross Phoenix to bring yogurt to a sick boy didn't surprise me. She was always putting herself in the way of the sufferings of others. When I was eight a prostitute came to live in our pool house. I use that term—"prostitute"—because that was what she called herself. Her name was Nan. She'd looked up churches in the phone book, and ours, Antioch, was first on the list. The deacons discovered she'd been living in a condemned house with five other women, all of them sex workers. There was also a goat that roamed from room to room, leaving droppings on the floor. One of the deacons—only men were allowed to be deacons—phoned my mother. I heard my parents discussing the situation in my father's den, the pleading tones in my mother's treble, the increasingly acquiescent notes of my father's bass. Later that evening my mother told me about Nan, the condemned house, the goat, the word "prostitute."

The following day I went out back and Nan was there, standing beside our pool, smoking a cigarette. She had on a macramé swimsuit with beaded ties at her hips and shoulders. Her thighs were tiny, the size of my own, the skin loose and wavery. Her breasts were smallish and dangly and looped up into the macramé, dark nipples visible through the rope; her hair was silver, with little braids here and there.

Hey, honey, I'm Nan, she said when she saw me.

Hi, I said.

Your mom told you about me? she asked. What I do professionally?

I nodded.

You don't have to be nervous, she said.

She stubbed out her cigarette on the pool deck, sat on the diving board, and crossed her legs, hooking them together with her foot.

What's your name? she asked.

Anna, I said.

O.K., Anna, I'm gonna say this to you now because I might not get another chance. You have an *angel* for a mother. She's stupid about practical things like money, how people live, and how shit gets done. Someday you'll realize it, and you'll think she's the dumbest person in the world. Then you'll remember what I just said.

O.K., I said.

A fucking *saint*, Nan said.

Four days later she was gone. She'd taken the box of antique silverware and most of the bottles in my father's whiskey collection. Also my mother's rings. All costume, my mother said, the poor woman.

Then there was the time my mother called to me from the kitchen. Something in her voice made me run. I found her opening cupboards and putting cans of soup and boxes of cereal into paper grocery bags. Help me carry these, she said. We loaded the bags into the station wagon, the babysitter from three houses down arrived to watch my little brother and sister, and my mother and I drove to a stucco house near the university. I waited in the car while she went up and rang the bell. The door opened; my mother came back.

Jilly would like to play with you, she said.

From the shadowy interior a toddler emerged. She was naked except for what looked like a pair of concrete underwear, a molded cast around her private parts. She began to run in circles on the gravel driveway. I chased her, thinking that was what she wanted, but then she sat down—her cast functioning as a kind of portable chair—and put her head between her legs. Her mother carried her inside while my mother and I unpacked groceries. The house smelled of baby lotion and sour milk and urine.

On the way home my mother explained that Jilly had cancer. The medical expenses had pushed the family to the edge, she said. The edge of what I wasn't sure. Starvation, maybe. I wanted to ask why the girl had a cast encasing her private parts—what kind of cancer did that to a child?—but my mother had pulled the car over and was sobbing. Two weeks later she took me with her to the funeral home. Jilly's mother and father stood beside a table, on top of which was a white coffin with a bit of lace sticking up in one corner. It was silent in the room, so quiet I could hear the *shush* of traffic outside and my own heartbeat, but when I looked into the coffin and saw the ashen hands placed one on top of the other, the small frowning face with its sunken blue eyelids, it was as if the carpet, walls, overhead lights, table, coffin, even the girl herself, were shouting—all of them, all at once. The sound was unbearable. I covered my ears.

Looking back I see how strange it was that I could stand to look at death but not to hear it. Strange that death had a sound. That my mother took me to see a dead toddler and let me hang out with a prostitute. Places of suffering are the places Christ shows up, she said. I took this literally. I was always keeping an eye out for him. In my imagination, Christ was forever vanishing around some corner. If I caught a glimpse, it would be the hemline of a robe, an upturned sole.

Because of Nan and Jilly it might have seemed odd to me that my mother didn't take me along on yogurt days. I don't remember giving it a thought. I suppose I was relieved. I went to the library and finished my homework, then looked at pictures of decorated cakes in cookbooks, or doll houses in collectors' magazines. I listened to music in the library's soundproof room—"Maniac," "Hungry Like the Wolf," "Girls Just Want to Have Fun." When five o'clock came I stepped from the air-conditioned stillness into the desert heat, my skin feathering out in goosebumps. A thrill, that allover quiver. Something I could make happen anytime I wanted, just by going from inside to outside.

One Thursday evening my mother didn't show. I used the librarian's phone to dial home and got our machine. When I called my father his answering service said that he was still in surgery, and to try again in half an hour. I decided to walk. Our neighborhood was a mile down Tatum, toward Camelback Mountain, which looked flat in the evenings and seemed smaller than it did in the

mornings, when it was dimensional in sunlight and shadow, the canyons articulated between ridges. I'd been walking for a few minutes when my mother pulled up beside me. A woman was in the passenger seat so I got in the back. A Styrofoam yogurt cup sat in the center console.

You remember Miss Cheryl, Benjamin's mom, my mother said.

Cheryl had short gray curls; unlike my mother she wore no makeup. She kept her lips pressed tightly together, which gave me the idea that she wanted to say something and was trying to keep herself from saying it.

We're going to pick up Miss Joyce, my mother said, and then we're taking Benjamin his yogurt.

He won't come, Cheryl said.

My mother leaned forward, neck stretched out, chin over the steering wheel, as if the windshield were in her way and she were straining to get through it.

Joyce came out wearing one of the flowy jumpsuits she sold under my mother's umbrella business. I didn't understand the umbrella or how it worked, only that my mother made money off the women beneath her. She also sold Mary Kay, and something called the Cambridge Diet, a mail-order powder you mixed with water and drank in place of meals.

Skinniness was important to my mother. Food fell into two categories, fattening and nonfattening. She put my sister and me on the swim team each summer because she loved to watch the flab on our legs melt off. Your little bottoms just harden right up, she said. Honestly it makes me envious. In high school, when I developed anorexia and then bulimia, I blamed her, and I continued to blame her into my twenties, and then I had my own children and my girls turned into teen-agers—neither of them with eating disorders but definitely showing signs of disordered eating—and some years later we went to visit their great-grandmother, my mother's mother, who said to me, in front of everyone: Anna, you stay so nice and trim, but your mother doesn't seem to be able to keep the fat off. She said to my daughters: You girls better watch your weight the way your mother does. After that I forgave my mother for everything—the swim practices, the comments about flab, the fattening/nonfattening binary.

Joyce slid into the back seat. Hi, Anna, she said. And then, to my mother, So he actually decided?

He did, my mother said. When I got there he said, I'm ready, call my parents.

Praise God for you and your yogurt days, Joyce said.

It was almost dark. To the north and east, above the McDowell Mountains, the sky was lavender; in the west, some leftover yellowish light above the White Tanks; the dusky ridgeline of the Sierra Estrella to the south. Sentries, our mountains, my mother always said. She'd grown up in Iowa, told us stories about tornadoes and fleeing to basements, whiteout blizzards and ice storms that knocked down power lines. The desert was safe, she said. Sunshine year-round.

We drove beneath the glowing signs of fast-food places. There was a long stretch of desert and then we turned onto a side street and pulled up to an adobe-brick house with a red motorcycle in the carport.

I told you he wouldn't be here, Cheryl said.

It doesn't matter, my mother said. Anna, you can watch TV in the family room.

Joyce gathered her pants into folds and stepped out of the car. My mother walked around and opened the passenger door and stood there until Cheryl got out.

What about the yogurt, I said, but they were already headed inside. I brought the cup with me.

The entry was cool and dark, the floor tiled white. A ragged basket-weave paper covered the walls. The house smelled like scented toilet paper and something I couldn't identify. Vinegar? There was a mirror above the entry table, and in the dusky light from the open door I saw myself in its reflection: my cushioned plaid headband holding back my bangs, and the earrings I'd selected that morning, a tiny penny in one ear, tiny nickel in the other. Behind me was a wall of pictures. I turned to look: a man and a woman—Cheryl, but younger, her hair long and dark—with a boy at various ages. Toddler, elementary school, teen. There was a frame shaped like a school bus, with photos of the same boy in each window, kindergarten through twelfth grade.

Joyce stood beside me. What a *beautiful* boy he was, she said. Those chubby cheeks.

"Mondays are especially bad when you know your arrest is imminent."

The three women went down the hallway, where I assumed the bedrooms were. Where Benjamin must be. I heard talking but couldn't make out what they were saying. I lifted the lid on the yogurt—chocolate, melted to soup. Maybe it would refreeze and he could eat it later. I found the kitchen: the freezer held solid rectangular ice packs and squishy gel ice packs, and casserole dishes topped with foil. The fridge, too, was stuffed. Gatorades, six-packs

of 7 UP, bottles of Ensure. Medicines lined the door shelves, with times and dates on sticky notes. The bottom two shelves were stacked with more foil-covered dishes.

I returned to the hallway and saw my mother and Joyce at the far end. Something white fluttered between them.

Anna, this is Ben, my mother said.

He looked ancient: Dark hair grew in sparse patches on his skull. There were depressions beneath his eyes and cheeks. He wore a white robe, tied loosely, open enough so I could see he was wearing only a diaper. On his stomach and chest and thighs were stains like birthmarks.

I'd seen the pictures in one of my father's magazines. I wondered if my mother had been risking her life to come here every week, to bring him the yogurt.

Down the tiled hallway they came, moving slowly, pausing after every couple of steps so the man could steady himself. His feet were bare.

Ben's asked to be baptized, Joyce said. The elders and the minister have refused to do it. His father has, too. So we're doing it ourselves.

Only men could baptize people: this was what our church taught. Any man could do it, ordained or not, as long as the baptism was full immersion. All adults could get baptized, or children old enough to understand that they needed their sins to be washed away. That they had sins. I understood there was something called an age of accountability, based on the ages of the Israelites who'd been allowed to enter the Promised Land, but I was never clear on what that age was. To be safe I'd been baptized when I was nine. I was too embarrassed to do it at church, and so, at my mother's insistence, my father did it in our pool, dunking me backward quickly, drying off, and hurrying to his hospital rotation.

I stood there with the yogurt. The man grinned, his skin pulled tight around his teeth and jaw.

Chocolate? he asked. A deep voice, raspy but louder than I'd expected, coming from such a body.

It's melted, I said.

I like it melted, he said.

Cheryl stepped out of the bathroom. I could hear the tub filling behind her. I glanced inside—the floor and the walls were tiled bubble-gum pink, the tub and toilet and countertops an olive-green porcelain. The women led the man into the bathroom. I waited for someone to tell me what to do. I watched Cheryl untie the robe and start to undo the diaper before I looked away.

No funny business, ladies, the man said.

It was crowded in there, the three women maneuvering around the naked man. Turn him this way, lift here, bend a little more that way that's right almost there no but if you get around on this side it'll be easier to lower, like this, maybe we should try it from the other side. I thought of a poster in my art classroom, above the teacher's desk: women holding hands in a circle, dancing on a hill against a blue background. Only, in the poster, it was the women who were naked.

The spigot squeaked and the water stopped running. I heard sloshing, a groan.

This is a mistake, Cheryl said, for us to do this ourselves. If Mike finds out it'll make things worse.

Nothing can make anything worse, Mom, the man said.

Grab that towel, my mother said. There. How's that?

Perfect, the man said. Like a warm bath.

Anna, my mother said, I left my Bible in the trunk. Get it for me, please.

What about the yogurt? I asked.

Just leave it out there, she said.

On the hall table were newspapers and magazines, sunscreen, empty medicine bottles, a lint roller. I rearranged things to clear a spot for the cup.

In the driveway a man in a suit and tie was stepping out of a car. It was the man from the hallway photos. He was bald on top now; the stems of his glasses disappeared into tufts of hair above his ears.

I assume your mother's inside, he said, walking past me.

My mother's Bible was teal leather with a cross etched in. During the long sermons I always ran my fingers over it in a pattern—up, down, right, left. Tucked between the pages were cards made by my siblings and me, and a hardened black-and-white photograph of my grandparents when they were newlyweds, at fifteen and nineteen. They were standing side by side in front of a bank in Iowa, the one where my grandfather still worked, stiff in their formal clothes.

Back inside I heard arguing in the kitchen. I could tell Cheryl was pleading with her husband to baptize the man. Their son. Joyce was leaning against the wall outside the bathroom. She'd piled her hair on top of her head and was keeping it up with both hands.

It's because he's refused to repent, she whispered, until today. I'm sorry you had to see this. I don't know why your mother didn't take you home first.

My mother was squatting beside the tub. One of the man's arms was draped over the side and she was holding his hand. I focussed, hard, on not looking at the rest of him.

Set it on the counter, she said to me.

I'm going to talk to your dad, she said to the man.

I saw his thumb turn up.

The man's feet were splayed against the pink tile on either side of the spigot. Joyce and my mother stood in the hallway, speaking in rapid hissing whispers. I peeked at the man's face: the skull partly submerged, the eyes closed, the lower jaw slung open. I worried he might be asleep. I worried water might get into his mouth. I got up the courage to look at the rest of him: the concave chest, striated ribs, jutting hip bones and knees. The bottle cap of his penis floating just above the surface. I'd seen my brother's penis, but this was the first time I'd seen one on a grown man. All that sin bound up in such a small, flailing thing. And God so concerned with it, with the skin of it, how it was used, and with whom. Our preacher said God's people were marked there—men were marked there—to remind them, each time they loved another person, who it was that had loved them first.

The man's eyes half opened.

Hey, he said. He cleared his throat twice. You still got that yogurt?

He was awake. I wouldn't have to save him from drowning. I got the yogurt and took the lid off.

Do you want a spoon? I asked.

That'd be no fun, he said.

He reached shakily for the cup. Every

part of him was shaking, even his head. He tried to push himself up but slid back. I held the cup near his face—so close I could see the white sores on his gums and tongue—and felt his wet hands on top of mine. He took a sip, but as far as I could tell he didn't swallow. Caramel-colored liquid ran down into his scraggly chin beard.

Delicious, he said.

I was dizzy. I was afraid I might throw up. I set the cup on the rim of the tub and stood to face the mirror. My bangs were sticking out, damply askew. I couldn't remember taking off my headband.

I'll be right back, I said.

From the hallway I heard my mother's faraway voice coming from the kitchen. So very, very far away. I thought about going to wait in the car. I thought about my mother coming here week after week, while I sat in the library, looking at cakes and doll houses. I wished I was in the library looking at cakes and doll houses. Looking at anything but the pink tile, sickly-green tub, jutting limbs.

I went back and sat on the toilet lid. I was relieved to see the man had taken the towel from behind his head to float it over his hips.

You see my bike out there? he asked.

There's a motorcycle, I said.

Correction: Ducati. Cost me the fucking bank.

It's a nice color.

You're cute, he said. His skull rotated toward me. It's Anna, right?

Yes, I said.

What are you, thirteen?

Almost twelve.

How'd you get stuck coming here?

She was late, I said, feeling helpless.

Can you keep a secret?

O.K., I said.

You won't tell?

I nodded, then shook my head, then said, I won't.

I'm doing this for her, he said. For them.

Doing . . . the baptism? I asked.

All of it, he said. I am who I am, you know?

I wasn't sure if I was supposed to agree, but I nodded anyhow.

Pinkie promise, he said, sticking out his finger. I leaned forward and touched it with my own pinkie, feeling sick sick sick.

Be good to her, he said. Your mom. She's clueless as fuck but means well.

I heard voices and they were back, all of them, Mike and Cheryl were stepping into the bathroom, my mother following close behind. On her face was a look I knew: just about to cry or just finished crying. I squeezed past them and stood in the hallway with Joyce.

Is it true? I heard the father say. You've repented?

Yes, Dad, Benjamin said. I'm so sorry—

A great wet sobbing noise; I saw the father drop to his knees. My son, my son, I wish you could have realized sooner.

Let's give them some privacy, Joyce said, closing the bathroom door.

My neighbor is a geriatric psychiatrist. He says whoever you are in your youth and middle years, whatever characteristics come to define you, the way you learn to respond or not respond to stimuli, to react or not react—these characteristics will intensify in your later years, hardening into nonnegotiables as you approach death. We die the way we live, my neighbor says.

We age into ourselves, my yoga teacher says: As you think, you will speak; as you speak, you will act; as you act, you will form habit; as you form habit, you will develop character; as you develop character, you will create destiny.

My mother just turned eighty. Her phone calls always begin with her telling me in what ways she's at work for God: a talk she's preparing on the Book of Acts, the Bible clubs she leads in public elementary schools in Glendale.

They're so cute, the kids, almost all of them immigrants, she says.

Sometimes I want to scream. Sometimes I think, Yes, a fucking saint, my mother.

She asks me questions. What are the girls up to? How's Jonathan? What are you working on? I tell her about my trips to Barcelona and Marseille for magazine assignments. I tell her about Jonathan's clients, the older daughter's new boyfriend, the younger's interest in classical guitar.

Anything else? she asks.

I tell her about the homeless woman on Third Avenue who lives in a tent because the shelter is full. How, before the recent cold snap, I took her a propane heater, enough propane to last two weeks, and a bus pass, good for the rest of the year. Also some cookies.

I'm so proud of you, she says. Being the hands and feet of Christ like that.

I tell myself I should be so lucky to age the way my mother has. Her life honed to a singleness of purpose while my father stumbles about, narrating the current state of his illnesses. My mother nobly bearing the loss of my brother, who disowned her, my father, the entire family. Another story. Refusing to grow bitter or give up hope that someday my brother will return like the prodigal son. Watching her sister, my aunt, go through a divorce at the age of seventy-eight because my uncle wanted to "explore his options."

Burying her father, her mother, my father's father, his mother.

I choose joy, my mother says. It's a choice, you understand.

I buy groceries for the downtown Widows Harvest. A Christmas tree for a single mom with three children. I call my mother to tell her I've done these things, to prove something, though I'm not sure what that thing is.

On the drive home my mother had told us, Joyce and me, that Benjamin had ended up going face down.

It was the only way to get him fully immersed, she said, but it was glorious, that eleventh hour. The way he lifted his arms up and hugged them—so much holiness in that little bathroom.

There isn't going to be a funeral, she said. Only a burial with the family.

Last week, during one of our phone calls, I asked my mother what she remembered about the yogurt days.

That man loved frozen yogurt, she said. I was the only one who brought it to him. He wanted nothing to do with the Bible, but I kept showing up. And then he just . . . decided.

I remember that day, I said.

That's right, you were there, weren't you? she said.

Not for the actual baptism, I said.

You should have seen him after, she said. Lit up like an angel. ♦

NEWYORKER.COM
Jamie Quatro on the dual lens of memory.

EVERETT / BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

BOOKS

THE CHILDREN'S CRUSADE

In 1956, a Tennessee high school was desegregated; two years later, it was dynamited. What happened?

BY LOUIS MENAND

When the Supreme Court handed down its decision in Brown v. Board of Education, on May 17, 1954, it was big news. The *Times* gave the story banner headlines and ten pages of coverage. The case had been before the Justices since 1952, and it was common knowledge that a decision had been in the works. Many people probably anticipated the outcome, although maybe not that the opinion would be unanimous. Everyone, though, had the same question: Now what?

There is a reason for all the Hogwarts-like trappings that surround the Supreme Court—the super-secret conferences, the ban on cameras, the fact that the Justices read their opinions from a dais, that they never hold press conferences, that they wear black robes. All this gravitas masks the reality that the Court's powers are largely paper powers. When the Court issues an opinion, it is basically waving a wand in the hope that something will happen. As Alexander Hamilton put it, the Court "has no influence over either

"A Most Tolerant Little Town," by Rachel Louise Martin, documents the battle for integration at Clinton High School.

the sword or the purse." The sword belongs to the executive branch, as does the Department of Justice, and unless an Administration is prepared to enforce the Court's decisions the Court is almost powerless to see that they are carried out.

The man who wrote the Brown opinion, Chief Justice Earl Warren, had reason to believe that the President would not be especially thrilled with the decision, so there might be enforcement issues. Dwight Eisenhower's record on civil rights was mixed. He had commanded a segregated military in the Second World War, but he followed through on Harry Truman's order to desegregate the armed forces, he supported the desegregation of public schools in the District of Columbia (a federal jurisdiction), and his Attorney General, Herbert Brownell, Jr., submitted a brief in Brown that recommended public-school segregation be declared a violation of the Fourteenth Amendment's guarantee of "the equal protection of the laws," which is exactly what the Court did declare.

But, like every twentieth-century President before him, Eisenhower found it convenient to regard race relations as a local matter and to see discrimination as a moral question. He took the position, a common one in the period, that you cannot change people's hearts by passing a law. What this position elided, of course, was that Jim Crow was a legal regime. White people and Black people were not separated simply by custom or by choice. Separation was enforced by legal sanction, and Southern legislatures kept finding new activities to segregate. In Birmingham, Blacks and whites were forbidden by law from playing checkers together.

Like many opponents of Brown, Eisenhower ignored the fact that the whole purpose of the Fourteenth Amendment is to make state-ordered discrimination a federal matter. That is why four of the five school-segregation cases that were consolidated in Brown had been filed in federal courts. In the subsequent six and a half years of his Presidency, Eisenhower never endorsed the Brown decision. The most he would say was that if the Supreme Court declared it to be the law he was bound to obey it. Nevertheless, there would come a day when he would have to unsheathe the sword.

Chief Justice Warren was not new to the political arena. He had been elected governor of California three times, and in 1948 he was the Republican candidate for Vice-President, on the ticket with Thomas E. Dewey. Getting unanimity in Brown, a case on which the Justices had been split before Warren joined the Court, was a triumph of ego management (which is a lot of what the Chief's job is).

After the ruling, Warren paused the "Now what?" question for a year. Even before the Brown opinion came down, two states, South Carolina and Georgia, had threatened to close their public schools if segregation was outlawed. Another of the Chief's duties is to guard the legitimacy of the Court. Warren did not want to wave a wand and have nothing happen. He waited until May 31, 1955, in a decision known as Brown II, to spell out how the Court's ruling was to be implemented.

Seventeen states had laws mandating segregation, and four states permitted it—close to half the country. Each school district in those states faced a different set of challenges to desegregation. Warren reasoned that since federal district courts are closer to the ground than the Supreme Court, in far-off Washington, they were better positioned to set the terms for desegregation. The cases in Brown that had been in federal court were therefore remanded to the district courts in which they had

originated, and those courts were instructed to "take such proceedings and enter such orders and decrees . . . as are necessary and proper to admit to public schools on a racially nondiscriminatory basis with all deliberate speed the parties to these cases."

The slightly oxymoronic phrase "all deliberate speed" turned out to be a booby trap. It allowed segregationists to argue that "deliberate" might mean taking, say, a generation or so. That was one problem with Brown II. Another was that, in order to trigger the desegregation process, parties had either to petition their local school boards or, failing that, to bring suit in federal court. Courts could not order a school to desegregate unless someone asked them to do so.

Not many people have the wherewithal to go to court, and certainly not many Black Southerners in 1955 did. The N.A.A.C.P., which had litigated almost all the cases in Brown, stepped in to organize the effort. But, by setting no timetable for compliance—something that both the N.A.A.C.P. and the Justice Department had urged it to do—the Court left the door open to all manner of procrastination. And the federal government remained on the sidelines. The effort to destroy Jim Crow, which had been under way for decades and which finally got traction with Brown, would take ten more years to complete.

One lawsuit was already in the courts. In 1950, five schoolchildren and their parents and guardians, represented by N.A.A.C.P. lawyers, brought suit in federal court against the Anderson County, Tennessee, Board of Education. The plaintiffs argued that Black children in their town, Clinton, were being denied equal protection: they were required to travel, by bus, twenty miles to an all-Black school in another county, even though a white school was just down the street. The district court ruled that, because some white students were obliged to take a bus to Clinton, the schools were "separate but equal," the standard the Supreme Court had set in Plessy v. Ferguson, back in 1896.

When the plaintiffs appealed, the case was put on hold by the appellate court, pending the decision in Brown. In Brown, of course, the Court overruled Plessy, and when Brown II was handed down the Tennessee case was sent back to the district court, which, in January, ordered Clinton High School to be integrated "not later than the beginning of the fall term of the present year of 1956." Clinton High thus became the first Southern high school to be desegregated by court order.

Clinton was a town of around four thousand, in eastern Tennessee, about

fifteen miles from Knoxville. It was the seat of what was then southern Appalachia's wealthiest county, Anderson County, which includes Oak Ridge, a city built by the federal government, in 1942, as a site for the Manhattan Project. Clinton High was one of the best public schools in Tennessee. The town had no history of racial friction, and its Black population was small, less than three hundred, most of whom lived in a neighborhood known as Freedman's Hill.

The governor of Tennessee, Frank Clement, although opposed to integration in principle, had vowed to abide by Brown. The state's senators—Albert Gore, Sr., and Estes Kefauver—were, along with Lyndon Johnson, of Texas, the only Southern senators not to sign the so-called Southern Manifesto, a statement endorsed by some hundred United States senators and congressmen, accusing the Supreme Court of an abuse of power. So no one expected trouble in Clinton. How wrong they were is the subject of Rachel Louise Martin's "A Most Tolerant Little Town" (Simon & Schuster).

Given that people today have generally heard of Selma and Birmingham and Little Rock, and many people know about the integration of the University of Georgia (by Charlayne Hunter and Hamilton Holmes, in 1961), the University of Mississippi (by James Meredith, in 1962), and the University of Alabama (by Vivian Malone and James Hood, in 1963), it's a little strange, as Martin says, that Clinton is not on the standard civil-rights time line. But in 1956 what was happening in Clinton was news around the world.

Since Clinton High was the first school to test Brown, the media were alert to signs of trouble. When trouble appeared, they swarmed. This did not have a calming effect. The battle of Clinton High was covered by CBS, NBC, ABC, the Associated Press, and Reuters. *Time* reported on it. *Life* sent a photographer. There was a correspondent from a London paper. Clinton was front-page news in the New York *Times* and the New York *Herald Tribune*, whose Paris edition was distributed in Europe. Edward R. Murrow narrated a fifty-minute documentary, "Clinton and the Law," on his popular CBS program, "See It Now." David Halberstam reported from Clinton early in his career.

Clinton has since been written about quite a bit by historians, partly because the journalistic record is so rich. In 1966, one of the teachers at Clinton High, Margaret Anderson, published a book on the struggle to integrate the school, "The Children of the South." And a feature documentary called "The Clinton 12," directed by Keith Henry McDaniel and narrated by James Earl Jones, was released in 2006. Martin also draws on a collection of works by June Adamson. But Martin has done her own research and expanded on the existing record.

Things began peacefully enough. At the end of August, 1956, twelve Black students registered to attend Clinton High. The school's principal, David Brittain, was committed to following the law, and the white students seemed accepting. Shortly after classes started, though, picketers appeared outside the school, Brittain began receiving ominous phone calls, nightly rallies formed, and the situation rapidly descended into chaos.

It seemed that there was more racial animosity in Clinton than met the eye. By the end of the school year, pretty much every item in the apparatus of Southern civil-rights resistance had made an appearance in Clinton, from anti-Black slurs and heckling to cross burnings, bombings, and Ku Klux Klan night riders. A hundred state highway patrolmen and more than six hundred National Guardsmen drove into town with armored personnel carriers and seven M-41 Walker Bulldog tanks.

The picketers grew increasingly abusive. Cars passing through Clinton with Black passengers were attacked by mobs (activities duly captured by *Life's* photographers). White students inside the school started harassing the Black students. A white minister was beaten by a gang of whites after he walked Black students to school. Some Black students dropped out; one was expelled. A few white students refused to attend altogether.

Still, in 1957, Clinton High became the first integrated school in the South to graduate a Black student, Bobby Cain (though white students tried to beat

him up after the ceremony), and by the fall of 1957 things were close to normal. The school had a new principal, journalists were barred from the premises, and when nine Black students registered only one protester stood outside. Attendance was full.

It was a false dawn. In October of the following year, Clinton High was destroyed by dynamite. No one was injured, and the bomber was never apprehended. When the county requested federal aid (people were already sending in donations from around the country), Eisenhower responded that the government cannot "step in with money every time something goes wrong with a school from a water faucet on up." Terrorism, too, was a local matter.

Martin interviewed many of the survivors, including most of the Black students who had formed the Clinton Twelve. Some key actors are dead. Paul Turner, the minister who was beaten, died by suicide in 1980, apparently still traumatized by the experience. Unsurprisingly, Martin evidently had trouble getting many of the anti-integration protesters to talk with her. Most of them probably faded back into the woodwork many years ago, but they are the ones that it would be most interesting to hear from. How do they justify hating on schoolchildren? Martin is a good storyteller, though, and Clinton is a good story.

It's a good story in part because it's typical. What happened in Clinton was a kind of preview of what would happen all across the South during the period. But the Clinton story has a few atypical elements, too. There is, for example, a weird connection to English departments.

What seems to have catalyzed the change in Clinton almost overnight, from reluctant acceptance to violent resistance, was the arrival of a man named John Kasper. He was not a Southerner. He was a bookstore owner from New Jersey who went to the South on a mission to fight desegregation by any means necessary.

Kasper appeared in Clinton the weekend before the start of classes, carrying a list of names associated with an outfit called the Tennessee Federation for Constitutional Government. He found a pay phone and began calling. Then he rang doorbells. Did people know that Black students were about to attend the local high school? Didn't they want to do something about it? White citizens began gathering in the courthouse square, where Kasper harangued them about their right to ignore Brown. He was duly arrested, for vagrancy and for attempting to incite a riot, and thrown in jail, but the charges were dismissed for lack of evidence. When he got out, he went right back to work, and by the time the Black students got to school there were at least a hundred protesters there to welcome them.

Kasper was a rabble-rouser. He was arrested many times in his career as an agitator. He was never convicted of vigilante violence, but he certainly encouraged it, and he was believed to have been behind various bombings. It has also been speculated that he was the man who blew up Clinton High. Eventually, the jail time wore him down, and he retired from segregationist activism in 1960, after completing a sentence of six months of hard labor in the Davidson County workhouse, in Nashville.

The interesting thing about Kasper is that he was a disciple of Ezra Pound, a fact that Martin mentions but does not spend a lot of time on—understandably, since it's tangential to her story. Their relationship has been traced in detail by Clive Webb, in "Rabble Rousers" (2010), and by Alec Marsh, in "John Kasper and Ezra Pound: Saving the Republic" (2015). The connection tells us something about the unholy mixture of antisemitism, anti-Communism, and conspiracy theory which was part of the Southern resistance to desegregation, and which still circulates in the American body politic. Racism is only one ingredient in this cocktail.

Kasper seems to have encountered Pound's writings around 1950, when he was a student at Columbia. Martin gives the impression, as have others, that Kasper was a graduate of Columbia College. This is a little misleading; his degree came from Columbia's School of General Studies, an adult-education program. At the time, Pound was in a mental hospital, St. Elizabeths, in Washington, D.C. He had been there since December, 1945, when he was declared unfit to stand trial for treason, a charge stemming from his broadcasts on Italian radio during the war. (He made hundreds of them, from 1941 until his arrest by American forces, in 1945.)

In fact, Pound was never medically diagnosed. It's possible that the American government did not want to be in the position of executing a poet, and putting him in St. Elizabeths seemed the most convenient way to hold him accountable. Pound called it "the bughouse." He would not be released until 1958, when he returned to Italy (something that the government should have arranged a lot sooner).

Pound was not crazy, nor was he repentant, and he received a steady stream of visitors to his hospital room. One was John Kasper, starting when he was twenty-one years old. Pound was always good to his disciples, and Kasper was more than a disciple. He was an acolyte, something that Pound, situated as he was, couldn't resist.

Fighting desegregation was not high on Pound's list of causes. The Jews were his lifelong obsession, and it was his antisemitism that first drew in Kasper. Pound was also a Jeffersonian, however. He hated the federal government—which was secretly run, of course, by Jews—so he could get behind the states'-rights argument against court-mandated desegregation.

Kasper had socialized with Black people at his bookstore (he opened one in New York City but relocated it to Washington, apparently to be closer to Pound), and he had even dated a Black woman. But he recognized that anti-integration agitation was not incompatible with the Poundian program, which included a horror of interbreeding. And both men agreed that the N.A.A.C.P. was a tool of Jews and Communists. Pound gave Kasper encouragement and free rein to wreak what havoc he could. As he put it in a letter to a friend, Kasper "at least got a little publicity for the NAACP being run by kikes not by coons."

Kasper and Pound were in touch continually, to the point that their public association delayed Pound's release from St. Elizabeths. The Justice Department needed Kasper to go away before they were willing to set Pound free. After Pound got to Italy, Kasper tried to reach him, but Pound avoided him.

They never met again. But during the period of Kasper's anti-integration activism Ezra Pound was in the mix.

Another odd wrinkle in the Clinton story has to do with the Tennessee Federation for Constitutional Government, the group that supplied the list of people Kasper called in Clinton. Martin mentions this group in passing. She doesn't tell us that the federation was founded in 1955 by a man named Donald Davidson, who served as its chairman. (His vice-chair was a sculptor, Jack Kershaw, who once defended his statue of the Confederate general Nathan Bedford Forrest by insisting that "somebody needs to say a good word for slavery.") Davidson, a poet, essayist, and journal editor, played a role in the founding of a method of literary interpretation called the New Criticism.

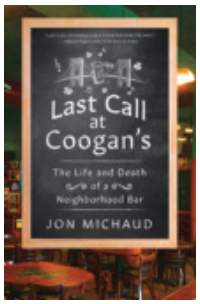
The New Criticism arose at Vanderbilt, in Nashville, where Davidson taught, and nearly all the first generation of New Critics were Southern partisans and Yankee-haters, opponents of secularism, liberalism, and modernity. Davidson was among the men behind "I'll Take My Stand," a now notorious anthology of pro-Dixie, anti-Northern ideology by Southern writers and professors.

The New Critics addressed the South's race problem mainly by avoiding the subject. They were formalists. Politics wasn't meant to play any part in their criticism. Davidson was the exception. In 1948, when the Dixiecrat Strom Thurmond, of South Carolina, ran for President on a segregationist platform, Davidson was an enthusiastic supporter, and helped get him on the ballot. (Thurmond carried four states.) By the time of Brown, Davidson's overt racism had alienated most of his former Vanderbilt colleagues.

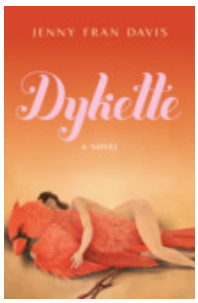
Davidson was not a bomb-thrower like Kasper. He was what Martin (who doesn't mention him) would designate a "law-and-order segregationist." He campaigned for a legal reversal of Brown, though it was not clear what body, apart from the Supreme Court, was in a position to do such a thing. When classes started in Clinton, the federation organized a rally. (Davidson was in Vermont, teaching at the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference.) And it petitioned an Anderson County court to enjoin the high

BRIEFLY NOTED

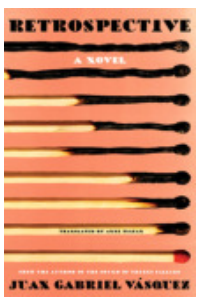
Rhythm Man, *by Stephanie Stein Crease (Oxford)*. This propulsive biography places the drummer and bandleader Chick Webb at the epicenter of the early Swing Era. Despite the spinal tuberculosis that stunted his height at four feet and ended his life at thirty-four, Webb's strength on the drums reshaped the jazz rhythm section as he "battled" other bandleaders, such as Duke Ellington and Benny Goodman, at Harlem's Savoy Ballroom. Crease pays close attention to the details of the recordings of Webb's band, contextualizing their shifting sound against a backdrop of changing racial dynamics. She also incorporates eloquent testimonies to Webb's musicianship and generosity from his contemporaries: after their performances, he "would compliment his sidemen's best solos by singing them, note for note."



Last Call at Coogan's, *by Jon Michaud (St. Martin's)*. Based on interviews with nearly a hundred subjects, this portrait of a neighborhood bar, which operated in Washington Heights from 1985 to 2020, is also a portrait of a modern American city in microcosm. Originally run by a "combustible trio of Irishmen," Coogan's functioned as a safe harbor in a high-crime neighborhood whose central tension was the mutual distrust between the Dominican community and a largely white police force. By the time Coogan's closed—during the COVID pandemic, after narrowly surviving a brush with gentrification—the bar had become a local institution that hosted fund-raisers, wakes, and other community gatherings.



Dykette, *by Jenny Fran Davis (Henry Holt)*. This biting gay millennial comedy of manners takes place at the holiday home of a wealthy lesbian couple, where two younger, less financially secure couples visit them for ten days. As the older couple derive satisfaction from comparing their lives with those of their guests, a connection develops between a member of each of the younger couples, sparking a consequential outburst. While depicting rituals both mundane and vaunted—revisiting "Gossip Girl," fights followed by hours of "lesbian processing"—the novel also plumbs its characters' fears of intimacy, failure, and irrelevance.



Retrospective, *by Juan Gabriel Vásquez (Riverhead)*. The life of the filmmaker Sergio Cabrera provides the raw material for this searching novel, which charts the Cabrera family's experiences through particularly turbulent periods of the twentieth century. Cabrera's father, who became an accomplished dramaturge and actor, fled Fascist Spain as a teen-ager; Cabrera himself, along with his sister and their parents, would leave Colombia decades later, when changing political winds made their Communist sympathies a liability. For part of Cabrera's adolescence, the family of fervent Marxists lived in Beijing, residing in a plush, cloistered compound reserved exclusively for foreigners. When Cabrera attends a retrospective of his work in Barcelona, in 2016, he reflects on this history, on his family's resentments, and on how intensely held—if impermanent—political convictions inflect individual lives.

school from admitting Black students, on the ground that a Tennessee law prohibited integrated schools from receiving state money. The suit backfired when Davidson appealed and the Tennessee Supreme Court seized the occasion to declare the state's school-segregation laws to be unconstitutional.

All the original New Critics except Davidson had moved North by 1956, and the New Criticism had become the dominant mode of literary pedagogy and interpretation in the academy. As for Pound, he was not cancelled; his literary reputation hardly suffered. His publisher, New Directions, kept issuing collections of his writings. Among Pound's visitors at St. Elizabeths was virtually every important American poet, who would listen to him while he explained how things were and how things ought to be. These people all knew what Pound's politics were, including the antisemitism. They just put it aside as a regrettable eccentricity.

In 1957, Kasper and a dozen other activists were put on trial for defying an injunction against interfering with the desegregation of Clinton High. Davidson's federation supported many of the defendants financially, and when seven of them (including Kasper) were convicted Davidson issued a statement. "The jury stand sat a bulwark between potential judicial tyranny and the people," he said. "The jury sitting in judgment . . . will go down in history as a tragic failure." Which sounds like an argument for jury nullification.

It was just over a year after the desegregation of Clinton High that Eisenhower finally unsheathed the sword. When the governor of Arkansas, Orval Faubus, called on the state's National Guard to prevent nine Black students from entering Central High School, in Little Rock, Eisenhower, after agonizing privately, federalized the Guard and sent in the 101st Airborne, to insure the students' safety. The Black students were able to attend.

But the following fall the state legislature closed all public high schools in Little Rock for a year. Southern states had always threatened this as an option. In 1959, Prince Edward County, in Virginia, closed its public schools for five years. Speed was very deliberate across the South. By 1964, ten years after Brown, less than two per cent of Black students in the South attended school with whites.

What happened in Little Rock is better known than what happened in Clinton in part because Little Rock was the first time that the federal government sent troops to enforce a desegregation order (it would not be the last), and in part because the Arkansas government, unlike the Tennessee government, actively resisted court desegregation orders and barred Black students from entering a white school.

As familiar as the school-desegregation story is, a couple of things jump out in Martin's telling. One is how profoundly divided the races were in the Jim Crow states. They had no conception of each other's "lived experience," as we would call it today. The white people in Clinton knew nothing about the Black people. Because segregation seemed to work so well, whites appear to have assumed that Black life was separate but similar.

In the Murrow documentary, David Brittain, the Clinton High School principal, was interviewed at length. The campaign of harassment against him had clearly worn him down, and he struggles to explain what it had been like. "It just presses you down every day, lower and lower," he says. "And to me it is an amazing thing that an American citizen living in the United States has to be subjected to this while the lawless citizens, those who refuse to abide or accept the law, continue to run free." Did it occur to him that he was only feeling something that every Black person in Tennessee felt every day?

The other striking thing in Martin's account is that virtually every white person involved in the desegregation of Clinton High School was a segregationist. No one, except possibly some of the teachers, was actually in favor of integration. That included the principal, who did not permit the Black students to interact socially with the white students or to participate in extracurriculars. (The law said that they could get an education; that was it.) It included the governor, who, after sending in the National Guard, largely washed his hands of the mess. It even included the minister who was beaten.

And it included the captain of the football team and student-body president, Jerry Shattuck, who organized the football players to safeguard Black students in the hallways. Shattuck didn't like the idea of integration, either. He just thought, as the minister thought, that it was wrong to harass people, regardless of their race. The Black students in Clinton had defenders who believed in upholding the law, and there were white people who were prepared to put up with them. But no one really wanted them.

This brings us to the real scandal of Brown. The Supreme Court finally interpreted the equal-protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment as it had been intended: to protect Black Americans from state-ordered discrimination. The Court was not wrong when it held public-school segregation laws unconstitutional. But its decision placed the burden of desegregation—not just some of the burden, the entire burden—on children. Schoolchildren, both white and Black, were required (few volunteered) to do something that no adult was required to do. Socialized since birth to avoid unnecessary contact with the other race, they were suddenly expected to handle a situation that their parents, outside of military service, had never been asked to handle.

Labor unions and police forces and fire companies were not required to integrate in 1954. Restaurants and hotels and theatres were not required to integrate. Places of business were not required to integrate. Water fountains and bus stations and city parks were not required to integrate. Only public schools were required to integrate.

Clinton High School had eight hundred students. It was insane to send twelve Black teen-agers in there while demonstrators screamed abuse outside and there was not a single Black teacher in the building. It was insane to send nine Black teen-agers into Central High School in Little Rock with eighteen hundred white students and no Black teachers. It was insane to ask one Black adolescent, fifteen-year-old Dorothy Counts, to walk a gantlet of taunting whites so that she could single-handedly integrate Harry P. Harding High School, in Charlotte, North Carolina. Desegregation was a war. We sent children off to fight it. ♦

TASTE OF CHERRY

Ann Patchett's pandemic novel.

BY KATY WALDMAN

When the author Ann Patchett was five years old, her family broke apart. Her mother divorced her father, married the man with whom she'd been having an affair, and moved Patchett and her sister from Los Angeles to Nashville. Patchett gained four new siblings and an additional parent. Years later, when she was twenty-seven, her mother remarried again. "I suffered from abundance," she writes in "My Three Fathers," a 2020 essay for this magazine. As a girl, she would fly back to L.A. for a week every summer to see her birth father. Often, they'd go to Forest Lawn cemetery. "We would bring a lunch and walk the paths through the exemplary grass to see where the movie stars were buried," Patchett writes. She adds that the scent of carnations can still return her to "those happy afternoons." The cemetery, crowded but lonely, gives off echoes of her unconventional ménage, and Patchett fashions it into a figure for family itself: a plot in which you're trapped with a bunch of strangers, a place of mingled loss and togetherness.

Most of Patchett's work is directly or indirectly about the experience of being stuck in a difficult family. She is a connoisseur of ambivalent interpersonal dynamics within closed groups. "Bel Canto" (2001), her breakout novel, traces the bonds that develop among terrorists and their prisoners. "State of Wonder" (2011) follows a scientist searching for her colleagues in the Amazon rain forest. In the Pulitzer finalist "The Dutch House" (2019), two grown siblings return compulsively to their unhappy childhood: "Like swallows, like salmon, we were the helpless captives of our migratory patterns."

Patchett is interested in how people, in families and elsewhere, come to terms with painful circumstances; how they press beauty from constraint, assuming artificial or arbitrary roles that then become naturalized, like features of the landscape. In "Commonwealth" (2016), her most autobiographical novel, six children flung together by their parents' affair form a fraught alliance, in which the older kids routinely drug their baby brother with Benadryl. The father leaves his gun within easy reach of the kids, and the mother grabs glassy-eyed time-outs in the car. One son becomes obsessed with the art of setting fires, almost burning down his school.

In her twenties, Franny, the protagonist, appears to transcend her upbringing by recounting it to a famous novelist, who turns it into a best-selling work of fiction. It's a thrillingly illicit inversion, or seems to be: Franny was trapped in her family, but now she has trapped them in a book; she has transformed the sinkhole of her past into a resource. But as her relatives bear up under "the inestimable burden of their lives"—the kids marrying and procreating, the parents retiring and sickening—their family narratives evolve. A mute sibling is rebranded "the smart one." When Franny reconnects with Albie, the brother so monstrous his siblings fed him Benadryl, she notes with surprise that "there wasn't anything so awful about him. It was only that he was a little kid." Franny's family *is* a resource, she realizes, but she has mistaken its nature—it is not an heirloom to be handed off to a stranger but a commons, an inexhaustible font of ever-changing roles and stories. As the novel draws to a close, Patchett celebrates this reserve, accelerating through scenes of connection: a beach trip, a party, a talk on the porch. The gatherings suggest that talismanic

Patchett is a connoisseur of ambivalent dynamics within closed groups.

ILLUSTRATION BY CHLOE CUSHMAN

word, abundance. They portray a kind of land wealth—a richness of common ground.

In "Tom Lake," Patchett's ninth and newest novel (Harper), members of a summer theatre troupe in rural Michigan in the nineteen-eighties coalesce into something like an incestuous family. They share housing, meals, and beds; their community is rife with intense, fleeting intimacies. As the group is putting on a production of "Our Town," by Thornton Wilder, the actress cast as Emily, the play's ingénue, drops out. A young performer named Lara arrives to pinch-hit. Lara didn't formally study theatre, but she has an uncanny ability to inhabit the role. "He understood what he was looking at," she says of one director. "A pretty girl who wasn't so much playing a part as she was right for the part she was playing."

At Tom Lake, the town where the troupe is based, Lara is greeted by the cast as star, savior, and potential love interest. She has eyes only for twenty-eight-year-old Peter Duke, who plays Emily's father. Within days, she and Duke are spending all their time together, rehearsing, having sex, or swimming in the lake. The summer becomes a blur of overlapping absorptions—in Wilder's language, in the water, in one another. "We wore our swimsuits under our clothes and ran to the lake in lieu of eating lunch," Lara recalls. "We could get from the stage to being nearly naked and fully submerged in four minutes flat."

Tom Lake is a fairy tale, a conjunction of person, time, and place, and it is as transient as any idyll, slipping through Lara's fingers even as half a day seems to last "a solid six months." "No one gets to go on playing Emily forever," she thinks, preëmptively grieving. The curtain falls sooner than she expects. On the tennis court, Lara ruptures her Achilles tendon; her understudy, a magnetic Black dancer named Pallace, steps into the Emily part. Watching her friend take the stage, Lara later remembers, "I cried because she was that good. I cried because I would never play Emily again. I cried because I had loved that world so much." When the summer ends, Duke goes on to a wildly successful career in Hollywood. Lara quits acting, marries a cherry farmer, and becomes a mother.

In the spring of 2020, at the start of the COVID-19 lockdown, Lara, now fifty-seven, is sheltering in place on the family farm with her husband, Joe Nelson, and their three twentysomething daughters, Emily, Maisie, and Nell. With harvesters scarce, the Nelsons have to pick and process their own fruit; to make the time go by faster, Lara tells the girls about her brief career as an actor.

The early pandemic, with its claustrophobic intimacy, seems almost tailor-made for Patchett's interests. "Tom Lake" is about being caught in an intractable family situation. It is about being constrained by one's role—in this case, motherhood—and it is about the transformations wrought by the passage of time and the search for confinement's upsides. The seasonal beauty of the fruit trees evokes the ephemeral loveliness of youth, romance, and fame; the novel, which is haunted by classics of theatre, repeatedly invokes Chekhov's "The Cherry Orchard," as if Lara, like that play's central character, were lost in a reverie about herself in her prime.

But Patchett airs the suggestion that Lara is stranded in the past only to gently put it to rest. Despite Duke's "ubiquitous presence in the world," Lara notices, scrubbing a lasagna pan to the strains of one of his movies, "I thought of him remarkably little." Chekhov, with his warnings about the hazards of nostalgia, turns out to be a red herring; a bigger portion of the book's soul resides in "Our Town," Wilder's play about daily life which ends in a cemetery, where the dead are "weaned away from the earth." Lara uses the text as a touchstone, channelling its mood of elegiac acceptance as she carefully detaches herself from her old wounds and triumphs:

> There is no explaining this simple truth about life: you will forget much of it. The painful things you were certain you'd never be able to let go? Now you're not entirely sure when they happened, while the thrilling parts, the heart-stopping joys, splintered and scattered and became something else. Memories are then replaced by different joys and larger sorrows, and unbelievably, those things get knocked aside as well.

Lara's thinking here feels infused with sensitivity to the personal—to the vividness of life as it pierces a single subject—but the immediacy of pain and joy has mellowed, over time, into something richer and stranger. "Had every sight or sound of him sent me off on a pilgrimage of nostalgia or excoriation I would have lost my mind years before," Lara says of Duke. Later: "The rage dissipates along with the love, and all we're left with is a story."

A story is artificial, which means it can be fun. Lara isn't so much recalling the summer of 1988 as she is performing it—playing both her younger self and her current one, selectively concocting a PG-rated soap opera for her wide-eyed Zoomers. She finesses, elides. "I'm not telling them the good parts," she says, meaning the incredible sex with Duke. The girls, participating in the game, cast themselves as a socially progressive Greek chorus. "You can't say 'crazy,'" one interrupts. When Lara describes Pallace's "preposterous" legs, they protest that she is objectifying her.

In these scenes, the source of Lara's contentment is sweetly obvious. When Nell laments the celebrity Lara could perhaps have been, she exclaims, "Look at this! Look at the three of you! You think my life would have been better spent making commercials for lobster rolls?" The pandemic portions of the book conjure an adult world of trade-offs and compromise, in which family offers abundant recompense for lacklustre Google search results. The girls themselves are delicious creations. Emily is fiery; Maisie, a veterinarian-in-training, is sensible; Nell is intuitive, the most in tune with her mother. She shares Lara's fanciful streak and sometimes wears lipstick to go cherry picking. Musing about whether to pursue an argument with one of her daughters, Lara thinks, "I will always be afraid of waking up the part of Emily that has long been dormant. I will always be afraid of accidentally breaking something in Nell that is fragile and pure. But Maisie is up for it; no one will ever worry about Maisie."

In other words, the ingredients have been assembled for a wistful meditation on mothers and daughters learning to handle the seasons of their lives. "Tom Lake" guides Lara to equanim-

ity and closure, mostly by awakening her to the value of the people around her. Here, as in much of Patchett's work, togetherness compensates for loss; being with others, even if they're not exactly the others you wanted and you're not with them in exactly the right way, is a genuine form of flourishing.

But the novel's alchemical transformation of pain into peace feels, at times, overstated. In "Bel Canto," gunfire interrupted the harmony Patchett painstakingly built between terrorists and captives. "Tom Lake" softens such dissonance. Lara doesn't just acquiesce to her second act; she discovers that the convergence of motherhood, lockdown, and fruit harvesting has created "the happiest time of my life." The interlude, she thinks, is "joy itself." (Nell's opinion: "I want to get the hell out of this orchard.") For Lara, the farm is not an earthly place; its red-and-white fields ripple with magic. Amid a "pointillist's dream" of fruit trees, she can play all her roles at once, reënacting her glory days at Tom Lake, parenting her grown children, and indulging the maternal prerogative of steering the family narrative. Lara sees the selves she's shed throughout her life jumbled and reallocated among her daughters. Nell shares her "naturalness" onstage, "an ability to be so transparent it's impossible to turn your eyes away." Emily, her most difficult child, she construes as a fugitive piece of her own soul: "No matter how many years ago I'd stopped playing Emily, she is still here." The farm holds, or has held, or will hold, all the people Lara loves. It even encompasses a graveyard—with tangled daisies, a "pretty iron fence," and "benevolent shade"—where generations of Joe's family are buried. The Nelsons "resting beneath the mossy slabs . . . had never wanted to be anywhere else," Lara thinks, projecting her bliss upon the dead.

"Tom Lake" collects enchanted places, sites of congregation like the lake and the stage, or like Chekhov's cherry orchard and the town in "Our Town." Patchett suggests that in these timeless locales, with their renewable springs of ghostly personae, characters can safely warehouse past versions of themselves and others. Or at least that's the idea. Rather than fear the cemetery, Lara and her kids love it and its promise of "everlasting inclusion." As a girl, Emily "liked to run her fingers along the tombstones, the letters worn nearly to nothing, the stones speckled with lichen." Lara herself "would lie in the grass between the graves, so pregnant with Maisie I wondered if I'd be able to get up again, and Emily would weave back and forth between the granite slabs, hiding then leaping out to make me laugh."

As "Tom Lake" goes on, the determined positivity begins to feel slightly menacing, or at least constrictive. Is Lara really that happy? Or is she hiding inside the myth of her happiness to avoid confronting her daughters' unhappiness and her own shortcomings as a parent? I was tempted into a paranoid reading of the three Nelson girls, scanning for covert signs of distress. Nell, like her mother, dreams of the stage, but she is stuck wearing sad quarantine lipstick, thumbing through plays in her bedroom at night, and practicing lines with her friends over Zoom. Dependable Maisie is always off to deliver a litter of puppies or tend to a calf with diarrhea. Was she forced to grow up too soon? Meanwhile, Emily declares her intention not to procreate. Her decision is a poignant nod to climate change, but it could also be glossed as a salvo against a controlling parent.

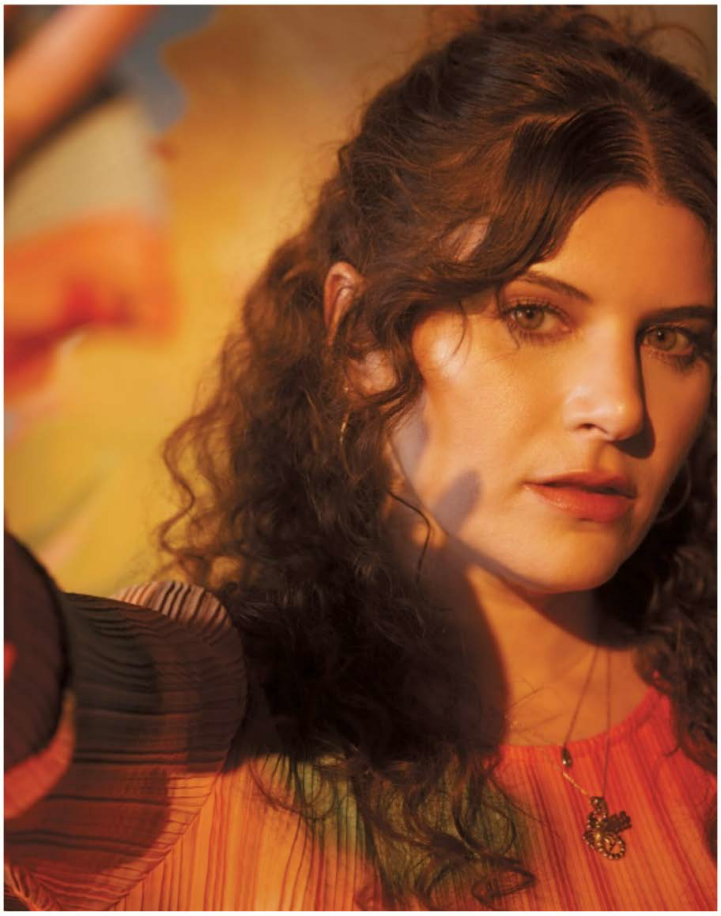
Ultimately, though, the novel endorses Lara's rosy perspective. The girls gratefully receive the tale of Tom Lake—"I'm not sorry to know," Maisie assures her mom—and the family draws closer. With cherries harvested and blessings scattered, the cast convenes joyfully in the cemetery. Lara thinks, "There is room up here for all of us." The scene seems oddly unreal, like plastic flowers on a grave. Yet there's something subversively wise and self-aware about the book's investment in its own fantasy. "Tom Lake," the fiction, seems conscious of its status as a magical place, a locus of gentle make-believe. Even as Patchett validates Lara's performance of contentment, she appears to know that behind the artifice lies a more complicated truth. The same might be said of the graveyard itself, with its friendly daisies and eternally fulfilled ancestors. Strip away the props: there, perhaps, is Forest Lawn cemetery, in Los Angeles, where Patchett and her father were briefly resurrected into one another's lives. ♦

POP MUSIC

EVOLUTION

Bethany Cosentino's songs of self-actualization.

BY AMANDA PETRUSICH



As part of Best Coast, Cosentino was the face of a hazy, millennial cool.

These days, it's not uncommon to hear moviegoers, exhausted by new releases based on toys, comic books, or films they've already seen, lament the disappearance of a middle ground between blockbuster and avant-garde: stories that are character-driven but not too opaque or ponderous, that are neither blind to suffering nor drowning in pathos, that aren't fusty or overly youth-obsessed. That same void exists, to a lesser degree, in the music industry. It's easy to find records that feel raw and challenging, or, conversely, records that have been focus-grouped and smoothed into oblivion. It is much more difficult to find music that explores whatever might lie in between.

On "Natural Disaster," out this month, the singer, songwriter, and guitarist Bethany Cosentino takes an unexpected swing at normie rock and roll. The album's references are clear: Liz Phair in her "Why Can't I?" era, Alanis Morissette, Pete Yorn, the Wallflowers, Don Henley, Matchbox Twenty, and, perhaps most vividly, Sheryl Crow, who in the second half of the nineties had a lock on bluesy, loping, straightforward guitar pop. Cosentino, who was born in Los Angeles, came of age as part of Best Coast, an indie-rock duo she formed with the multi-instrumentalist Bobb Bruno. Best Coast released its début LP, "Crazy for You," in 2010, and Cosentino became beloved for her gauzy and cacophonous tunes about longing and despair. She had recently spent a depressed nine months living in Brooklyn, interning at *The Fader*, and studying journalism and creative nonfiction at the New School; the band coalesced once she returned—prodigally, gratefully—to California. She knew Bruno through L.A.'s D.I.Y. scene, which was then centered around the Smell, an all-ages performance and gallery space downtown. The band's early vibe was scrappy, anti-commercial, experimental.

"Crazy for You," which was put out by the independent record company Mexican Summer, quickly gained traction in the blogosphere (a coterie of irreverent and now mostly defunct Web sites dedicated to dissecting new releases). It appeared on Pitchfork's year-end list and on the Billboard 200, where it peaked at No. 36—no small achievement for a new band on a small label. In 2012, Cosentino and her then boyfriend, Nathan Williams of Wavves, were on the cover of *Spin*. Cosentino, who played a baby-blue Fender Mustang and wrote most of the band's songs, had become the face of a certain kind of hazy, millennial cool: she liked weed, her cat, Brian Wilson, punk rock, and being online. The band's reverb-heavy vocal harmonies suggested a whimsical nihilism; "Crazy for You" often gave me the feeling of lounging on a beach blanket stoned, wondering if I could sink far enough into the hot sand to disappear entirely. As a front woman, Cosentino was not without affect or feeling, and her lyrics could be heavy with desire, but her delivery was always a little deadpan. Best Coast released three more albums, each of which expanded the band's sound and scope. Cosentino seemed to be grappling with the uphill slog of self-actualization: how to bridge the ravine between the earnest wish to change and her ability to actually do so. (Cosentino has a tattoo on one finger that reads "TRUST NO ONE." On a finger of her opposite hand: "let it go.")

In 2020, Best Coast released its fourth album, "Always Tomorrow." Cosentino had recently got sober, and the record's lyrics emphasized a kind of anodyne positivity. On the single "Everything

PHOTOGRAPH BY LENNE CHAI

Has Changed," Cosentino considered old grievances. "I used to cry myself to sleep/Reading all the names they called me," she sang. Nonetheless, she remained a bit wary of personal growth. What else might be washed away by the waters of self-betterment? "If everything's O.K./Then what the hell do I complain about?" was how she put it.

Earlier this year, Cosentino, who is now thirty-six, announced that Best Coast was on indefinite hiatus, and that she would be releasing a solo album under her own name. "Natural Disaster" was produced by the Americana singer and songwriter Butch Walker, who has worked on such mainstream fare as Taylor Swift's "Red" and Pink's "The Truth About Love," and on tense, hooky records by such pop-punk acts as Fall Out Boy, Avril Lavigne, and Panic! At the Disco. If Cosentino's shift toward a more radio-friendly sound is unsurprising—the last two Best Coast records were inching toward this sort of tunefulness—her aptitude for it is still remarkable. Cosentino has a rich, burly voice that's unpretentious without feeling artless. She sounds both committed and hungry.

"Natural Disaster" is not quite a country record, but the production is meaty and proficient in a way that feels, somehow, unique to Nashville. (Walker, who has played in various rock bands over the years, runs a home studio there.) The songs are jangly and palatable. At moments, they can be predictable—"I hate to sound cliché and cheesy," Cosentino, eternally self-aware, sings on "Easy"—but I suppose that's sort of the point. "Natural Disaster" is for car stereos (windows down, Wayfarers on), back-yard barbecues, and maybe, one day, the air-conditioned aisles of pharmacies and supermarkets. The psychic and sonic dissonance of Cosentino's early songwriting is almost entirely gone. During a recent interview, she took the reporter to a drive-through Starbucks, a move that would have been a P.R. calamity for a tattooed indie-rock darling in the late two-thousands. ("I'm a real chain girl, sorry," Cosentino said.) She seems mostly done with the underground. If you, like me, have a punk-rock heart, it's tempting to regret this shift—though it might represent the first time that Cosentino's promises of reinvention have felt wholly real.

The title track, which opens the album, works as a companion piece to Sheryl Crow's "Soak Up the Sun" (a Top Forty hit back in 2002), only with a heavy dose of climate anxiety. The hook is catchy and supple. Crow was advocating joy as an act of radical defiance. "I'm gonna soak up the sun/I'm gonna tell everyone to lighten up," she sang on the chorus. Cosentino is too savvy and worn out to be an optimist, but she has found levity in the gloom, accepting mutual destruction as the cost of being alive:

> This is the hottest summer I can ever remember
> Cuz the world is on fire
> And hey if we're all dying
> Then what does it matter?
> We're a natural disaster

On "It's Fine," Cosentino considers her past. "Imagine if I handled this shit like I used to," the song begins. The exact conflict Cosentino is referring to is never quite clear—maybe she's talking to an ex mired in arrested development—but the song ultimately unfolds like a letter to her former self. "I am evolved/You've stayed the same," she observes. In the end, time has helped her find out what she wants. "With a little bit of wind blowing through my mind/It's fine," she sings, her voice light.

The one fear that remains is what happens next. On "Easy," which opens with a plaintive, sombre piano line, she worries that she's missed some subtle cue to settle down, start a family:

> Growing up is easy when you're seventeen
> Now I'm thirty-five and I don't quite know what it means
> I always thought I'd be a mother
> With a purpose to discover
> But the clouds cover me

Cosentino, who has been singing about change—as both hope and necessity—for years, seems to finally understand that real transformation isn't a mountain you climb but a slow, never-ending odyssey. Clouds come; clouds go. "Natural Disaster" feels like her most adult record, and not just because the songs are short, familiar, and easy to like. She's comfortable enough with her own ongoing evolution to make it sound breezy. Or, as she sings on "My Own City," "I didn't even cry/When I left myself behind." ♦

THE THEATRE

LOVER BOY

Erica Schmidt revives Tennessee Williams's "Orpheus Descending."

BY VINSON CUNNINGHAM

The passage of time has made Williams's mysterious men look like paper dolls.

"Orpheus Descending," a great big louche mess of a play by Tennessee Williams, from 1957—revived at Theatre for a New Audience's Polonsky Shakespeare Center, directed by Erica Schmidt—kicks into gear when a good-looking kid called Valentine Xavier (Pico Alexander) slinks into the Torrance Mercantile Store, in a small town in Mississippi. I say "called," not "named," because he seems like the type of guy who's had to shed his given name like a skin, and maybe a handful of others after that, continually improvising. Self-created and just turned thirty, he's decked out in a snakeskin jacket, carrying a much loved acoustic guitar. Val's an odd guy, shrouded in put-on mystery and spouting high-flown, lyrical talk.

In search of a job, he produces a reference letter that's off-puttingly candid: his former employer at an auto-repair shop says that he is "a peculiar talker and that is the reason I got to let him go." As for himself, Val offers, "Well, they say that a woman can burn a man down. But I can burn down a woman."

Val has been brought to the store by Vee Talbott (the very funny Ana Reeder), who is a painter of her own sacred visions—she's toting a picture of a headless Holy Ghost—and the wife of the local sheriff (Brian Keane). Whatever we think of Val's assessment of his own magnetism, it's clear that it's working on Vee. She shows him off like a prized cut of steak, trying to help get him work at the store. The place is owned by Jabe Torrance (Michael Cullen), a mean man with an unlovely personality who's just returned from having surgery in Memphis and seems to be dying. Jabe's middle-aged wife, Lady (Maggie Siff), an all-business daughter of Italian immigrants, runs the store with efficient competence in his stead. When Jabe needs something, he bangs on the floor of his room upstairs, rattling the ceiling of the store. It's Lady to whom Val gives the recommendation letter and the spiel about his sex appeal.

Whatever trick Val's got up his sleeve, he's turned it before. At the shop, the flighty and booze-addicted Carol Cutrere (Julia McDermott, who plays the part with heart) recognizes him from a long-past night in New Orleans. She's heard him sing and play that guitar, and obviously harbors lovelorn memories. Soon, the brazen Carol is frankly asserting her desire to get to know Val better this time around. Val doesn't appreciate the reminder. He insists that he's left those wilder days behind, that his recent escape from his twenties means an end to the fast, itinerant life.

Carol glides around the edges of the play like a spectre, and there are more ghosts than one: she cavorts with Uncle Pleasant (Dathan B. Williams), a largely silent Black "conjure man" who is "part Choctaw" and who, if prompted by cash, will offer a piercingly loud Indigenous chant. But the major artery of the eventually bloody play is the relationship between Val and Lady. She hires him, even as she scoffs at his braggadocio. "Just remember," she says. "No monkey business with me." And yet, in short order, we see the power in the relationship shift, as the older woman becomes more and more bewitched by the younger man.

So much depends, in this play, on whether you buy the idea that a woman like Lady would make herself abject—go almost mad and endanger her life—over a truant kid like Val.

ILLUSTRATION BY JULIE BENBASSET

Lady is from an immigrant family, and holds tightly to the memory of her father, a merchant whose "wine garden" was burned down by the Klan because of his willingness to do business with Black customers. Her father went up in the flames, too. This is a flagrantly racist town: the N-word flies almost casually throughout the text of the play, the better to show a kind of rattlesnake viciousness in the town's citizens, and their saturation in the culture of Jim Crow. Lady stands apart from that culture, thriving commercially but remaining ethnically distinct. She speaks with an accent and wears the dark colors of a mourner.

Siff's performance reflects the double-sidedness of Williams's text. One minute, Lady is formidable, and the next she's a comic whirlwind, telling jokes and making faces, set ablaze and made a fool by Val. Siff is a powerful performer who maintains a taut string of connection with the audience. When she's kidding, you laugh; when she's thinking, you strain to find the meaning written on her face. Lady's backstory and Siff's dignified conveyance of her physical presence elicit respect from the audience. She's been through a lot and seems hard to deceive. Her father's lost wine garden becomes her model for the shop's new confectionery—a sweet, symbolic revenge that just might make a mint.

So it's difficult to see what's so alluring, in her eyes, about Val. Yes, he's wearing a cool jacket, and we're supposed to discern in his bearing a familiar bad-boy charm. Maybe it's too familiar: scrawled on his guitar are the signatures of famous blues and roots artists, like Blind Lemon Jefferson, Woody Guthrie, and Bessie Smith. You can tell that he's jacked some of his swagger from these betters of his, and employs it on women too provincial to know the difference. Here's some of the "peculiar" talk that's supposed to pass as a first step in seducing Lady:

> You know they's a kind of bird that don't have legs so it can't light on nothing but has to stay all its life on its wings in the sky? That's true. I seen one once, it had died and fallen to earth and it was light blue colored and its body was tiny as your little finger, that's the truth, it had a body as tiny as your little finger and so light on the palm of your hand it didn't weigh more than a feather, but its wings spread out this wide but they was transparent, the color of the sky and you could see through them. That's what they call protection coloring. Camouflage, they call it.

He also claims to be able to go forty-eight hours without sleep—"without even feeling sleepy"—and three minutes without taking a breath, and a whole day without using the bathroom. In order to contemporize Val and have him make any cultural sense, you'd have to reach for the recent trope of the "fuckboy"—that jerk who trawls the streets of Bushwick, tells stories about himself and shares surprising facts at trying length over the din of the bar, and makes promises he never means to keep. His playlists always include Drake, and, like Val with his jacket, he cultivates a wardrobe full of statement outerwear. Sometimes Val sings snippets from a song called "Heavenly Grass" while strumming his guitar, and you can see, instantly, the romantic effect it has on Lady. I'm not sure the spell ever reaches beyond the lip of the stage.

This disjunction isn't Alexander's fault, or Schmidt's. The direction is fluid and affecting, and Schmidt goads her actors into creating moving tableaux reminiscent of the most menacing of Norman Rockwell's paintings. (She's helped in this by David Weiner's high-contrast lighting and Amy Rubin's scenic design.) The problem is that Val is an all but lost artifact of our cultural memory, one whose existence was a cornerstone of twentieth-century American literature—the strong, emotional, mysterious man whose sexual appeal and moral courage are as natural as a Southwestern rock formation, as ubiquitous as landscape itself. Not anymore. The best recent pop-cultural example of a man like this—Don Draper, in "Mad Men"—was unclothed, piece by piece, until we could see him for the fraudulent little boy that he was.

The passage of time has made Williams's shrewd, operatic, utterly human women even more appealing—and, strangely, made his men look like paper dolls, useful only to stoke crises in the lives of their more interesting and soulful counterparts. Val's Rorschach masculinity just won't fly, and it is easily the most dated thing in "Orpheus Descending," racial slurs included. Williams wrote Val as a victim of his own allure—he can't help how all these women react to him, or how their desire brings about an all but certain doom—but, when Val appears on a contemporary stage, he's the deserving victim of feminism's successes in dressing down facile notions of what it means to be a man. ♦

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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 Ed Himelblau, must be received by Sunday, August 6th. The finalists in the July 24th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the August 21st 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

“Your money or I'll give these to your kids.”
John Alber, Apalachicola, Fla.

“It just depends on what you're looking for—unconditional adoration or soul-crushing disregard.”
Rebecca Wiseman Lee, Martinez, Calif.

“Wanna complicate your existence?”
Bill Doughty, Honolulu, Hawaii

THE WINNING CAPTION

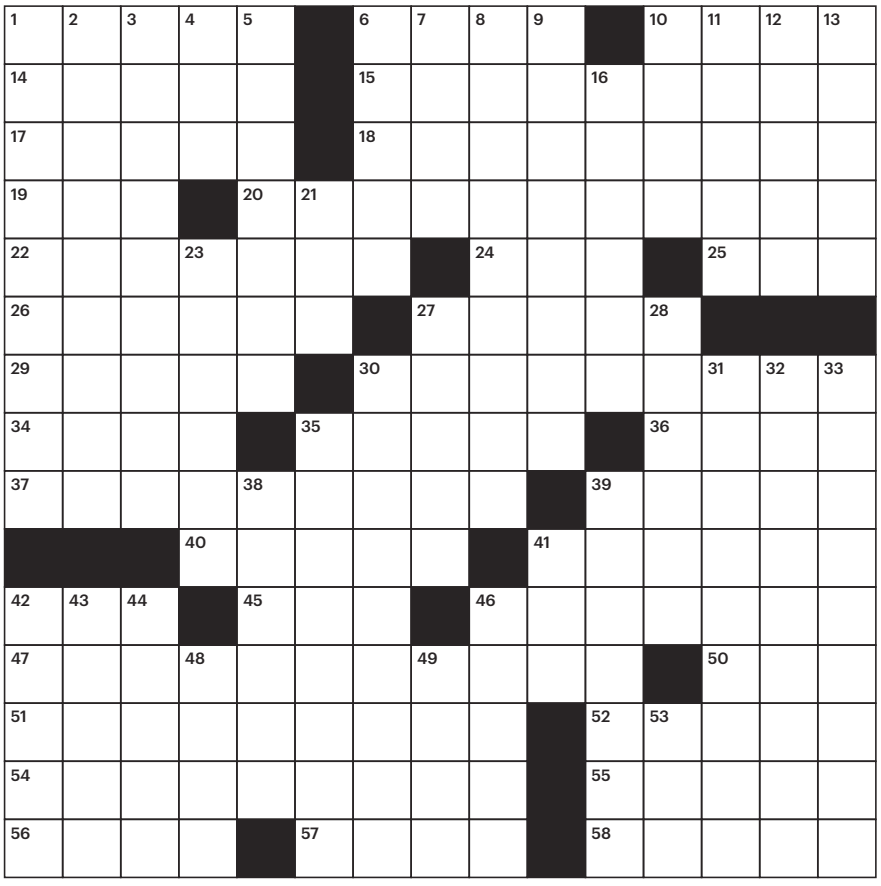
“You don't have to say 'Excuse me' every single time.”
Rob Needham, Ann Arbor, Mich.

PUZZLES & GAMES DEPT.

THE CROSSWORD

A moderately challenging puzzle.

BY PATRICK BERRY



ACROSS

1 Regional plant life
6 Sporty Italian car, for short
10 Fast-paced, lighthearted film
14 What many state mottoes are written in
15 Caves in a negotiation
17 Eldest of the Three Musketeers
18 Country whose national bird and national currency are both the quetzal
19 "I never thought of it that way!"
20 Like walls in seventies houses, often
22 Harangues
24 PSAT takers, generally
25 White or Black, e.g.
26 Facing
27 Selena Gomez's role on "Only Murders in the Building"
29 Out of kilter
30 Meat-heavy Wendy's cheeseburger
34 Coachella or Lollapalooza, for short
35 ___ swear (earnest promise)
36 Vocal inflection
37 Ropeless ascents
39 Photo tint
40 "Lady Love" singer Lou
41 People in the background of vacation photos, e.g.
42 For instance
45 Former "Dancing with the Stars" judge Goodman
46 Units in mechanics
47 "Man, I paid too much for this!"
50 Sch. whose student newspaper is the *Reveille*
51 Title shared by a Mae West film and a Gregg Allman Band song
52 Predominant faith of Pakistan
54 Accessory woven from toquilla straw
55 Hackneyed
56 Tighten, perhaps
57 Combustible pile
58 Smarts

DOWN

1 Home of Arizona's Lowell Observatory, at which Pluto was discovered
2 Person who doesn't catch the kickoff?
3 If not
4 South America's *cidade maravilhosa* (wonderful city), familiarly
5 What teachers' editions of textbooks often contain
6 Ancient Peloponnesian city-state ruled by Pheidon in the seventh century B.C.
7 Thunderous
8 Breakfast stack
9 Rite aide?
10 Where to see the Quirinal Palace
11 Racetrack figures
12 Disorganized battle
13 Miu Miu's parent company
16 Bygone licorice-flavored breath freshener
21 Unusual
23 Holy Week finale
27 Rancho hands?
28 Not fully developed
30 Star of the 2022 film "Living"
31 A hefty sum
32 Aromatic off-white seasoning
33 Takes on again, as a former office
35 Go-getter's brief break
38 Ceremonial bow
39 Carpenter shark, by another name
41 Whom the fans are rarely fans of, for short
42 Touch-screen motion
43 Sportscaster Rashad
44 "Live at the Acropolis" musician
46 "The Prince of Tides" actor Nick
48 Impeccably
49 Anjou or Bosc, e.g.
53 Tommy and Dil's dad, on "Rugrats"

Solution to the previous puzzle:

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

Find more puzzles and this week's solution at **newyorker.com/crossword**

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