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DECEMBER 18, 2023

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John Kinsella (*Poem, p. 53*) will publish a volume of selected poems and a new collection, "Aporia," in 2025. His latest book, co-authored with Kwame Dawes, is "unHistory."

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Adam Gopnik (*A Critic at Large, p. 58*), a staff writer, published his latest book, "The Real Work," in March.

THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM

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Inkoo Kang on the year's ten best shows, which, despite studio stoppages, rival those of the Peak TV era.

THE NEW YORKER INTERVIEW
Nathan Taylor Pemberton speaks with Wim Wenders, the filmmaker behind "Anselm" and "Perfect Days."

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LEFT: MOJO WANG; RIGHT: PAUL GRANDSARD / ANZENBERGER / REDUX

THE MAIL

A FORGOTTEN CRISIS

I enjoyed Thomas Mallon's review of Tobias Becker's book about nostalgia (Books, November 27th). But, like Zadie Smith's piece of memoir that appears in the same issue, Mallon's article features a misleading reference to Y2K. Mallon calls Y2K a "passing apocalyptic fancy." Indeed, in the past twenty-four years, Y2K has become a stand-in for any much hyped threat that turns out to be insignificant.

In reality, however, Y2K is a rare example of a known problem that was successfully addressed in advance through the combined efforts of government and private industry. I am one of the many programmers who worked on Y2K preparation. Like my colleagues, I waited at home on New Year's Eve, 1999, watching anxiously, and then triumphantly, as the lights stayed on in country after country while clocks across the globe struck midnight. These efforts could have been turned into an example of how to coördinate catastrophe prevention, if they hadn't been so successful that the general public now believes the threat didn't really exist.

Diane Neal
Elgin, Ill.

DIVINE SIGHTINGS

One moment in Eren Orbey's essay about his father's murder struck me as characteristic of *The New Yorker's* approach to religious issues ("Point Blank," November 27th). Every week, I read my hard copy of *The New Yorker* cover to cover—one might even say that I read it religiously. As a scholar of religion, however, I am frequently disappointed by the way religion is treated within the magazine's otherwise estimable pages. Examples that come to mind include the omission of the religion major from Nathan Heller's piece, published in February, about declining humanities enrollments, and the absence of a single source with a doctorate in religious studies from Kelefa Sanneh's consideration of Christian nationalism, published in March.

Orbey's memoir provides another example. Orbey casually states that "Islam forbids depictions of the Prophet," but this is not strictly true. As many scholars emphasize, Islam is not a monolithic entity, and various Muslim individuals and groups have interpreted their tradition differently over time, including by articulating different rules about the Prophet's representation. Christiane Gruber and Omid Safi, for example, have done excellent work documenting the rich visual tradition of such representations. Safi, who was raised in Iran (and who was a professor of mine when I was an undergraduate), is himself a Muslim, and keeps an image of the Prophet in his home.

Emily O. Gravett
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PERFECTION

Reading Hannah Goldfield's piece about New Haven's great pizzerias brought to mind my experiences eating pizza there in my youth ("Upper Crust," November 27th). In the nineteen-forties, I was a student at the Gateway School for Girls, on St. Ronan Terrace, and would often go to Sally's Pizzeria Napoletana (now Sally's Apizza), on Wooster Street, just around the corner. There, my friends and I would share a wonderful tomato-and-cheese pie. Eventually, garlic, meat, shellfish, and various other toppings were added, but none of these were really necessary, since the simple version—especially when fresh out of the oven, hot enough to burn the roof of your mouth—was perfect. And what did the whole thing cost? Just fifty cents.

Ina Furst
Hamden, Conn.

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GOINGS ON

DECEMBER 13 – 19, 2023

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

The snug music-and-dinner venue Joe's Pub has a sweet-and-salty lineup for audiences who want to mark the holidays with a tweak to the season's perpetual wonder and sincerity. **Justin Vivian Bond** (Dec. 19-21) and **Sandra Bernhard** (Dec. 26-31), master storytellers at the intersection of mordant comedy and song, share deadpan anecdotes from family life and festivities past. **Julia Mattison** and **Joel Waggoner,** the unhinged parodists behind the Instagram account Advent Carolndar, skewer holiday clichés with note-perfect mimicries of Stephen Sondheim and Christian pop (Dec. 21-22). **Murray Hill,** the professional nice guy whose optimism lifts the HBO series "Somebody Somewhere" (Dec. 12-16), and **Eva Noblezada,** who takes audiences to her own "Winter Delululand" (Dec. 18-20), round out the offerings.—*Oussama Zahr*

ABOUT TOWN

OFF BROADWAY | The Tony Award-winning Gavin Creel's **"Walk On Through: Confessions of a Museum Novice"** started as a commission by the Metropolitan Museum of Art to respond to its galleries; it's since developed into a hundred-minute, seventeen-song cycle, directed by Linda Goodrich, heavy on the slides. The charm-juggernaut Creel cracks wise—"Hey! Look! I'm believing in art / Am I smart?"—and boings around, pogoing over his piano, growing sombre about a breakup, then exploding again with lust for, say, classical sculpture. (One marble butt gets a "Boop!") The overlong autobiographical stuff doesn't always hang convincingly alongside his Met observations, but amid the welter of material several songs glow: gilded moments of sympathy, when his careful ear seems to hear something in the paint.—*Helen Shaw (Robert W. Wilson MCC Theatre Space; through Jan. 7.)*

EXPERIMENTAL MUSIC | For more than forty years, the sound composer **William Basinski** has experimented with antiquated audio machinery, primarily tape decks; with the album "Shortwavemusic," from 1998, Basinski began to release recordings from his archive of stirring electronic music. "The Disintegration Loops" (2002-03) assembled and recorded degraded tape loops that deteriorated further as they played. His work since has only deepened his affinity for distortion, as in "On Time Out of Time" (2019), which samples audio of two black holes merging. Basinski and the ambient artist claire rousay perform in collaboration with the string duo LEYA.—*Sheldon Pearce (Pioneer Works; Dec. 14.)*

ART | The grotesque is timeless, boundless, and—best of all—shameless. Maybe that explains the charisma of **Dana Schutz,** whose recent paintings and sculptures are the subject of "Jupiter's Lottery," one of this year's most pungently memorable exhibitions. Her art is often described as allegorical, though in most of these images the meanings and symbols get tied up in knots. In the painting "Parrots" (2023), three grinning, goblinlike beachgoers seem too dazzled by bright plumage to figure out what it all means. Do we have a better idea? Does Schutz, even? Perhaps not, but beauty isn't such a bad consolation prize when understanding is out of the question, and Schutz's art has the ghastly beauty of a swollen purple bruise.—*Jackson Arn (Zwirner; through Dec. 16.)*

CLASSICAL | The charismatic tenor **Rolando Villazón,** who's in town for the Metropolitan Opera's "Magic Flute," and the harpist **Xavier de Maistre** revisit their album, "Serenata Latina," for Lincoln Center's "The Other Side of the Stars" series. After de Maistre gave a performance of Alberto Ginastera's Harp Concerto, a work of dreaminess and rhythmic alacrity, in the early two-thousands, Ginastera's widow suggested that de Maistre transcribe the Argentine composer's songs for the harp. Villazón and de Maistre's adaptations retain the tenderness and the dash of Ginastera's traditional and folk-inspired melodies, alongside settings of works by other Latin American composers.—*Oussama Zahr (Alice Tully Hall; Dec. 18.)*

DANCE | Beatboxers make music with their mouths. Tap dancers do it with their feet. In **"Bzzz,"** those two tribes of bodily instrumentalists find common ground and join forces, the champion beatboxers Chris Celiz and Gene Shinozaki laying down astonishing layers of sound as Caleb Teicher and an expert crew of metal-shod dancers drum the stage. It's a high-energy show, full of surprises, such as the pairing of a four-on-the-floor club beat with kick-up-your-heels Appalachian flatfooting. The title alludes to the low vibrations that the beatboxers send through amplifiers, but it also signals the spirit of the production: unafraid to be goofy in pursuit of happiness and its hum.—*Brian Seibert (Joyce Theatre; Dec. 12-17.)*

MOVIES | A new streaming service, the Kino Film Collection, offers a wide range of classics (including "Ganja and Hess") and recent treasures (such as "Li'l Quinquin"). It also offers such delightful eccentricities as **"The Girl on a Motorcycle,"** an erotic extravagance from 1968, starring Marianne Faithfull as a former bookstore clerk who lives in France with her husband, a dull schoolteacher, while lusting after a flashy intellectual (Alain Delon) with whom she had a brief yet fiery affair. Though set in Europe, the movie is an icon of swinging England; it's centered on Rebecca's dreams, fantasies, and memories—especially of sexual pleasure, which the director and cinematographer, Jack Cardiff, depicts in hot-colored psychedelic abstractions. The camera pays close attention both to Faithfull's skin and to Delon's, but its lascivious focus is on Rebecca's Harley-Davidson—and her leather body suit, which became an instant fashion statement.—*Richard Brody*

ILLUSTRATION BY MARIA-INES GUL

TABLES FOR TWO

Foul Witch
15 Avenue A

Foul Witch, a wine-focussed restaurant from the folks behind the Bushwick pizza powerhouse Roberta's, opened nearly a year ago, on a block of Avenue A that feels neither hip nor interesting. The restaurant, too, is oddly short on ambience: the long, narrow, high-ceilinged dining room is like a hallway to nowhere; the space seems unfinished, rather than artfully gritty; the open kitchen has a startup-garage haphazardness, eschewing any aesthetic grace. This whole vibe is very Roberta's—the ultra-hip, ultra-influential original pizza restaurant includes a commune-like assemblage of shipping containers and party tents—though here the effect reads less as anarchic scrappiness and more as an absence of charm.

Thank goodness, then, for early winter sunsets, low interior lighting, and food so fascinatingly delicious that you don't care where you're sitting to eat it. Every meal at Foul Witch begins with a complimentary portion of bread and butter: a wedge of crisp, oil-slicked focaccia; a length of sour baguette, *bien cuit*; an enormous dollop of yolk-yellow butter, soft as cake frosting, salted like the sea. It's a struggle not to finish every bite, which would be strategically unwise, given what's to come.

Foul Witch is ostensibly an Italian restaurant, though it is seemingly unconstrained by any known definition of that cuisine. The wines are global, and err on the side of bizarre—I was enraptured by a Slovenian Pinot Grigio which my server described (accurately) as "entirely un-green." The dishes that emerge from chef Carlo Mirarchi's kitchen are luscious, almost libidinous; his motivating principle seems to be the pursuit of suppleness and surrender. For an appetizer, pale rounds of pawpaw, the custard-like North American fruit that tastes like the tropics (and which ought to star on far more menus), are served at the bottom of a small, deep bowl, bathed in cream, beneath an obscene, slumping scoop of Golden Kaluga caviar. Tortellini, soft and curvaceous, have a velvet filling of veal sweetbreads; they swim in a golden broth made strange and beautiful by a butterscotch splash of Amaretto. Tender Wagyu, grilled over charcoal, comes with an earthy, almost animal, sunchoke béarnaise.

Even the more pointed preparations, with piercing flavors that break up the menu's otherwise relentless rolling softness, are almost unnervingly sensual: a needle-sharp salsa verde dressing a plate of yielding Sorana beans, an anchovy-drenched celery salad, the vegetable sliced lengthwise into curling tentacles. Often, when restaurants are called "sexy," that means sleek-lined and hard-edged; the food at Foul Witch is sexy, not in the way of a fast car or a low-slung couch but like actual sex: a physical indulgence, a sinking in, an embodied experience of pleasure. *(Dishes $15–$54.)*

—Helen Rosner

PICK THREE

The staff writer Rachel Syme shares her favorite winter movies.

1. Inevitably, around this time of year, people gather on the Internet to debate what counts as a "Christmas movie." Among the criteria: a frigid winter setting, stylish coats, and an atmosphere of loneliness tempered by glowy bonhomie. Though Robert Altman's 1971 epic, **"McCabe and Mrs. Miller"**—about a cocky gambler (Warren Beatty) and a pragmatic prostitute (Julie Christie) who become business partners in a turn-of-the-century mining town—is not about Christmas in any way, it still heralds the season for me: the fur pelts, the dramatic snow drifts, the general sense of human hubris in the face of nature's icy inhospitality.

2. Every December, I find myself yearning to rewatch Todd Haynes's 2015 thriller, **"Carol,"** about a mid-century shopgirl named Therese (Rooney Mara) who enters into a clandestine relationship with a glamorous older woman named Carol (Cate Blanchett). The two meet while Carol is Christmas shopping, but what really makes the film holiday fare is its stylish evocation of a cold, bygone Manhattan where Martinis were considered a lunch food and women still wore driving gloves.

3. Marielle Heller's **"Can You Ever Forgive Me?,"** from 2018, about a real-life writer, Lee Israel, who was arrested in the nineties for forging and selling letters she attributed to famous authors, is, to my mind, a perfect December film. Melissa McCarthy plays Israel—a lonesome misanthrope who nurses highballs at the Greenwich Village gay bar Julius' on frosty evenings—with caustic empathy; her relationship with the rapscallion scammer Jack Hock (Richard E. Grant) may be criminal, but it is also heart-thawing.

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THE NEW YORKER

THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
SLEEPWALKING

Betrayal, vengeance, invective, and apostasy: these are constants in the turmoil and carnival of American political history. Aaron Burr was accused of launching a strange and semi-farcical attempt to establish a separate country on four hundred thousand acres of farmland in what is now Louisiana. His leading accuser was Thomas Jefferson, whom he had recently served as Vice-President. (Burr was acquitted of treason, first by the courts, and then, centuries later, by revisionist scholars.) John Quincy Adams left the White House only to return to the House of Representatives, where he and his supporters attacked his successor, Andrew Jackson, as an authoritarian, a bigamist, a drunk, a "backwoods Napoleon." Theodore Roosevelt championed his fellow-Republican and Secretary of War, William Howard Taft, as his successor, but grew so disenchanted that he declared Taft an avatar of "political crookedness," broke with the G.O.P., and ran against him, in 1912, as the leader of the Bull Moose Party.

Liz Cheney, the former Republican congresswoman from Wyoming and an ardent conservative, is an apostate for modern times. In a political party that has evolved into a personality cult, her apostasy resides in her refusal to worship its leader and in her defense of the Constitution. For such impudence, she was banished. She was thrown out of the Wyoming Republican Party, censured by the Republican National Committee, and voted out of Congress simply for insisting on the facts: that Donald Trump incited a violent insurrection on Capitol Hill as part of an elaborate attempt to steal the 2020 Presidential election. Cheney did not merely withdraw her support for Trump. She helped lead the congressional select committee investigating the January 6th uprising, which assembled so much of the evidence that informs the federal criminal case against Trump.

Cheney has not ceased ringing the alarm. She now contends that, if Trump wins back the White House in November, his election could be our last election. Mainstream media outlets, including this one, are filled with detailed descriptions of an incipient Trump autocracy, a second term in which he is no longer restrained by conscience-stricken counsellors. Yet tens of millions of Americans seem undeterred by the prospect of absolutism, cruelty, and corruption on the horizon. The caucuses and the primaries begin next month, and Trump not only dominates his party—he leads in some national polls against the sitting President, Joe Biden. The country, as Cheney puts it, is "sleepwalking into dictatorship."

There are many reasons for Democrats and Independents to be, at best, skeptical of Liz Cheney. Her hairpin turn to Damascus came late. She voted for Trump in 2016 and 2020. As a member of the House of Representatives, she voted with him ninety-three per cent of the time. During the war in Iraq, a catastrophe designed in no small measure by her father, Dick Cheney, she defended the use of "enhanced interrogation techniques." When asked about the conspiracy theory that Barack Obama had not been born in the United States, she delivered the squirrelly reply that people believed it because they were "uncomfortable with an American President who seems to be afraid to defend America."

In a saner world, Cheney's apostasy would be irrelevant. Defeated or convicted, Trump would be relegated to Palm Beach or to a prison cell. And yet his persistence and shamelessness, his Republican preëminence, defy understanding. He has been judged liable for sexual abuse. In courts from Georgia to New York and Washington, D.C., he faces four criminal indictments and ninety-one felony charges. (Of course, Trump denies all charges.) One of his campaign's greatest challenges will be scheduling his rallies around his court appearances. He has suggested that the former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff deserves to be executed. He has promised to wage vengeful "retribution" on the press, as well as on the Justice Department, the F.B.I.,

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

the I.R.S., and a host of other federal agencies. And he regularly deploys the rhetoric and the imagery of twentieth-century European fascism. "We pledge to you," he told supporters recently, "that we will root out the communists, Marxists, fascists, and the radical-left thugs that live like vermin within the confines of our country." Perhaps the most diabolical aspect of Trump's postmodern authoritarian skill set is his way of winking at his darkest intentions. Asked by Sean Hannity at a Fox News town hall if he intended to be a dictator, Trump replied that he didn't—"other than Day One," when he would close the southern border and resume wide-scale oil drilling. "After that, I'm not a dictator." This is neither hilarious nor comforting.

But this is not that saner world, particularly in the Republican Party, which remains prostrate at Trump's feet. It is the world in which Kevin McCarthy, the ex-House Speaker, reportedly rushed to visit Trump after the insurrection because Trump was "not eating." (Trump credibly allows that he was, in fact, "eating too much.") It is the world in which the new House Speaker, Mike Johnson, who once said that Trump "lacks the character and the moral center" to be President, has now concluded that he's "all in for President Trump."

So, though Cheney's rebellion is belated, it is a distinctly lonely stance, and she does not hold back. When she was asked recently on "The New Yorker Radio Hour" whether she thought that Trump should go to prison if he is convicted of serious felonies, she replied, "I do. That's going to be up to our justice system, to a jury of his peers, to the judges involved, but I think it's fundamental to who we are as a country that no person is above the law."

Meanwhile, Republican operatives in the capital are planning for Trump's return to power. Like Bolsheviks plotting in the coffeehouses of Zurich, right-wing instituteniks at the Heritage Foundation have drafted Project 2025, a gargantuan instruction manual and ideological manifesto for Trump 2.0. It envisions a Presidential transition in which "conservative warriors" are recruited to assist in the dismantling of "the deep state." Curbing the independence of the Department of Justice is just one of the countless Trumpist goals in Project 2025. Or, as Trump himself has posted, "I have the absolute right to PARDON myself."

Cheney has said that she is not ruling out a run for the White House but would do nothing that might help Trump win. Democrats and Independents hardly need to bow to her every policy prescription, but her principled stand against an assault on the Constitution and against an incipient dictator from her own party is notable and potentially important. As a Republican apostate, Cheney need not preach to the converted, but in an inevitably close election she could prove effective in helping to convert the undecided.

—David Remnick

THE PICTURES
FAILURE TO LAUNCH

Paul Briganti, the comedy director, was wandering the floor of the R.E.I. flagship store in SoHo, a multistory behemoth of outdoor gear. "I never really got into camping," he said. "My parents divorced when I was a kid, and my dad was, like, 'You're going to go to Cub Scouts now, and I'll be a den leader.'" He paused by a rack of nylon Patagonia pants, rustling through them with a flummoxed air. "It was supposed to be a kind of structured activity for us, making fires and setting up tents and watching birds, but we both didn't know what we were doing. We were just two dummies hanging out, no gas or momentum in the venture."

Nevertheless, a year and a half ago, Briganti found himself directing a movie about another group of dummies who go camping. "The Treasure of Foggy Mountain," now out on Peacock, stars Please Don't Destroy, the "Saturday Night Live" trio composed of Martin Herlihy, John Higgins, and Ben Marshall, who have become known for their absurdist, aggressively self-deprecating digital shorts. In the movie, which was produced by Judd Apatow, they play three small-town friends in their mid-twenties who decide to resolve their failure-to-launch woes by going on a quest on a nearby wooded mountain, to find an antique gold bust worth millions. (High jinks ensue.) The production took place in North Carolina under distressingly outdoorsy conditions. "Really humid, really, really hot, crazy thunderstorms," Briganti, who is thirty-six, said. "Kind of a nightmare." He laughed. "It was our first movie, so we didn't know enough to say, 'We're not shooting outside in Charlotte in the summer!'"

Briganti, low-key in wire-rimmed glasses and a black ball cap, came of age in Stratford, Connecticut. "Until the eighties, it was an asbestos-factory town, so, yeah, that worked out great," he said. He was a lonely, nerdy kid who loved watching Mel Brooks movies and romantic comedies that were a little too adult for him. "I was, like, seven, and I was watching 'Broadcast News' and 'Moonstruck.'" He liked that these movies were funny but also dealt with big, complicated feelings. (Plus, "there was always a scene with some sort of nudity.") It was important to him that "Foggy Mountain," despite its "Dumb and Dumber"-style shenanigans, have a romantic plotline, so in the movie a park ranger named Lisa (played by the comedian Meg Stelter), who is going neck and neck with the boys on the hunt to find the treasure, pursues a love connection

Paul Briganti

with Higgins's character, John. Passing by a tent on display in the store, Briganti peered inside. "We tested a bunch of different colors of tents, and we ended up with this really pretty yellow-red color," he said, referring to a scene in which Stelter and Higgins cuddle overnight. "We wanted it to feel really warm, like a date."

In high school, Briganti began making short movies with his friends. (One was about Jesus' brother, Bill, who is understandably overshadowed by the Son of God.) He went on to study film editing at the School of Visual Arts, in New York, and then moved to Bushwick and began making comedy videos for sites like College Humor. "I was really ambitious," he said. "I love people who are desperately trying and just work really hard—it's my favorite quality." He paused. "That and making fun of yourself." In 2016, he was hired as a director by "S.N.L." "When you start at 'S.N.L.,' you're inherently low status," he said. "It's like the Army." Briganti kept his head down, and patiently established himself on the show. In 2021, when the Please Don't Destroy guys joined, he began directing them, including in one memorable short, "Three Sad Virgins," in which Taylor Swift serenaded them with a hilariously humiliating ode. ("None of them have the guts to take their shirts off in front of a girl.")

Briganti now lives in Los Angeles with his wife, who is a producer, and their eight-month-old. Before leaving the store, he descended to the cellar, to the children's section, to look for something to buy for his daughter. "She's long, but pretty petite," he said, examining a neon-yellow-and-purple fleece. "This looks too large." He put it down and picked up a winter hat instead. He was planning to return to New York with his family for the holidays, and the baby would need to keep warm, if not at a campsite then on the city streets. Stopping in front of a case of pocketknives, Briganti considered the wares. "I'd probably pick the smallest one," he conceded, and pointed to a diminutive blade. "He's a little guy. I feel bad for him." Then he brightened. "But he can do a lot!"

—Naomi Fry

HYPHENATE DEPT.
CONFESSIONAL

The actor, filmmaker, and musician Josh Radnor recently visited Brooklyn's Green-Wood Cemetery, a historic burying ground, established in 1838, where Jean-Michel Basquiat, Leonard Bernstein, Boss Tweed, and the rapper Pop Smoke have all been laid to rest. Death was on Radnor's mind. Earlier this fall, he released "Eulogy: Volume 1," a collection of tender, disarming folk and rock songs he recorded last year, while processing a breakup and attempting to conjure a whole new future for himself. "Each song is a kind of mini-funeral for some part of myself that served me for a time, and then was no longer necessary," Radnor, who is forty-nine, said, as he sat on a bench overlooking one of Green-Wood's glacial ponds. "There's a Buddhist thing: once you're across the river, drop the canoe. You don't need it anymore. These are little elegies for the canoes that got me across the river."

For nine seasons, from 2005 to 2014, Radnor played Ted Mosby, the hapless, scruffy-haired lead on the CBS sitcom "How I Met Your Mother." The character—and the series—was preoccupied with the notion of true love. "When I got off the show, I was approaching forty. I was, like, I don't know how to do this, or if I want to do this," he said of pursuing a serious relationship. "Which was weird, because I was on a show that was all about a guy wanting that so badly." Halfway through the sessions for "Eulogy," Radnor met someone; they're now engaged. ("I'm not the youngest groom of all time," he joked.) The change of circumstances gives the new songs a kind of buoyancy.

As a kid, Radnor listened to his mother's record collection. "John Denver, Judy Collins, Peter, Paul, and Mary. I grew up enjoying the sound of an acoustic guitar and a good story being told," he said. As a teen-ager, he saw the video for the Indigo Girls' twangy, jubilant hit "Closer to Fine," and felt transformed. "I went to Record and Tape Outlet, and I bought the cassette," he said. "But I was so worried about listening to the right thing that I took it out of its case and put

"Don't you love the smell of burning leather boots this time of year?"

it in another one." He can't quite remember what tape he used for cover—probably the Grateful Dead, Led Zeppelin, or Pink Floyd: "That was the trifecta in Bexley, Ohio." It's easy to hear the chatty urgency of the Indigo Girls in Radnor's music, which also recalls Noah Kahan and Damien Rice. "Red," the song that opens the album, is based on "The Masculine Road," a lecture by the poet Robert Bly, and imagines the sort of delinquent adolescence Radnor never quite experienced: "Jerks they're lurking everywhere, with purple smiles and perfect hair / I will steal their girlfriends, I will also steal their Subarus / Throw my ass in prison, I don't care, I'll run the joint by noon."

Shortly after "How I Met Your Mother" ended, Radnor started making music with the Australian musician Ben Lee; they released two albums. During the pandemic, Radnor was writing with gusto. Last winter, he drove to Nashville from Columbus, Ohio, with his Labradoodle, Nelson, to record. "Arthur Miller said this thing about how your best writing is right at the edge of humiliating yourself," he said. "And Voltaire said something like 'That which is too stupid to say is sung.'"

The new record approaches the conundrum of midlife with a deep, determined honesty. "Aging is a very psychedelic thing," he said, as he strolled past elaborate mausoleums. In his younger years, he was "addicted to options," he said. "I wanted to live out every story, and I was scared to pick one and go deep on it." He went on, "That's the mercy of getting older. You don't have the energy to seek out every story."

At a nearby coffee shop, he ordered tea with honey and lemon. The cashier asked for a picture. Radnor has found that songwriting is a useful way of externalizing his interior life, presenting it for affirmation. "Good friendship is so pleasurable because you feel witnessed," he said. "Otherwise you can just kind of cave in on yourself. That's why I think art-making is an antidepressive. Art-making stops me from journeying so far inward where I can't come back. I'm not like Knausgaard or someone, writing 'This is what I did this morning with my cup of coffee.' But you can see that there's a life."

—Amanda Petrusich

NATURE, IMPROVED

LIGHTS UP!

"I forgot our life vests!" Matt Marsden said the other day, before stepping into a blow-up dinghy floating in the Japanese Pond at the Brooklyn Botanic Garden, where he was working as an event contractor. He was joined by a B.B.G. executive named Kathryn Glass, who was inspecting a new addition to the million-and-a-half-gallon body of water: twelve huge, illuminated fountains, which had recently arrived from the Netherlands. "We didn't just go down the street to, like, Vern's Pump Supply," Marsden said. "We had to get a big piece of machinery that could reach out thirty feet and drop them into the water."

"Like, an excavator-size thing?" Glass asked. "Are you impressed that I pulled out that technical term? I have nephews."

"It's not quite an excavator—it's a telescoping material handler."

Marsden and his crew were transforming the fifty-two-acre garden into a light show called Lightscape—Dancing Water Colors (the fountains), Singing Trees (spruces and larches wrapped in lights), a Sea of Light (a grove of cherry-blossom and oak trees transformed into a lit-up symphony), all powered by not quite hidden generators, humming in the woods. With more than a million L.E.D. light bulbs, the garden expected to burn through a hundred and fifty gallons of diesel fuel each night.

As a blue heron strutted along the shore of the pond, Erdal Eyubov, the garden's maintenance foreman, strolled up. Glass, who wore hiking boots and an I.D. card on a lanyard, wanted to see how most of the garden's hundred and fifty or so lampposts could be shut off each night, so that their light wouldn't interfere with Lightscape. Eyubov explained that the task involved descending into various spaces in the bowels of the garden's facilities to turn some knobs, flip some switches, and hope for the best. "It's like an old house," he said. "Every time you touch stuff, you break things." He wore a green fleece and pressed green khaki pants, and carried a ring with fifty-three keys. One door led to a maintenance garage—five bicycle tires, four chainsaws, three stray cats, and two oil drums. He flipped a switch, and thirty lampposts outside the Bonsai Museum went dark.

Next, Glass and Eyubov trekked to a brick shed at the northeast end of the garden. "This one is a bit complicated," Eyubov warned. "Keep your head down!" He flipped another switch, and a thicket of dogwoods was plunged into darkness. Then he flipped the lights on again, so that the contractors setting up the nearby Winter Cathedral (a twinkling tunnel set among some ginkgoes) could finish their work.

Glass was also eager to see how Eyubov was tackling another problem. For Lightscape's opening night, she wanted it to look as if Adrian Benepe, the garden's president, was ceremonially turning on the Sea of Light, all at once, by flipping a single switch. Since that was technically impossible, a "dummy switch" had been rigged. Down in the woodshop (a sign read "BBG MAINTENANCE / WE MAKE YOUR DREAMS COME TRUE"), Eyubov showed off his team's handiwork. Three large fuses had been wired to a 240V.A.C. Siemens general-duty safety switch ("DANGER: HAZARDOUS VOLTAGE. WILL CAUSE DEATH OR SERIOUS INJURY"), which was screwed to a plywood board. Benepe would grasp the fake switch's bright-red lever and pull it up, as Marsden and a colleague rushed to push buttons on their laptops. "It's not OSHA-approved," Eyubov joked. "It just looks funny."

Glass and Eyubov walked through a grove of horse-chestnut trees. By Daffodil Hill, a woman in a reflective vest pulled a wagon loaded with ten-gallon diesel-fuel cannisters along an unlit garden path. Apparently, the first attempt at fuelling up the generators hadn't gone as planned. "They brought too big of a truck," Marsden said. "So, for now, we're doing it the old-school way—we fill up cans, and pour them into the generator. There's like a gazillion solutions."

Glass explained that she hoped Lightscape, in its third year, would be a big money-maker for the garden. (Adult admission is around forty dollars.) It's a collaboration with a subsidiary of Sony Music. She said that during the planning sessions she'd told them, "We want to do this, but it can't be Christmas-themed, because it's Brooklyn." Glass continued, "And they said, 'But it's *really* Christmas, right?'" She'd replied, "No! I want something that's like the pagan heart of Brooklyn." "Jingle Bells" and "Frosty the Snowman" were forbidden. No reindeer. Not a single Christmas tree. Instead, a thirty-five-foot-tall light sculpture (name: Contemporary Tree) was installed on a lawn, near an actual conifer (*Pinus strobus*). Glass recalled, "I was, like, 'We'll take that tree, but there can't be a star on top!'" When the sculpture arrived, there was a star on top. "And I was, like, 'You've got to cut off the star!'" Marsden's team replaced it with a glowing orb.

—Adam Iscoe

LONDON POSTCARD
THE UNDERPANTS METHOD

Some time ago, in Notting Hill, the actress Juno Temple accidentally locked herself out of her apartment and decided to go vintage shopping. She was about to wrap the third season of "Ted Lasso" and, at the same time, was packing for a frigid winter in Canada, where she'd be shooting the next installment of "Fargo." "I'm housing three different people at once," she said, sipping an oat-milk latte as she browsed. She was wearing a high ponytail reminiscent of her bubbly "Ted Lasso" character, the influencer turned P.R. exec Keeley Jones, along with sweats, Uggs, and a thrifted Louis Vuitton mini-bag.

On "Fargo," which returned to FX last month, Temple plays Dot, a Minnesota housewife with a dark past. Dot's on the run from Roy Tillman (Jon Hamm), a county sheriff with a mean streak. "She's a kick-ass woman who has survived a lot and seen a lot," Temple said of Dot. "And it's made her the brilliant mom, and loving wife, and Bisquick-pancake-making ninja that she is." The role required nailing a strong Minnesota accent, and Temple had a session with a dialect coach later that afternoon. "Oh, *geez*," she said, switching into Minnesotan. "It's *sooo* scary. No rest for the wicked, huh?"

Born in London to parents in the film business, Temple was raised mostly in Somerset, "near this great forest which we called the Wiggly Woggly Wood," she said. According to legend, "it's where Coleridge, like, off his face on opium, wrote 'The Ancient Mariner,' because he saw these trees and thought they looked like the masts of ships. It was an amazing place to grow up because it makes your imagination go crazy." As a teen-ager, she told her parents she wanted to be an actor ("they were, like, 'Fuck. But we saw that coming'"), and eventually she moved to L.A. On trips back to London, she always visits Portobello Market, which she scoured with her godmother as a child. At the end of shoots, she likes to give fellow cast members things she has picked up secondhand; for one "Ted Lasso" season, she handed out pillboxes decorated with ceramic soccer balls. "I'm a vintage person," she said. "I do not buy anything new, really, except for underwear—sometimes."

At a sunglasses stand, she stopped to try on a pair of shades shaped like the continental United States. "Is it too much?" she asked. If Temple hadn't become an actor, she might have been a fashion designer. "I wanted to do a whole line of surrealist lingerie," she said. "A melting-clock corset, and kind of lips and weird eyes and trees that look like hands that would wrap around you like a bralette. I've still got the designs." She envisioned a line of swimsuits printed with graphic images of shark bites. "And then you'd have supermodels wearing them and from far away you'd be, like, 'The fuck! Are they O.K.?'"

Over the years, Temple has acquired a large collection of vintage underwear, including a piece by the surrealist designer Elsa Schiaparelli (nude stockings with a hot pink "Schiaparelli" up the back). "It's something that you can do on your own to feel great about yourself," she said. "Every time I get a new part—a new woman in my life, where I'm going to be living in her shoes for a while—I buy a pair of underpants." On her first day as Keeley, she wore metallic Agent Provocateur knickers covered in tiny pink lips. As Dot, the "Fargo" housewife, she went more basic. "Really simple cotton with a little bit of frill," she said. "I thought those would be her go-tos."

Juno Temple

On the set of "Fargo," Temple did her best to speak in Dot's voice even between takes. "Being in the weather, and the terrain we were in, the accent makes even more sense because you move your mouth so little," she said. "It's freezing!" In the show, Dot goes to extreme—sometimes psychotic—lengths to protect her family. "I would like to believe that I would fight for the people I love, too," Temple said. "I don't know that I would go to the extent that Dot does—hopefully, I wouldn't have to."

She ducked into a jewelry shop. A butterfly bracelet caught her eye, and a shimmering lobster. Outside, she paused. "I love every single character I've played so much," she said. "Each one of them has taught me so much about what it is to be a girl, a woman, and all the things in between, and made me feel less alone." She once lamented not being cast as Alice in Tim Burton's "Alice in Wonderland," but now it made sense to her. "I'm already in the rabbit hole! I need to play the Queen of Hearts one day."

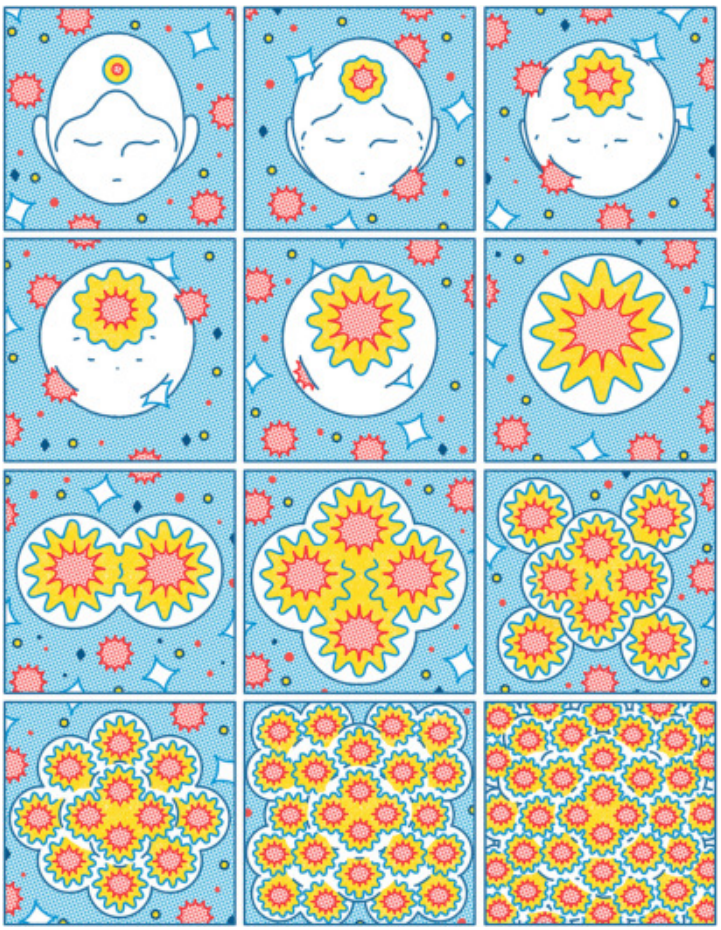
—Anna Russell

ANNALS OF MEDICINE

SLEEPER CELLS

To catch more carcinogens, we need to widen our scope.

BY SIDDHARTHA MUKHERJEE



A class of substances don't create cancer cells but rouse them from their slumber.

ILLUSTRATION BY EVAN M. COHEN

In the nineteen-seventies, Bruce Ames, a biochemist at Berkeley, devised a way to test whether a chemical might cause cancer. Various tenets of cancer biology were already well established. Cancer resulted from genetic mutations—changes in a cell's DNA sequence that typically cause the cell to divide uncontrollably. These mutations could be inherited, induced by viruses, or generated by random copying errors in dividing cells. They could also be produced by physical or chemical agents: radiation, ultraviolet light, benzene. One day, Ames had found himself reading the list of ingredients on a package of potato chips, and wondering how safe the chemicals used as preservatives really were.

But how to catch a carcinogen? You could expose a rodent to a suspect chemical and see if it developed cancer; toxicologists had done so for generations. But that approach was too slow and costly to deploy on a wide enough scale. Ames—a limber fellow who was partial to wide-lapel tweed jackets and unorthodox neckties—had an idea. If an agent caused DNA mutations in human cells, he reasoned, it was likely to cause mutations in bacterial cells. And Ames had a way of measuring the mutation rate in bacteria, using fast-growing, easy-to-culture strains of salmonella, which he had been studying for a couple of decades. With a few colleagues, he established the assay and published a paper outlining the method with a bold title: "Carcinogens Are Mutagens." The so-called Ames test for mutagens remains the standard lab technique for screening substances that may cause cancer.

Scientists, including Ames, realized from the start that the test wasn't a comprehensive method for catching carcinogens. Epidemiologists were learning, for instance, that exposure to certain estrogen-like chemicals, such as diethylstilbestrol (DES), increases the risk of vaginal, cervical, and breast cancer. (Toxicologists found similar results in mice and rats.) Yet DES wasn't obviously mutagenic in cell cultures; its cancer-causing mechanism is still being explored, but probably involves driving the growth of hormone-responsive cells or changing the expression of cancer-linked genes. In time, additional classes of carcinogens were added to the list. One feature of cancer cells is that they avoid detection by the immune system. And so compounds that suppress the immune system, such as cyclosporine, were recognized as cancer-promoting chemicals, even though they don't cause mutations in DNA.

But there were mysteries in carcinogenesis that continued to puzzle toxicologists. Earlier this fall, I discussed the issue with Allan Balmain, a cancer geneticist at the University of California, San Francisco. Balmain, who is in his seventies, was born in Wick, Scotland, and still speaks with a Scottish burr. He wore a cardigan that had a noticeable hole but matched the cornflower blue of his darting eyes. "Virtually every standard model for finding and classifying carcinogens has relied on what it does to the cancer cell," he told me. Balmain had come to believe that we were thinking far too narrowly. He was hinting at unsolved mysteries in cancer epidemiology. The incidence of colorectal cancer in young men and women in the United States, for example, has nearly doubled since 1995. In certain pockets of the world, lung-cancer rates in young, non-smoking adults are rising dramatically. Although researchers have advanced various theories about why, there's a sense that

some cancer-inducing factors elude our apparatus of detection. It's as if there were dark matter lurking in the cosmos of carcinogens.

We were standing on a catwalk that led to Balmain's lab, within an airy, glass-lined atrium overlooking Third Street, in Mission Bay. A few blocks away, a colossal Mark di Suvero sculpture, a multi-ton steel assemblage with four ladder-like legs and outstretched beams, rose above a grassy hill. I was struck by how much the landscape made the art. Without the grass and the hill, the piece might be taken for one of the construction cranes that hover over the campus. Balmain, too, was talking about context. Cancer cells live and grow surrounded by normal cells—buried in a landscape of normal tissue. Shouldn't we extend our focus to the larger ecosystem where cancers arise?

He guided me to his office, a space so clean and organized that it looked like housekeeping had just visited. In a 2020 study, he and a team of researchers exposed mice to twenty chemicals that are known or suspected human carcinogens. Tumors formed, and the team analyzed their DNA. "These are potent, well-established cancer-causing agents," Balmain told me. "You would expect the tumors that grew to be splattered with mutations." That's because DNA-disrupting chemicals have signature mutagenic effects, found not just in the specific genes linked to cancer but throughout the genome. But in the case of seventeen of the chemicals, there was no clear link between them and the mutations. "It was a head-scratching result," Balmain said. "And so I've really started wondering if they are changing the cells that *surround* the cancer."

In the eighties, not long after Balmain started researching cancer, the field was dominated by a step-by-step "multi-hit" model of carcinogenesis. A normal cell acquires one genetic mutation, and then another, and then another, moving, gene by gene, toward becoming a malignant cell. Perhaps one mutation overactivates a gene that promotes cell division, another mutation inhibits a gene that triggers cell death when abnormalities are detected, and a third sabotages a gene specializing in DNA repair. "That's absolutely true for some cancers, and that's how the story ran," Balmain told me. But at least one mouse study, conducted in the forties, demonstrated that the genesis of cancer could also follow a different trajectory. "It was an experiment that didn't fit the standard model of carcinogenesis," Balmain said.

In the experiment, two researchers working at Oxford, Isaac Berenblum and Philippe Shubik, assembled a group of mice, clipped a patch of hair on each rodent's back, and painted the patches with DMBA, a cancer-linked chemical that was found in coal tar. Yet only one animal in thirty-eight developed a malignant lesion. When the researchers added some slicks of croton oil to the same area, the results were startlingly different. (Croton oil, a blistering, inflammatory liquid extracted from the seeds of an Asian tree, was used as an emetic and as a skin-sloughing exfoliant.) Now malignant tumors bloomed, appearing on more than half the mice. The sequence mattered. Reverse the schedule of application—croton oil first, tar after—and there were no tumors.

It was as though the known carcinogen, DMBA, had primed the cell and the croton oil had catapulted it toward malignancy. Berenblum and Shubik saw croton oil as a "promoting" agent: here was a new kind of carcinogen that, it appeared, acted through an inflammatory response. The idea that inflammation could lead to cancer wasn't new. In the eighteen-seventies, the Viennese surgeon Alexander von Winiwarter had proposed that cancer was a consequence of an incompletely healed wound. But in what sense was croton oil a carcinogen? The mice painted only with croton oil hadn't developed tumors. It passes a standard Ames test on bacteria, and a more sensitive version of the Ames test that uses fruit-fly cells. It's negative even with animal cells. There's no evidence, in short, that it causes DNA mutations.

So what was its contribution, and why did it do its malign work only after the coal-tar chemical was applied? Yes, it caused inflammation, but plenty of things do. A staph infection in the skin produces a potent inflammatory state, and yet it doesn't cause skin cancer. The mystery perplexed cancer biologists for decades. What if this mechanism wasn't an incidental curiosity but a major source of disease which we were only starting to understand? And, if so, what kind of substance *irritates* its victims to death?

Scientific investigations, like detective stories, take place within an epistemological system, a way of knowing. To identify the murderer, we might need to first identify the method of murder. But sometimes this presents a more complicated puzzle than we might anticipate; the weapon may involve a confluence of factors. In Arthur Conan Doyle's "The Adventure of the Speckled Band," Sherlock Holmes is on guard for a mysterious killer who can seemingly slip through doors. He sits awake in a room, waiting nervily by a ventilation shaft. The weapon turns out to be a venomous snake; it climbs through the shaft via a rope and poisons its victim. Yet the snake isn't the singular cause: it's necessary but not sufficient. The murderer has to whip the snake into a frenzy—inflame it—before it will attack. In "The Hound of the Baskervilles," the titular creature doesn't maul its victim but frightens him to death. The hound is lethal because it has been painted with a phosphorescent substance, and because of a specific context: the victim is terrified by a legend that says his ancestors were haunted by a supernatural monster. Conan Doyle was drawn to these additive scenarios because they expanded the complexity of a mystery.

For decades, chemical irritants presented carcinogen hunters with a structurally similar problem. These agents may work only in combination with other chemicals; like a hound on the moor, they, too, might depend on the victim's history of prior exposure (DMBA first, croton oil next). And, as with Conan Doyle's creaturely killers, they may also depend on multiple causes: the irritant promotes the development of tumors, but only after an initiator has been applied. How, then, might we devise a test for a substance when it acts only in concert and in context?

Not long after Berenblum and Shubik published that paper, a doctor named Irving Selikoff opened a medical clinic in Paterson, New Jersey, a largely working-class city. His was a blandly modern office: veneer panels,

a curved Formica-topped desk, a few chairs. In the postwar years, factories were starting to close, but Paterson's Union Asbestos and Rubber Company factory, which produced asbestos insulation material, was still operating. And members of an asbestos-workers union enrolled in his practice.

Selikoff was particularly attuned to lung diseases. By the early fifties, he had learned to treat tuberculosis using the antibiotic isoniazid (for which he and a couple of colleagues would win a Lasker Award). Soon, he began to notice lung problems—most prominent, deposits of calcium in scarred, inflamed lesions—in patients with asbestos exposure. "These men came home each day covered with the whitish fibers of asbestos—on their clothes, in their hair, in their lunch pails," the *Times* later reported. "Sometimes they brought home samples of the fireproof product they made for their children to play with."

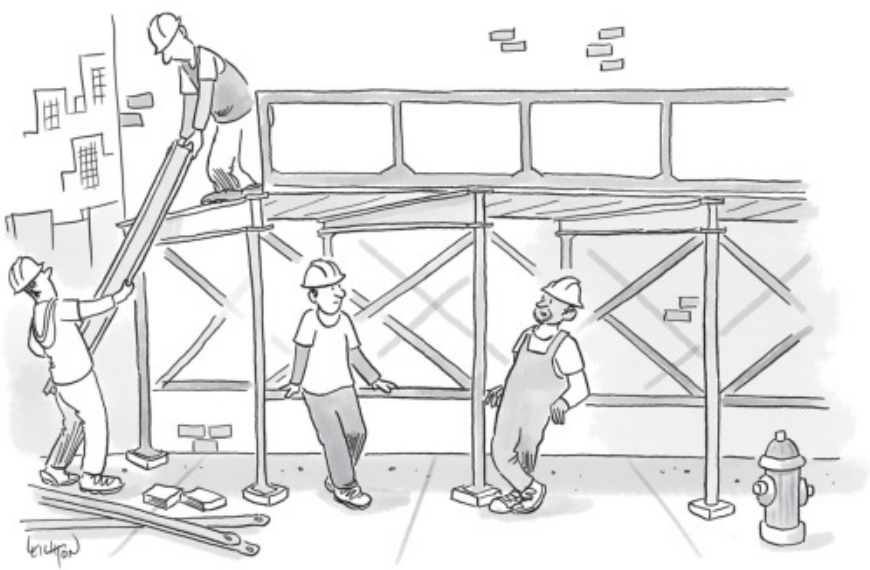
As the years passed, the cases took a more ominous turn. Selikoff, confirming research done in Britain and Germany, noted that the workers were succumbing to a rare, lethal form of cancer that typically spread through the lining of the lung: mesothelioma. X-rays lit up the white shadow of the cancer coursing through the back and the bottom of the lung. The tumors often invaded the spine and the chest wall, and led to agonizing deaths. By the early sixties, Selikoff had collected data on a cohort of six hundred and thirty-two men who had worked in the insulation factory, some for many years. Among these men, Selikoff documented forty-five cases of lung cancer and mesothelioma—seven times more than the expected number. The incidence of stomach, colon, and rectal cancer was three times higher than expected.

Even as asbestos was identified as a major occupational carcinogen, however, scientists struggled to understand how it might cause cancer. The research remains inconclusive. In a study published in 1977, researchers exposed various strains of bacteria to asbestos fibres, and didn't find that the fibres were associated with mutations. The toxicologists persisted. In one study, researchers added several other chemicals to asbestos and finally found bacterial mutants. In another, asbestos-induced chromosomal abnormalities were detected in animal cells. Yet another study found that mice injected with asbestos developed cancer, but with a latency period that seemed inexplicably long, given the material's potency as a human carcinogen. And a study of a cohort of Turkish villagers exposed to one type of asbestos came to the opposite conclusion: sensitive tests revealed no increase in DNA damage. It was obvious that asbestos exposure raised your risk of cancer; it wasn't obvious how. Like croton oil, asbestos seems to act as a promoter. Generate a mutation first, and then add an irritant, and a cell is propelled toward becoming a tumor.

In science, a clamorous consensus often begins as a whisper. Long before cancer was understood as a disease of mutated genes—indeed, long before the terms "gene" and "DNA" entered our scientific vocabulary—a London physician named Percivall Pott wrote about the cancerous scrotal sores that were turning up in chimney sweeps, who, since early childhood, had been "thrust up narrow, and sometimes hot chimneys, where they are bruised, burned, and almost suffocated." Although the condition was initially attributed to a venereal disease—what better explanation for a poor man's genital lesions than his presumed promiscuity?—Pott conjectured, in a 1775 essay, that the "soot-wart" was caused by chronic exposure to soot particles, which lodged in the scrotal ridges.

It's tempting, of course, to extrapolate Pott's findings on soot-induced cancers to cancers caused by cigarette tar in humans. But it has been challenging to test cigarette tar or smoke in a standard Ames test. Cigarette smoke certainly contains mutagens—more than sixty have been identified—and, by extension, carcinogens. Yet a 2023 study that examined the characteristic fingerprints of DNA damage caused by cigarette smoke in human lung cancers revealed an unexpected result. Among cancer specimens from smokers, ninety-two per cent had the telltale fingerprint of cigarette-smoke-induced genetic damage—they had the mutations associated with the DNA-damaging substances in smoke. But about eight per cent *lacked* this kind of damage, suggesting some other mechanism by which those cancers may have arisen.

The fact that, in almost one in ten cases, we can't identify a clear mechanism for the development of lung cancer even in smokers gives us all the more reason to think that we may be missing a plenitude of cancer-causing agents. The multi-hit model tells us about what's happening within a cell, but Balmain knew that a cell is not an isolated spaceship floating between planets. That's why he came to suspect



"As I understand it, after this scaffolding comes down the city will be done."

that some of the "hits" have to do not with the cancer cell but with the tissue milieu in which the cancer cell finds itself. The snake, venomous as it is, must still be whipped to provoke its attack; the hound must be painted *and* set to roam the moor.

"Wait, wait," Balmain said as I got up to leave his office. "I need to show you a picture." He pulled up an image on his computer. A few years ago, a postdoctoral researcher in his lab had obtained a genetically altered line of mice; when they were given a chemical trigger, a powerful cancer-causing gene would be activated in their skin cells. But when the trigger was administered very little happened. "And that's exactly what happens with most of these genetic mouse models," he said. "You trigger genes implicated in human cancers, and then you wait for months before you get tumors. Guess what happened when we activated our cancer gene? Just bugger all. The mutant cells were there, all right, but no tumors."

Next, the researchers in his lab made a linear incision in the skin of the mice. Still no tumors. And then—in that liminal space between serendipity and intentional experimentation—Balmain's team stumbled on a peculiar result. The researchers had put three surgical staples at the incision site. (The experiment had been monitored carefully by vets to minimize animal suffering.) Poorly healing wounds—chronic inflammation—had formed around the three sites. And precisely three tumors had grown there.

Balmain used his pen to point out the tumors on the computer screen: "One. Two. Three." He went on, "It's just as with Berenblum's experiments. We had primed the cells to become malignant, but they remained dormant." They formed tumors only after the chronic irritation had catapulted them out of normalcy. "The mutant cells just lie there," he said. "It's the inflammation that awakens them."

I looked through Balmain's office window. It was 6:30 P.M., and the cars on the road were starting to lock next to each other like Tetris blocks. Uber's headquarters, a hulking glass building a few streets away, would soon be emptying out. Before long, the air outside would smell like traffic.

"But what if that irritation is caused by an environmental insult, like air pollution?" I asked. The surgical staples weren't mutagens, of course, but they precipitated tumor formation. By the same logic, the irritant chemical could be a substance that we eat, or a chemical we expose our children to, or something in the environment that we unsuspectingly breathe. It probably wouldn't be caught by an Ames test or by any standard toxicology study. Could there be a universe of promoters that we'd been missing because we hadn't been looking in the right place?

"Ah, that you'll have to ask Charlie Swanton, in London," Balmain said.

Charles Swanton's lab is at the Francis Crick Institute, near King's Cross. Like Balmain's research center in San Francisco, the building has an enormous open atrium, with cascading walls of glass, a bank of elevators, and connecting catwalks. Cancer labs come in clones, I thought.

And clones are what Swanton works on. In cancer biology, a "clone" is a group of genetically identical cells. Imagine an enormous family of cells: a great-grandfather, his children, their children, *their* children. Some may have acquired mutations of their own, through the vagaries of cell division; they're called subclones. But the population is "clonally related"—that is, there's a genetic lineage that connects them all.

Wiry and rail thin, Swanton looks like an athlete, his body a coil of sinewy intensity that seems to have dispensed with all excess, including the hair on his head. His seminal work, carried out over the past decade, concerns tracking clones in human cancers as tumors grow. Cancer, as he conceives it, is a disease of clonal competition. Which clones become dominant as cancer evolves? His research has provided a granular description of cancer's evolution. A one-centimetre tumor contains something like a hundred million cells. "These hundred million cells are all descendants from one cell—that is, they are clonally related," Swanton explained. "But by the time that tumor develops it already contains myriad individual clones."

This is a chilling duality of cancer: each individual cancer comes from a single cell, and yet each cancer contains thousands of clones evolving in time and space. Treating or curing cancer involves tackling this incredible degree of genetic diversity. It's a clone war. And the clinical relevance is obvious. Clones that develop mutations conferring resistance to anti-cancer therapies are the ones that flourish and form metastases. "You can't always stay ahead of all those clones," Swanton observed—underlining the importance of trying to prevent tumors from forming in the first place.

In June, 2019, Swanton flew to South Korea to give a talk on clonal evolution in cancer. Jet-lagged, exhausted, and more than a little sleepy, he finished his talk and walked to a reception in the hotel lobby. "You know the routine," he said. "Chitchat, a glass of wine, nibbles, and then to bed."

A young Taiwanese doctor flagged him down. He'd listened closely to Swanton talking about mutations in lung cancer. The doctor showed him a map of fine-particulate air pollution across the planet, and then a map charting the incidence of lung cancer in nonsmokers. "I think I might have woken up a bit," Swanton said. There were areas of striking correlation. "In southern China, in Taiwan, in the areas north and south of Hong Kong, you could see the juxtaposition of the two phenomena."

That's where the mystery began. So far, air pollution has not been shown to be notably mutagenic. Tiny airborne particulate matter—designated PM2.5, for its size (no greater than 2.5 micrometres, about thirty times smaller than the width of a human hair)—enters the small airways of the lungs. But the stuff doesn't detectably damage DNA; it may be that whatever potential mutagens are present don't reach sufficient concentrations for that. Swanton wondered what might underlie the correlation between air pollution and lung cancer among nonsmokers.

Back in London, Swanton handed the project to three researchers: William Hill, a Welsh running enthusiast; Emilia Lim, a high-spirited Canadian whose Singaporean grandmother never smoked but succumbed to lung cancer; and Clare Weeden, an Australian devotee of detective stories. When lung

cancer occurs in people who have never smoked, the malignant cells often carry a mutation in a gene known as EGFR. Lim examined the link between air pollution and EGFR-mutated lung cancer, working with a team of epidemiologists and using data sets from the U.K., South Korea, and Taiwan. In each of the three countries, she found, the higher the level of air pollution the higher the incidence of EGFR-mutated lung cancer. The U.K. Biobank, which tracks the health of some five hundred thousand volunteers, generated additional data, helping to confirm a link between air pollution and nonsmoking-related lung cancer.

I met Hill and Weeden at the Crick Institute on an overcast morning. (Lim was setting up a new lab in Canada.) It was about eleven, and the lab was whirring with activity. Hill walked me to his lab bench. It was piled with a precarious tower of boxes—each containing dozens of glass slides with slices of tissue—that invited thoughts of the bookcase that toppled on poor Leonard Bast in "Howards End."

Hill reached into a drawer and pulled out a vial filled with a coal-black sludge. "That's a solution of suspended particles of dust and soot," he explained. "It's liquid air pollution."

I shook the vial, watching the particles rise and settle. It was as if someone had made a hideous snow globe with the grime wiped from my windows in New York.

"Careful," Hill said. "It comes from the National Institute of Standards, and the liquid contains a defined composition of particles collected from an air-polluted urban environment. It's about fifteen hundred pounds per bottle. Pricey soot."

Hill, Lim, and Weeden had begun their experiments with mice that were genetically engineered to have a mutant EGFR gene that could be turned on by a chemical trigger. After the researchers activated the cancer-linked gene in the mice's lung cells, the animals developed sporadic tumors—a low background hum of malignancy. "And then came the tricky part," Hill said. The researchers instilled various doses of the dusky air-pollution liquid in some of the mice's lungs. Ten weeks later, when the mice were examined, the data were striking: as the dose of the mixture had increased, so, too, had the frequency of lung tumors. At the highest dose (and, thus, the highest number of particles instilled), there was a nearly tenfold rise in the number of lung tumors.

What was the mechanism? Hill, Lim, and Weeden used gene sequencing to compare the tumors that had arisen in the non-treated mice and the tumors in the PM2.5-treated mice. In both kinds of tumor, they identified the EGFR mutation that had been purposely activated and, as expected, a few additional ones that had arisen spontaneously.

But it's what they *didn't* find that was crucial. "The mutation numbers in the control mice were not significantly different from those in the treated mice," Hill said. Whatever had caused the tenfold increase in the number of tumors in these mice wasn't producing new mutations inside the cancer cells. Hill and his colleagues suspected that the effects of the liquefied air pollution were found outside the cancer cell. "And so we went back to the tissue, dissecting out the tumors, cutting slices, and looking under the microscope," Hill said. The lungs of the mice that had been exposed to the air pollution, they found, were full of inflammatory cells.

Hill walked me to a microscope on his desk. The facility had dozens of powerful scopes, but this one was the sort of basic instrument that you might find in

a school lab. I looked through the lens at a wafer-thin section of a mouse lung. "This was from one of the mice that we treated with a high dose of air pollution," Hill told me. In the center of the slide was a disk-shaped lung tumor packed with misshapen malignant cells, but the tumor was like a raft in a seething ocean of inflammation. The researchers' analysis provided a detailed description of the inflammatory cells. They found a particular kind of macrophage—a cell so named because it's large (*macro*) and eats (*phago*) foreign particles—jump-starting an immune response by pumping out a potent inflammatory signal, interleukin-1 beta. When the interleukin-1 beta was blocked with an antibody, the effect of air-pollution exposure was attenuated. And when Hill, Lim, and Weeden reran their experiment with immune-deficient mice, the effect of air pollution disappeared. The macrophages, and their signals, were somehow promoting tumor development.

"But now the puzzle really deepened," Weeden said. We had moved from the lab upstairs to a circle of couches in the lobby on the ground floor, where Weeden could watch her four-month-old daughter, who was asleep in a stroller with Clucky the duck, her favorite stuffed toy. We spoke quietly to avoid disturbing the baby. "If she moves, Clucky will quack, and she'll wake up," Weeden said. "Once she's awake, it's all over."

What perplexed Hill, Lim, and Weeden involved the human epidemiology of lung cancer: if PM2.5 was not a mutagen but was merely awakening the growth of a preëxisting mutant cell, where did that original mutant cell come from? Weeden continued to talk quietly, gesturing at the sleeping child. It felt vaguely conspiratorial, as if we were offending an old orthodoxy. "It's a little crazy, isn't it?" she said. "For nearly four years, we had been the outsiders in a genetics lab, working on pollution sludge while everyone else was sequencing genes and looking for clones. And now it was reversed. *We* were the clone hunters. We were back in the thick of genetics, hunting for mutant clones." There was a sharp clang from the elevator bank. Thankfully, the baby continued to sleep.

If the original mutant cells existed before PM2.5 exposure, then the genetic tools developed over the decades to track rare clones should be able to find those cells. So the team examined pieces of normal lung tissue from human patients, using state-of-the-art "deep sequencing" methods, making thousands of passes through thousands of DNA strands to achieve a

high level of precision. EGFR mutant cells turned up in a significant minority of cases. The researchers calculated that the incidence of these cells was roughly one in half a million, which sounds minuscule until you remember that lung cells may number in the trillions. It's the nature of these mutant cells to go cancerous—*if* they receive the right nurture.

Hill, Lim, and Weeden aren't the only researchers to have found potentially cancerous cells lying dormant in tissues. In 2015, a team of scientists studied cells from the eyelid, an area of skin routinely exposed to UV light. (The tissue came from patients who'd had "eyelid lift" surgery.) Roughly a fifth to a third of the cells carried skin-cancer-driving mutations, and clones carrying some of these mutations had expanded, suggesting positive selection. Yet none of these patients had overt skin cancer. Such research suggests that healthy people may have a cadre of potentially cancerous clones.

"And *that's* the answer," Swanton told me when we spoke later, a jolt of intensity in his voice. "The simplest explanation is that people who don't smoke, and those who do, have preëxisting mutant cells, albeit at a very rare frequency, in their lungs. In the case of air-pollution-induced cancer, the PM2.5 particles activate immune cells to create an inflammatory milieu." And it's in this boggy cesspool of soot-spurred inflammation that the mutant cells find their footing.

Swanton's model sits athwart the standard model for carcinogenesis. In this case, the tumor doesn't evolve mutation by mutation (although, as the tumor grows, additional mutations can still accumulate). The original mutant clones are already there, sleeper cells awaiting activation.

"Then why aren't we bursting with cancer?" I asked, recalling Balmain's slide. I'd had minor surgery a few months before, and the surgeon had left nine staples in my skin. Why weren't nine tumors growing out?

"There's some bad luck involved—you have to have a bad cell at the bad place at the bad time, and over a long period," Swanton said. "There may be hereditary influences, too, or gene-environment interactions that dampen or accelerate the growth of some clones." With carcinogenesis, as with so much in life, the right combination of nature and nurture is required.

"I'm tired of the multiverse, too, Rocky."

• •

The paper in which Swanton's lab presented its findings about air pollution and lung cancer appeared in *Nature* earlier this year, and it ends on an ominous note: "Our data suggest a mechanistic and causative link between air pollutants and lung cancer, as previously proposed, and substantiate earlier findings on tumour promotion, providing a public health mandate to restrict particulate emissions in urban areas." The risk extends to a vast population. "Ninety-nine per cent of the world's population is exposed to levels of air pollution that exceed the safety guidelines published by the World Health Organization," Hill told me. Smoking increases your risk of lung cancer far more than air pollution, but the number of people exposed to air pollution is so vast that the over-all toll of each may be similar. Swanton has estimated that air-pollution-induced lung cancer kills seven or eight million people every year.

The issue of *Nature* in which the air-pollution paper ran featured, on its cover, a photograph of a smog-choked New Delhi, my home town. As I write this, in November, the city is in partial lockdown because the level of air pollution has reached a limit considered dangerous for human habitation. I recall a tragicomic moment from my youth when the government decided to erect a pollution meter atop one of the busiest traffic intersections in New Delhi. Cars, scooters, and trucks belched smoke as they snaked through the crossroads. Factories spewed dark, ash-laden air into the sky. Trees, blackened with soot, stood like silhouetted ghosts along highways. One morning, looking up at the air-pollution meter, I realized that I couldn't read the numbers. The glassy front was black. The device for measuring soot had been obscured by soot.

"Let me tell you a fact that only a handful of epidemiologists remember," Swanton told me. When the British epidemiologists Richard Doll and Austin Bradford Hill were trying to identify causes of lung cancer, they had

narrowed their suspicions to two main candidates. One was cigarette smoking, and they're still celebrated for having established the link between cigarettes and cancer. But, Swanton pointed out, their classic paper mentioned another cancer correlate—proximity to major roadways, gasworks, industrial plants, and coal fires, and thus, by extension, exposure to high levels of air pollution. "I wonder how the history of cancer prevention may have been written differently if biologists had the tools then to investigate that cause," Swanton mused.

In the end, as Holmes aficionados know, the detective never did trap the murderer in "The Hound of the Baskervilles." Stapleton, the villain, wanders through a woolly, impenetrable fog, is sucked into a bog in the moor, and asphyxiates to death. He leaves the barest signs of his existence: a boot and a tub of the phosphorescent paint that he used on the hound.

I asked Balmain how we might devise a trap for carcinogens that work by changing the tissue milieu—the cancerous cell's context. Could there be an Ames test for environmental inflammogens? We use the word "inflammation" colloquially, as if we understand what we are saying. But dig a little deeper and the word becomes a clown car of meanings. Is it the chronic irritation of an autoimmune disease? The lingering residue of a postviral syndrome? A nonhealing wound? Given the exquisite specificity of the kind of inflammation that Swanton's team had identified—mediated, it appeared, by macrophage-produced interleukin-1 beta—what test would capture just that form of it?

"I'm really not sure," Balmain confessed. But there are hints about where to start looking. He has been working with a team that is attempting to create such a test. One version relies on using a special type of "organoid"—in this case, three-dimensional clusters of skin cells and immune cells cultured together. (My own laboratory works on similar cancer organoids.) In principle, the chemical irritant might induce immune cells to produce an inflammatory cascade, and that inflammation, in turn, might make the cancer cells grow.

Or carcinogen hunters might study macrophages. They might, for instance, expose macrophages to chemicals that would jump-start the particular immune response, mediated, in part, by interleukin-1 beta. Or they might look in animal or human bodies for an immune-signal signature, as a surrogate for the sort of inflammation that promotes cancer. Signals indicating an imbalance of immune cells might predict a "pro-cancerous" state, perhaps leading to more intensive monitoring for prevention. That approach wouldn't necessarily identify the culprit, at least at first, but it would provide evidence of the misbehavior—like finding the tub of phosphorescent paint on the trail of the hound.

The walk from Swanton's lab to St. Bartholomew's Hospital takes about half an hour. It was a pleasant afternoon in London, so I decided to foot it. I wandered onto Greville Street, heading toward the hospital. About a mile and a half to the west was the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, where Austin Bradford Hill, working with Doll, at the Medical Research Council, had followed a cohort of more than forty thousand doctors for twenty-nine months and published the classic study about smoking and lung cancer. A little less than two miles east were the wards of the London Hospital, where Muriel Newhouse and Hilda Thompson had reported on patients with mesothelioma who had been exposed to asbestos.

I sat down on a roadside bench to read the *Nature* paper again. "The one way to identify a great work of literature," a friend and avid reader once told me, "is that the person who begins the novel and the person who finishes it are never going to be the same. The novel changes you." The same might be true for great work in science. It fundamentally changes the way you see the world. Swanton's team had wrestled the mystery down using epidemiology, toxicology, immunology, and human genetics, and then pulled them together into a causal, biologically plausible mechanism for carcinogenesis. It represents one of the most elegant reconciliations between disciplines that I have encountered in science.

The asbestos-linked tumors that Selikoff had found? Well, asbestos, most likely, is a promoter more than a mutagen, and its carcinogenic properties may be a consequence of the irritation that it produces. The fibres might summon macrophages and other immune cells that produce scarring and inflammation in the lungs, and this irritation might awaken preëxisting malignant clones. Cigarettes? The chemicals in tar cause mutations. Fine soot particles are the irritant. And the nicotine makes it addictive. A cigarette, in short, achieves a troubling trifecta: inflammogen, mutagen, and addictogen, all rolled conveniently into a thin cylinder.

A young man pushed past me in a haze of menthol, pulling on a vape pen. Scalding, vaporized particles of a chemical mixture wafted into his body. I wondered what a biopsy of his lung might reveal. A passing motorcycle coughed out a trail of black exhaust, and I wished I were wearing a mask. I found that I could think about the world around me only in terms of chemical irritants and inflammations. By now, it was about three in the afternoon, and I realized that I had reached the front gates of St. Bartholomew's, where Pott had reported on those pernicious soot warts. It was also where Swanton had done some of his medical training. And, I recalled, where Watson had first met Holmes.

Environmental carcinogens have been notoriously difficult to find because toxicology, an experimental science, has to keep pace with epidemiology, an observational one. It's a frantic chase: human studies are often throwing up puzzles that bacterial and animal tests cannot explain. And it's often hard to recapitulate "environments" in laboratory settings. (Who knew that the National Institute of Standards and Technology sells bottled air pollution?) Fortunately, the fields are converging; we're getting smarter at catching new culprits. But we're just beginning to grasp how many might be out there.

By the time I left St. Bartholomew's, I felt an urgent need to revisit the world of Conan Doyle. I hailed a cab and, in the spirit of completing the journey, rode to Baker Street. ♦

FOLDING THE EARTH IN HALF

BY IAN FRAZIER

[The astrophysicist Shep] Doeleman said a black hole formed from folding the Earth in half could power Manhattan for a year.
—*The Harvard Gazette, May 13, 2022.*

Yes, there are trade-offs. We discovered that. Trade-offs not only in astrophysics but in life.

I remember Shep became interested in folding planets in half when we were in high school. He got kicked off the tennis team for folding the tennis balls. We'd show up for practice and unfold them. You squeeze them and they pop back out. That was the moment of inspiration—that popping sound. Shep said, "Do you have any idea how much energy is being released?" To me, it seemed like only a modest amount, but he said, "Just one tennis ball, folded in half, could power this watch for almost half an hour!" He was still wearing a windup watch at the time.

Nobody else had his vision. He was the first to demonstrate the theoretical possibility of giant atomic-powered hands. Now you see these hands everywhere, but back then they were unthinkable, revolutionary. We both attended Princeton, and one day I was sitting in the school cafeteria (which we called the Caf) when Shep burst in waving pages of calculations that he said proved you could build these hands. Make them big enough, he continued excitedly, and they would even be able to fold the moon in half, which could produce enough energy to run the entire Tokyo subway system for seven weeks.

We had forgotten that the moon is not a tennis ball, or a basketball (which we had also folded in half, powering an electric can opener for almost a full circuit of the top of a six-ounce can). By then, science had determined that the moon is completely full of matter that is very similar to what is on its surface—i.e., rock. Most of that would have to come out before our giant hands could fold the moon in half.

I was in touch with my foreign spymasters this entire time. One was a short guy named Boris (appropriately enough), and he partnered with a tall Slavic woman, Natasha, who always wore tight black skirts and smoked cigarettes in a long cigarette holder. In return for the information I provided, they promised to teach me how to exist in only two dimensions. We used to meet at the old Horn & Hardart on Fifty-seventh Street.

What I gave them was garbage. Honestly, the documents I went to prison for couldn't have helped them fold a table saw in half, much less a planet. But that made no difference to a jury—I was incarcerated and, therefore, not around for all the political business involved with folding the Earth in half. The big thing was, after you got all the Earth's mantle removed, and the molten outer core, and the nickel-iron inner core, two questions came up. First, would the Earth collapse in on itself? And, second, when the Earth was folded in half, what would be the concave part and what part would be convex? On the convex part, life would go on as usual, but on the concave part major changes could be expected. New York would have to be on the convex part, because the whole point was to power Manhattan for a year, and planners wanted to keep it in the most advantageous position to benefit from that.

Boris and Natasha, my old cronies, got a real grilling from the Senate Armed Services Committee when they were nominated to be co-Secretaries of Defense. As noncitizens, they should never have been considered in the first place. Two reporters for the Washington *Post*, a moose and a squirrel, dug up their recent espionage history, and the nomination was sunk. The news made all the front pages, and even the Saturday-morning cartoons. Of course, my name came up a lot and, predictably, was dragged through the mud.

I am not bitter. I served my time, and reëntered society. It's kind of peaceful, being a pariah, shunned by all my former colleagues. Like everybody else, I watched from my front yard the night they folded the moon in half. None of us will forget the shadows of the giant thumbs and fingers flickering across the face of the familiar bright disk. Suddenly it was done. The folding occurred, and the full moon became a half-moon. In Tokyo, for almost two months, the subways would be free for everybody. We had entered a new era.

Folding the Earth in half foundered on account of NIMBYism coming from what was expected to be the Earth's concave side, and eventually the idea had to be shelved. Last year, I saw in an élite magazine that Shep had not lost his enthusiasm for the dream. Now the time may be right to look at it again. I wish him the best. ♦

LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

ONWARD AND UPWARD WITH THE ARTS

TERMS OF AGGRIEVEMENT

The Gen Z comedian Leo Reich blasts his elders—and himself.

BY REBECCA MEAD

Leo Reich strode onstage to the thudding beat of "Hot in It," by Tiësto and Charli XCX. His batwing-lined eyes gleamed, and he was dressed in a contour-molding MISBHV T-shirt and a pair of black short shorts whose white piping outlined his crotch. Grabbing a microphone stand and casting a mock-bashful look at the audience, he explained, "I didn't have any time to change. I had to, like, run here *straight* from my dad's worst nightmare." It was a mild September evening at Earth Hackney, a venue in East London, and Reich was performing his standup comedy show, "Leo Reich: Literally Who Cares?!" Shiny black zip-up boots endowed his steps with a peppy bounce. "I'd just like to introduce myself, for those of you who don't know me," he said. "I'm Leo. I'm queer." There were whoops from the audience, and Reich approached several people who, perilously, had seats in the front row. "Looking around, it seems like some of you guys"—he swept an arm in an arch gesture of inclusivity—"might *also* have a sexuality which is iconic."

Reich, who is twenty-five, first performed the show at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, in the summer of 2022. (It was unfortunate, he observed, that the COVID-19 pandemic hadn't occurred back in "the olden days, when people were used to disease and had the emotional *toolbox* to deal with it.") The Fringe is a proving ground for any aspiring British comedy performer or writer. Stephen Fry, John Oliver, and Richard Ayoade all performed there as members of the Cambridge Footlights, the university's famed sketch-comedy troupe; Reich, who graduated from Cambridge four years ago, also belonged. "Leo Reich: Literally Who Cares?!" was hailed at the festival, and last year Reich took it to venues in the U.K. and then to New York City, where Nina Rosenstein, a veteran HBO executive who oversees late-night and specials programming, saw it at the Greenwich House Theatre. "It was so exciting to discover someone at such an early point in his career who is so polished, so self-assured onstage, and such a great writer," she told me recently. The performance at Earth was at least Reich's hundredth time doing the show, and it would also be his last: it was being taped for an HBO comedy special, which begins airing on December 16th.

A precocious self-awareness fills the gap between Leo Reich the writer and Leo Reich the onstage character, who remains arrested at twenty-three—"which *Forbes* magazine recently described as one of the Top 25 youngest ages," he notes in the show. In person, Reich is thoughtful and analytical; onstage, he is extravagant and unnerving, fully weaponizing his posh voice and good looks—high cheekbones, bee-stung lips. Near the outset, he announces that he's about to undertake "a kind of rumination on twenty-first-century cynicism, on the self-objectification encouraged by social media, on the late-capitalistic co-option of the queer aesthetic—I'm kidding, can you imagine?" He then mimes blowing his brains out with a gun. Further ramping up the tone, the show incorporates musical numbers, from frenzied dance music to cheesy pop ballads, all delivered with aplomb by Reich, who has a powerful voice and a fearless onstage investment in his own charisma. (The music is composed by Toby Marlow, a friend of Reich's from Cambridge, and one of the co-creators of "Six," a musical about the lives of the six wives of Henry VIII, which became a hit in the

Onstage, he's extravagantly unnerving, weaponizing his posh voice and good looks.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ALIA ROMAGNOLI

West End and on Broadway after it débuted at the Edinburgh Fringe.)

Reich presents himself as a deliriously self-involved, fragmentarily informed, habitually self-pitying, comprehensively cynical member of Generation Z, the demographic cohort born between 1997 and 2012. To the extent that its members are depicted in popular culture and the mainstream media, it is usually by people significantly older than they are. ("Euphoria" is not written by teen-agers.) Reich's act offers an authentic Gen Z voice, but he emphasizes that, for people like him who grew up with social media, authenticity itself has become impossible to pin down. One of the motifs of "Literally Who Cares?!" is an escalating series of bits in which Reich tries to commodify his "lived experience": he starts with a memoir, then switches to a novel based on his memoir, and then to a rom-com based on the novelization of his memoir. Pretending to read from the novelized memoir, he tenderly recalls the first time he told someone "I'm queer": " 'And, in that moment, he felt so much shame. Little did he know that, in just a few short years, he'd actually feel *lucky* to be queer—branding-wise.' "

Reich parodies the fragility of his generation, deliberately garbling its idioms of identity politics and self-care: he complains about being "put under this *insane pressure* to do the *emotional labor* of knowing stuff about things." His character cycles manically through fashionably progressive and flimsily held political postures—"Vis-à-vis world hunger, I obviously think that there are *amazing* arguments on both sides"—and has an attention span so limited that he can't even finish reading a whole tweet. Reich has described the show as "a brutal character assassination of myself."

Older generations on both sides of the Atlantic may, in 2016, have started darkly joking about a glitch in the Matrix, but Gen Z has grown up almost entirely within that glitch—experiencing a climate crisis, an economic crisis, a global-health crisis, and a mental-health crisis arising from all the other crises. Objectively, none of this is very funny, but "Literally Who Cares?!" manages to skewer both the panicked self-absorption of the young while also offering an unsparing survey of the social, political, cultural, technological, environmental, and epidemiological conditions in which they have had the misfortune to come of age. As Reich says onstage, he imagined that "being in my early twenties would involve a lot more 'navigating the dating scene in the big city!' and a lot less Googling the words 'death toll.' "

Reich makes a persuasive case that he and his peers are justified in feeling aggrieved, especially given the smug prosperity enjoyed by those parents to whose homes so many Gen Z-ers have been forced to retreat, by the pandemic or by broader economic circumstances. One of the show's musical numbers is "Song for the Old," a plangent Céline Dion-style ode to the generation of Reich's parents and grandparents. It begins, "Tired and alone / Nowhere to call home / Unless you count the gorgeous nine-bed Georgian town house that you outright own," and concludes with a reference to a coming apocalypse brought about by those homeowners' shortsightedness. Complete with an emotive key change midway, the song is a joke, an earworm, and an indictment all at once. Lara Ricote, a Mexican American comedian who has toured with Reich, and who was also born in the late nineties, told me, "He's describing how upsetting it is to be the person that he is now, given what we've been handed. But he knows that the best way to get that across is to be this level of cynical—to be apathetic about it. Like, 'I couldn't give a shit about how awful things are—ugh, we're all going to die.' Because to say 'This is fucked up'—we've heard it already. But to push up to the anger *through* the apathy—that's the smartest way to do it."

One evening in October, I joined Reich at the Paddock, a monthly comedy showcase held in the performance room of the Bill Murray, a pub in the North London neighborhood of Islington. The Paddock event, which is overseen by Charlie Perkins, who was recently appointed head of comedy at the U.K. television network Channel 4, is not widely promoted: its audience is drawn from Britain's comedy cognoscenti. The event has become a place for comedians to try out material from works in progress. Reich told me that the atmosphere might be less than uproarious, warning, "Sometimes it is filled with people who are just analyzing joke structure, and silently *nodding*."

The room was small, dimly lit, and crowded, with folding chairs crammed together. Reich took a seat in the middle and advised me that he might applaud loudly or even whoop occasionally, in order to cheer on friends appearing on the evening's bill. As it turned out, the atmosphere was lively enough that Reich didn't need to make any interventions. A comedian named Ayoade Bamgboye delivered a deadpan lecture about Black History Month, which falls in October in the U.K. "Which Black person would you choose to save in the race war?" she asked a white woman in the audience, who—presumably from the depths of her unconscious, and to general astonishment—immediately replied "Idris Elba." Bamgboye nodded sagely, and said, "That is the right answer."

Soon it was the turn of Emmeline Downie, who has been Reich's best friend ever since they met, as aspiring comedians at Cambridge. Downie was reprising a character she first created as a student: Gail Summerfield, a would-be life coach partially modelled on Downie's mother. The character's advice was ridiculous—"Have you thought about taking the sheets out of a ready-meal lasagna? 'Cause then, voilà, you've got a good-to-go Bolognese sauce"—and Downie, conveying a desperate eagerness to please while wearing an auburn mom-bob wig, captured with excruciating precision the humiliation of being a middle-aged woman among a crowd of cool youngsters. Reich told me later, "We're laughing at Gail's naïve insanity not because she's different from us and people we know but because she's so deeply similar. It's all from a place of identification and affection. You come away thinking, Wow, I would die for that made-up woman."

Reich test-ran nearly all of "Literally Who Cares?!" at the Paddock series. The Bill Murray pub was also one of the venues where he first encountered live comedy. He grew up in Islington, a borough that is associated with left-leaning intelligentsia, the middle child

of three in what he called "a liberal, metropolitan family that a critic might describe as 'champagne socialist.'" His father is a film producer who worked on "Ex Machina" and "The Last King of Scotland"; his mother works in education. Reich discovered standup comedy on YouTube in his early teens, and persuaded his mom to accompany him to the now defunct Invisible Dot, in Kings Cross, which was a haunt for young comedians such as James Acaster, who has gone on to television and podcast fame in the U.K. "James would just improv for an hour, and there would be six people there, and two of them would be me and my mum," Reich recalled. "I have a fundamental, cringe memory of him thinking my mum and I were a couple, and that being simultaneously humiliating and funny—and exhilarating, because I was part of the show. I was the *joke* in the show. I was, like, 'This is so fun, to be embarrassed in this kind of public way.'"

Comedy didn't come naturally to Reich. "I was really shy until I was about ten," he told me. "No one was ever, like, 'You're so funny.'" He experienced social anxiety, and felt more comfortable with people older than him than with kids his own age. Comedy seemed like a good way to make friends, especially when he left elementary school to attend the City of London School, an élite private boys' school where it was not especially easy to be a queer teen. "I was, like, 'Well, this is a genius move, to be funny. It's so *charming*,'" Reich said, adding, "It was a much more robotically studied move than a natural clowning impulse."

When Lena Dunham's "Girls" débuted, on HBO in the U.S., in 2012, Reich downloaded it illegally, and found it strangely resonant: "It's really weird to think in retrospect, because I was, like, this sort of queer thirteen-year-old who had truly not been kissed, but I was watching that show and thinking, Yeah, *this* is how my generation have sex." Dunham's creative originality lay in her ability to be both authentically immersed in her generation's experiences while also maintaining enough distance to narrate them comically. Reich told me that "Girls" offered "a kind of dual, third-person perspective on your own life, whilst living it from a first-person perspective." Another important influence on Reich was the British comedian Simon Amstell, whose 2009 standup show, "Do Nothing," provided a model for mining comedy from the experience of being a young, gay, cripplingly self-conscious Jewish man. (Reich told me that his family is "secular but culturally Jewish.") Amstell, who holds his body with an awkward discomfort and whose voice frequently ascends into a nervous squeak, explored the challenges of falling in love, and—harder still—being fallen in love with. "My type is me, but better," Amstell says in "Do Nothing," adding, "Which, I think, is O.K. I just need to find somebody who wants himself, but much, much worse." Reich appreciated the way Amstell was "playing both ends of the spectrum of smart and stupid—he simultaneously makes himself out to be a guru and an idiot, often in the same sentence. He is able to genuinely connect both those things, and not use one as a setup to the other, but make those two elements of his personality reliant upon each other."

Reich's show incorporates lessons from both Dunham and Amstell: in "Literally Who Cares?!," his character is both knowing and oblivious, smart and idiotic. Connoisseurs of joke structure will find themselves silently nodding at Reich's expert use of misdirection, in which he sets up an expectation at the beginning of a riff, then abruptly undermines it. After speaking sadly of a schoolmate who tormented him by calling him a "pathetic gay," he suddenly acknowledges that his antagonist wasn't wrong—he was less a bully than a "mean oracle." Reich also makes skillful use of the callback, in which a seemingly throwaway line is revisited and built on, sometimes multiple times. An upbeat reference to the pop-science observation that a forced smile triggers the same endorphins as a real one is reprised at the show's conclusion with nihilistic vigor, within the context of the politics of oppression. Amstell, who has taken Reich on tour with him, told me, in an e-mail, "You have to be a really smart and sensitive comedian to play someone so specifically ridiculous," adding, "I think there's enough of who Leo actually is . . . that you really feel the humanity of the character."

Reich went to Cambridge in the fall of 2016, having chosen the university principally on the strength of its comedy legacy, rather than for its superior academics. (He did stay engaged with his studies, though, writing a dissertation on the use of recipes in modernist literature. "I had a field day doing theoretical acrobatics," he said. "It wasn't very good.") In his first year, he began appearing at student-run comedy shows. Toby Marlow, who was two years ahead of Reich, first saw him performing at such an event, with material that was very queer and self-knowing. "It was, like, 'How has this person read my mind, and is making these hilarious jokes that are making me feel so seen, and are really relatable—and is also, like, ripping the shit out of me at the same time?'" Marlow told me.

Reich had first gone to the Edinburgh Fringe as an audience member in his early teens; as a student at Cambridge, he started to go as a performer, first appearing in group shows. One year, he took advantage of the fact that his parents were in the audience to come out to them onstage. "Loads of my standup, either in passing or explicitly, references my sexuality, and it seemed like a good way of letting them know without sitting anyone down and having an earnest conversation," he said. "I decided, 'I'm going to say it in a way that's triumphant, and it makes loads of other people laugh.'" The revelation was hardly expected to come as a surprise. "They *have* met me," he noted.

In addition to working on his solo comedy material, Reich began collaborating with Emmeline Downie, whom he met while waiting in line for a comedy audition. "The jokes he was doing then were very similar to what he does now—the quarter-life-ennui kind of stuff," Downie told me. But back then there was no manufactured persona: "It was all presented in his own voice—the

voice of him having a laugh with friends." Reich and Downie were excited by American comics a decade or so older than them, including Kate Berlant, whose standup often consists of a meta-narrative about itself, and John Early, who generates ironic oppositions between cynical observations and accomplished cover versions of rock or pop classics. Reich and Downie co-wrote and performed in a two-person sketch show, "Manhunt," which they ended up taking to the Edinburgh Fringe.

"Manhunt" was about the challenges of finding a romantic partner in the age of dating apps and social media, with both Downie and Reich lamenting the absence of a boyfriend in their lives. Reich, who then had bleached-blond hair and nerdy glasses, deployed an affect of hopelessness that was not a million miles from that developed by Simon Amstell: "I just feel like when people meet me for the first time, y'know, that their first reaction isn't, like, 'Oh, gosh, what an attractive man, I must go on a date with him.' It's more sort of like 'Oh, gosh, what a tall nine-year-old! I wonder why he's crying?'" Reich and Downie transformed into a series of different characters, including members of a book group of upper-middle-class, middle-aged women, in which Reich's character brayed disparagement of her flamboyant gay son; and a pair of Australian critics appraising men as art works rather than as people. In that bit, Reich sat on the lap of a hapless front-row ticket holder and announced, "It's fleshy . . . it's very realistic . . . and I think, personally, that it was a *very* interesting artistic decision to have given this one an erection."

"Manhunt" became a word-of-mouth hit with the mostly young audiences at the Fringe, and after graduating from Cambridge, in the summer of 2019, Reich hoped to return to some of the same generational themes with a follow-up solo show, which, at the time, he was crafting to conform to the typical parameters of the genre. "It was straightforwardly confessional, in the classic Edinburgh Fringe way," he told me. "Weaving some kind of story from my own life into some kind of idea about the world at large, and making one a beautiful metaphor for the other, and coming to a very clear conclusion that is both smart *and* emotional." He began testing sections of the show in front of audiences crammed into small theatres or the back rooms of pubs. "The arc was about an inability to be romantically intimate, and the epiphany was 'You've got to open your heart to intimacy,'" Reich said, with evident distaste. "It wasn't *wholly* unself-aware, but it was definitely making out like I had been, in some small way, structurally oppressed in my youth, and that's what had led to all my problems."

In 2020, larger problems presented themselves to Reich, along with the rest of the world, with the onset of the pandemic. The entire live-entertainment industry ground to a halt, with the result that the young comedians in Reich's cohort were forced to retreat into their homes and adapt their work for online dissemination. That summer, Reich wrote, acted in, and shot a contribution to a comedy compilation that aired on Channel 4, in which he played two warring sides of himself: Reclusive Genius, in pajamas with a five-o'clock shadow, and Gorgeous Extrovert, with lavish eye makeup and bright-red lipstick. (The former: "I'm having an existential crisis." The latter: "The only times he *actually* feels sad is when he's watching a slow-moving comedy drama, and something mildly emotionally difficult happens to a character that directly resembles him.") Reich had a family member who was immunocompromised, and he was diligent about following social-distancing rules during lockdown, spending long days writing in his childhood bedroom, back beneath the prized "Rushmore" poster of his teens. On Twitter, Reich uploaded videos like "Telling My Kids About My Wild 20s," in which he gazed reflectively into the middle distance and said, with a world-weary chuckle, "You would not *believe* the things—the kind

of crazy things—that we used to bake."

The Edinburgh Fringe Festival was cancelled that year, so Reich took part in a substitute production, made for Comedy Central and filmed at Bush Hall, a venue in West London. Onstage, Reich was confronted not by the usual crowd primed with cocktails but by an enormous flat-screen monitor, which displayed thirty-odd homebound viewers in a checkerboard of Zoom squares. It was both a career high point and a depressingly compromised venture. During his set, some members of the Zoom audience visibly answered their phones, and others never offered so much as a smile, meaning that there was no chance of replicating the fizz of a live performance. "The excitement of doing something for Comedy Central that was filmed—I think—*kind* of overrode the feeling of total failure," he told me. "I'm in the middle of a pandemic. I'm at rock bottom. And then I'm put through *this*."

Something else was becoming clear: the show Reich had originally conceived was evolving in unexpected ways. He explained, "I got to the point where I lost patience with myself a bit, and started to feel cynical about that thing, which was so mid-two-thousand-tens: 'Telling your story is *really important*, and everyone has a story to tell, and you should tell your story, and that's actually quite an important political act.'" The show had never been a manifesto. "It wasn't 'Nanette,'" Reich said, referring to Hannah Gadsby's breakout comedy hour, which led audiences down the path of laughter only to force them to confront the cruelty inherent in their enjoyment of the jokes. Nonetheless, Reich said, at the heart of his original intention had been "some kind of core belief that there was a level of importance, and self-importance, to what I was doing." He went on, "For obvious reasons, in 2020 and 2021 it was suddenly very hard to buy into that at quite the same level."

The forced pause in his live-performance career turned out to be a creative boon: by the time he was able to present his show at Edinburgh, in 2022, a productive gap had emerged between Leo Reich the comedy writer and Leo Reich the distracted, pained, dazzling character whose voice rises to a screech on the words "climate—*ugh*," and whose musical numbers are delivered in frantic, fractured snatches. In "Literally Who Cares?!," Reich repeatedly withholds from his audience the satisfaction of hearing a complete number, at least in the show's initial stages; instead, he offers fragments of songs, into which he launches and then abruptly stops, saying, "We don't have time!" Reich explained to me, "It's just a really clear way of showing someone who can't really commit to *anything*."

Giving an appearance of quicksilver spontaneity when, in fact, the material has been performed over and over is one of the most difficult aspects of the comedian's art. Fortunately, Reich told me, "part of the reason why this character is so useful is that you don't really have to commit to the pretense of 'I just thought of this,' because it's *all* a pose." After Reich introduced himself to the audience for his last-ever performance of "Literally Who Cares?!," he quickly segued into what appeared to be an offhand apology for being distracted. He revealed, dolefully, that backstage in his dressing room he'd just been remembering about having done a forward roll while in elementary school, which would turn out to be "the last time I would *ever* do one." Reich's performative sorrow—a self-important mourning of the loss of childhood innocence, delivered by a glittery boy-man in tight shorts—was at once so silly and so full of pathos that it was easy to buy into the feigned immediacy.

As the show progressed, the jokes that had first been tried out on Twitter or in pubs were hitting exactly as Reich wanted them to, with the young people laughing in recognition at his generational indignation and the older people shuddering in recognition of their generation's complicity. He marched up to audience members who were seated onstage, seeming to enlist someone in a moment of empathy before brutally withdrawing into his exclusive limelight. Behind him, a curved wall of L.E.D. lights vibrated with vivid pinks and purples—a look intended by Thomas Hardiman, the show's director, to suggest the sugary, heavily ironized aesthetic of hyperpop artists like SOPHIE, the late Scottish producer and singer, or PC Music, the London-based collective whose work, like Reich's, blurs the distinction between satire and sincerity. By the end of the show—after all the foundationless political stances and the arrested songs and the iterated commodification of a life story that had barely had time to begin—Reich had, of course, returned to that very last forward roll he ever executed, this time incorporating it into a frankly terrifying musical number into which all the show's earlier themes collapsed, along with the multiple unstable identities of Leo Reich.

A few weeks after the recording, Reich told me, "Part of the feeling I am trying to express in the show is an inability to line up all my atomized beliefs in a row on specific issues and to say, '*This* coalesces into one coherent perspective.'" What he presents onstage, he went on, "is the stuff I fear and resent most in myself mixed in with the stuff that I feel is funniest and silliest about myself. The show has a fun, stupid, silly level *and* a callous, cynical, sad, scared level, and those things are inexorably linked." Two things being true at the same time is the most obvious thing in the world, Reich observed. "But a *hundred* things are often true at the same time—a hundred deeply contradictory things. The fact that young people are annoying *and* sad—I mean, *obviously*. That's one of the classic things about young people. Young people are petulant and entitled, and also aggrieved and justifiably angry."

Since his final performance, Reich had been in the edit room, watching himself deliver the same joke over and over, a process that itself added another layer to his accreted self-awareness. The process had reached picture lock: the sequence of shots had been selected, and the final edit was in sight. The show would not give viewers the narrative reassurance of a tidy, redemptive resolution. Instead, Reich hoped, it would offer the confounding experience of a contradiction in which more than one thing is true at once. "You shouldn't be able to get to the end of the show concretely saying there's any real takeaway," Reich told me. "Apart from 'Oh, God—*he* seems like he's having a weird . . . year.'" ♦

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A REPORTER AT LARGE

WHAT MAKES A MURDER?

How a draconian legal doctrine imprisons people for killings they didn't commit.

BY SARAH STILLMAN

In 1982, when Ian Marcus was nine days old, his father left work and headed home to his family on Long Island on a new moped, only to be killed by a driver who'd run a red light. "Here I was, this twenty-five-year-old widow with a baby," Ian's mother, Donna, told me. About a year and a half after the accident, when a bearded guy who ran a Brooklyn meat locker asked her out, "it took ten friends to convince me to go." Her date, Dean Amelkin, arrived with a plastic train set for Ian. Before long, her son had a second dad, a second last name, and two younger sisters.

The family relocated to South Florida, where Dean helped his own father run a graphics shop. Eager for Ian and his sisters to achieve more economic stability than he'd known, Dean pushed them academically, weeping with pride when Ian won a national debating championship in high school. Eventually, Ian went on to law school, landing a job at an élite Manhattan law firm; as a kid, he had watched "My Cousin Vinny" with his dad, and they'd agreed that lawyering looked fun.

One Sunday morning in August, 2012, Ian, now thirty, was in bed in Brooklyn when his mother called, distraught. Every Sunday for more than a decade, Dean had met some buddies at a shopping center, biked thirty miles to a beach and back, and then lingered over breakfast. But on that morning Dean hadn't made it home. For the second time in his life, Ian had lost his father to a reckless driver.

This shock was swiftly followed by another. As a result of the crash, which all parties agreed was unintentional, two men stood accused of murdering his father and a friend who was cycling with him. One of those charged, twenty-five-year-old Sadik Baxter, had never laid eyes on the victims. At the moment of impact, he had been miles away, in handcuffs.

When Donna heard the charges, she asked, How is this even possible? Ian had learned the answer in law school: a sweeping and uniquely American legal doctrine, often couched in terms of justice for victims' families, called felony murder. To engage in certain unlawful activities, the theory goes, is to assume full responsibility if a death occurs—regardless of intent.

The precipitating offenses in this case: Sadik Baxter had searched five cars for stray cash before surrendering when cops appeared, and O'Brian Oakley, his twenty-six-year-old friend, had fled the scene, lost control of his car in a police chase, and killed the bicyclists. The prosecution charged both men with two counts of felony murder in the first degree.

Recently, Ian spoke with me about the case while caring for his newborn daughter in Brooklyn; as we talked, he sometimes ran his hand down a thick beard he'd grown in homage to his dad. "It's truly one of the cruellest ideas in the American legal system," he said of felony murder. "And most people don't even know it exists."

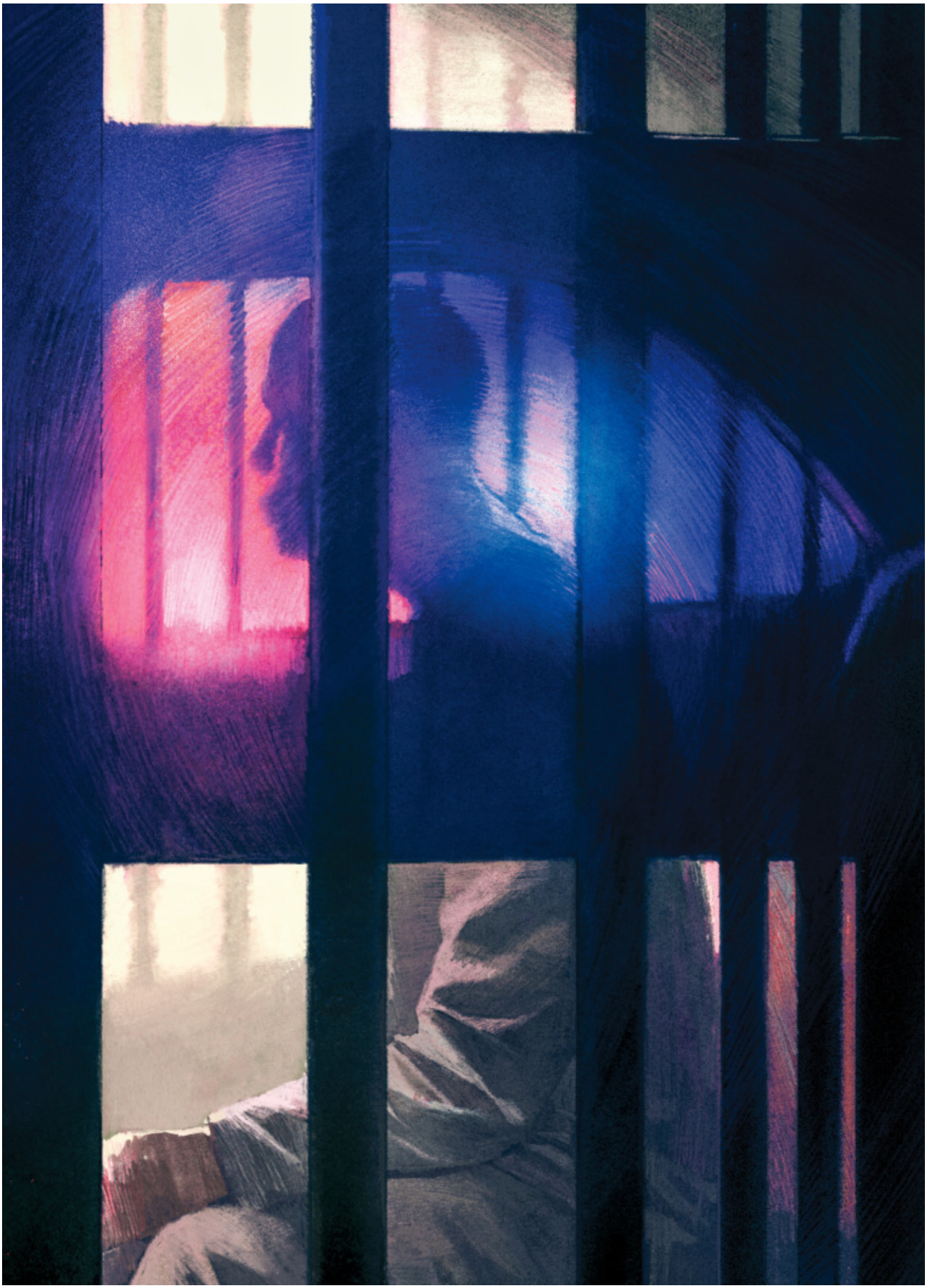
When Sadik Baxter was nine years old, he felt he'd discovered God after tasting the fruits of his parents' birthplace, Jamaica. He devoured the soursop, the star fruit, and the jackfruit; his father, a former cop in Kingston, took note. Sadik's mother, who'd been raising him just outside Miami, soon asked her ex to keep their son on the island for a spell and instill in him some discipline and focus. One way to do that, the father decided, would be to teach him to nurture plants and fruit trees of his own—a project to which Sadik became devoted.

A month before Sadik was arrested for killing the men he'd never seen, his father phoned him to relay a disturbing dream. "Something very bad is going to happen," he warned, but this catastrophe might be prevented if Sadik returned to his love of horticulture. At the time, Sadik felt that something very bad had already happened—a string of bad things, in fact. In a 2009 Miami night-club shooting, he'd taken a stray bullet in his tailbone, and the long recovery had cost him his job at the reception desk of a hotel. "Can you believe I'm changing your Pampers again?" his mom teased as she took care of him. Just as his gunshot injury began to heal, she had a stroke, then died at the age of fifty-nine. In his grief and physical distress, Sadik became addicted to painkillers.

His father, on the phone, put forward another way to live: Couldn't he import Jamaican plants and sell them in Florida grocery stores for a hefty markup? Think Scotch-bonnet peppers! And doesn't everyone love a poinsettia at Christmas? His son could do something he liked and make a living.

"Good idea," Sadik replied, before returning to doing precious little. One Saturday night soon afterward, he and O'Brian Oakley played blackjack and downed free drinks at a suburban Miami casino. Long after midnight, having lost a lot of money and popped a Percocet, Sadik left the casino with O'Brian and ended up in Cooper City, a nearby community of back-yard pools and luxe landscaping. It occurred to Sadik, cruising the winding streets, that he could steal from cars to offset his losses. O'Brian, a singer-songwriter, told me that he resisted the proposal at first. But just before dawn he found himself sitting in his parked silver sedan on a corner, as Sadik got out and looked around.

Sadik was hardly inconspicuous; at six feet nine, he was so lanky that his mom had called him Coconut



Sadik Baxter is serving a life sentence without parole for an accident that took place when he was miles away.

ILLUSTRATION BY HOKYOUNG KIM

Tree. Still, he had the benefit of the dark. Like a kid up too early on Christmas morning, he discovered a drum set in one unlocked car and an embroidered bag of baseball equipment in another. Then he turned his attention to a black S.U.V. sitting outside a home edged with palm trees. Inside the car, he grabbed a handful of change and a pair of sunglasses, only to look up and see a man striding toward him across the grass.

Bradley Kantor, a health-care entrepreneur, and his wife had just returned from taking their son to the airport when they spotted a stranger in their driveway. Sadik tried to saunter calmly away, but Kantor ran back to his car and began driving slowly behind him, his wife filming on her phone as he called 911. The first of several Broward County Sheriff's Office vehicles pulled up in two minutes.

"Get on the ground!" a deputy ordered. Sadik was handcuffed on the grass while having a panic attack—not least because he was supposed to pick up his four-year-old daughter, Danasia, that morning.

Moments later, O'Brian drove past. He had fled the scene when Kantor arrived, but had gotten lost exiting the neighborhood and accidentally circled back around. "That's the car!" Kantor cried out. O'Brian hit the accelerator, and multiple officers gave chase. They trailed him at high speed through a residential neighborhood. Eighteen minutes later, O'Brian ran a light and was struck by another vehicle; his car crashed into Dean Amelkin and his friend Christopher McConnell.

Sadik learned of the accident shortly before he arrived at the sheriff's office, where he confessed to stealing from five unlocked cars. Wearing a blue hospital gown, his voice thick from medications he'd been administered after his panic attack, he asked a detective what would happen next. He'd be charged with burglary, the detective replied. Three weeks later, Sadik received a written copy of his indictment at a Broward County jail.

According to a grand jury, both he and O'Brian did "unlawfully and feloniously kill and murder" two people. The prosecution had decided not to pursue the death penalty, but the first-degree-murder charges were punishable by life in prison without parole. Later, Sadik told me, "That's when I went crazy."

What makes a murderer? Intent is often assumed to be a factor. But, for hundreds of years, the felony-murder doctrine has muddled this conceit.

In 1716, the legal theorist William Hawkins argued that a crime like robbery "necessarily tends to raise Tumults and Quarrels . . . and cannot but be attended with the Danger of personal Hurt." Any resulting death, he posited, was tantamount to murder. Such notions began being applied in British courts later in the eighteenth century, and, almost from the beginning, Britons were questioning whether the felony-murder doctrine was just.

The question came to a head in 1953, when, despite widespread pleas for clemency, a nineteen-year-old Londoner named Derek Bentley was executed because his sixteen-year-old accomplice in a burglary killed a policeman during the crime. Four years later, the U.K. abolished the doctrine, and other Commonwealth nations followed suit. The United States, meanwhile, went in the opposite direction.

According to Guyora Binder, of the University at Buffalo School of Law, the modern felony-murder doctrine is best understood as "a distinctly American innovation." Although it was first applied early in the nineteenth century, use of the charge surged in the nineteen-seventies, when the era of mass incarceration began. Fifty years later, Binder contends, no country relies on the doctrine more.

In Tulsa, two men attempted to steal some copper wire from a radio tower and accidentally electrocuted themselves. One of them died and the other was charged with first-degree murder while recovering from his burns in the hospital; the girlfriend of the deceased was also charged with murder, for having driven them to the tower. In Topeka, a twenty-two-year-old made the mistake of hiding his gun atop his girlfriend's refrigerator; he was charged with first-degree murder several days later, when a child inadvertently fired it at a thirteen-year-old girl. In Minneapolis, a sixteen-year-old girl who sat in the car while two older men killed someone in a robbery was charged with felony murder. Deemed too young to enter the adult prison population after her conviction, she was placed in solitary confinement for months, purportedly for her own safety. In Somerville, Tennessee, last May, three teen-age girls overdosed on fentanyl in their high school's parking lot before a graduation ceremony. Two of them died, and the surviving girl was charged with murder.

For prosecutors, the felony-murder rule offers an efficient path to conviction: winning a case is much easier if you don't need to prove a person's mens rea—"guilty mind"—or even, in some cases, to establish that the accused was at the scene of the crime. Forty-eight states now have some version of the statute. Charlie Smith, the president of the National District Attorneys Association, told me that the tool is particularly useful in cases with vulnerable victims, such as an elderly woman in a wheelchair who gets assaulted in a purse-snatching incident and dies. "The community would feel it's not reasonable if the old lady's death was just a simple misdemeanor assault," he said. Prosecutors often employ felony murder when a death results from an armed robbery—a category of crime that Smith contends, in the spirit of Hawkins, carries death as a foreseeable outcome.

Another benefit to prosecutors is that the steep penalties often attached to felony murder—including life sentences—compel defendants to plead guilty to a lesser charge. "We shouldn't underestimate how many plea bargains occur in the shadow of felony-murder charges across the country," Ekow Yankah, a law professor at the University of Michigan, told me. "It is one of those quiet drivers of mass incarceration we never acknowledge."

Remarkably, no one knows how many people in the United States have been imprisoned for the crime. So in 2022, working with students and colleagues at the Yale Investigative Reporting Lab, I decided to try to get a sense of the scale. We started by filing public-records requests to state corrections departments and other agencies across the country; to our surprise, most told us that they weren't keeping track. "The records do not exist," an official

at the Virginia Department of Corrections wrote, in a typical response. In most states, a felony-murder conviction gets lumped in with other types of murder, clouding the data. It was as if the extent of felony murder in America were hidden by design.

When we eventually secured robust data from eleven states, our lab's analysts discovered that racial disparities for felony-murder convictions were higher—sometimes far higher—than the already disproportionate rates of Black incarceration over all. In Wisconsin, where Black individuals account for less than seven per cent of the population, the data show that they make up seventy-six per cent of those incarcerated for felony murder. In St. Louis, every felony-murder conviction between 2010 and 2022—a total of forty-seven people, according to the State of Missouri—was of a Black person.

To identify cases in other states, we worked with analysts at the nonprofit organization Measures for Justice, and with several law-school clinics, to obtain previously unpublished data. Thus far, we've documented more than ten thousand felony-murder convictions nationwide. We've also scoured trial records, appeals, and news clips, finding and scrutinizing more than two hundred cases, like Baxter's, in which the defendant neither killed nor intended to kill the victim. Women were sometimes charged for driving getaway cars for abusive partners, or performing other tasks under duress; some of the women served longer jail terms than their partners who'd committed the killing. And, time and again, young people were prosecuted for what an acquaintance, to their shock, had decided to do. In the past two years, I travelled from Alabama to California to Michigan to meet some of the individuals who have served time on the charge—along with crime victims' families, prosecutors, public defenders, and others—to consider how a doctrine so widely critiqued, and rejected elsewhere in the world, has proved stubbornly resilient in the United States.

In the days after his arrest, Sadik Baxter figured he'd be released on bail in time for his daughter's first day of kindergarten. He'd already bought Danasia's uniform, a blue skirt and a bright-white shirt. But, shortly after he learned that he was facing life in prison, a nurse in the jail's mental-health infirmary was wrapping him in a "turtle suit," a heavy anti-suicide smock, and a doctor was prescribing a cocktail of drugs.

"If your facial expression would normally convey sarcasm, blink twice."

• •

Once off suicide watch, Sadik remained in a spiritual hole. "I slept through breakfast, lunch, and dinner," he told me. The depression lasted for most of his first year in jail, as he awaited trial. He had originally been appointed a lawyer who struck him as attentive and hardworking, but that attorney was soon replaced by another. The new guy, Sadik thought, treated him like a nuisance. To soothe his panic, he took to playing spades or dominoes with other men in the infirmary's dayroom. One afternoon, an older man named Erik came in and asked for a word.

"Look, I can tell you're fighting time, because I see you've got stripes," Erik said. Indeed, in the jail, inmates' color-coded outfits told a story, indicating the severity of charges. Men in black and white stripes—including Erik—were staring down violent charges that could carry a sentence of life. Sadik explained to Erik that he was facing first-degree felony-murder charges for killing two people he'd never encountered. "So why are you sitting around playing spades," Erik asked, "when you need to focus on learning the law?"

Erik, a Detroit native, sat down with Sadik in his six-man cell and pulled a manila envelope from beneath his bed. "Read this," he said, handing over a few pages of a lawsuit he had filed. Sadik had never completed high school but considered himself a good reader—he'd finished a dozen James Patterson novels in jail. He found the language of Erik's complaint baffling, though. The older man assured him that he'd learn.

The jail had a law library, and Erik taught Sadik how to file a request form that would grant him copies of a few cases at a time, precedents that might prove relevant to his defense. Early each morning, he'd head to Erik's cell to read and annotate the cases, turning one of the cots into his desk. Some of his spades partners from the dayroom eventually joined him. "I'm all about freeing myself," Erik told them, "and you should be, too."

The cell became a classroom, with

"Thanks for watering the plants and Sean."

• •

Uncle E., as the men called their new professor, using one wall as a chalkboard. Sadik told me that, in addition to lessons on case research, "Erik taught us how to file a lawsuit, how to write a grievance, and how to assert our constitutional rights."

Over the next two months, as Sadik burned through case files on felony murder, a thirty-year-old opinion caught his attention. In State v. Amaro, several men arranged to sell more than thirteen thousand dollars' worth of marijuana to a buyer, who, it turned out, was an undercover cop. When other cops descended on the group, just after the deal, to make arrests, Juan Amaro tried to escape by climbing a fence; a detective grabbed him, pulled him to the ground, and hit him. Moments later, one of his accomplices shot and killed an officer. Could Amaro, who had been apprehended and struck just moments before the officer was murdered, be prosecuted for the killing? "When I read the case, my heart beat so fast," Sadik told me.

On the fifth page of the opinion, the judge said that being arrested didn't relieve others of liability for the murder. But, in a footnote, he qualified that his decision "*might* have been different" had a defendant been "securely in custody, either in a jail cell, in a squad car, or perhaps even in handcuffs." The judge went on, "This is not the situation here, and, thus, is left for another day."

Sadik was ecstatic. He had been, indisputably, in handcuffs when the deaths occurred. The judge's phrase became a mantra of sorts, one he often repeated in his cell when he felt hopeless: "Left for another day!"

In the spring of 2014, as Sadik's double-murder trial approached, he and his attorney discussed the possibility of a plea deal. Should Sadik agree to testify against O'Brian Oakley, his felony-murder charges might be dropped, leaving only the thefts from five cars. Each of those thefts carried a five-year maximum sentence, and his attorney hinted that he might be able to negotiate that potential twenty-five-year term down to less than five years.

One of Sadik's cousins, Brian Kirlew, had been a public defender in a nearby county, and wrote to urge him to take a deal: "I have tried 7 murder cases and nearly 50 jury trials. I am as experienced and competent as a trial lawyer gets. So listen to me carefully: You need to take a plea deal, if you want to get out of prison alive."

Sadik didn't want to snitch on a friend, though. And, while he would readily acknowledge the burglaries, he felt that he was innocent of murder, and couldn't imagine that a jury of his peers would disagree. Even the judge, Jeffrey Levenson, had said at a pretrial hearing, "I think you have a very defensible case, in terms of whether you're responsible for the homicide." So in May, 2014, Sadik shuffled into a Broward County courthouse in waist chains, changed into the black suit that he'd worn to his mother's funeral, and girded himself for a trial.

Before swearing in the jury, the judge offered Sadik a final chance to take a plea, and underlined the risk. "Jury instructions in this are pretty tough for a defendant," he explained, and if Sadik were to be convicted he'd be forced to sentence him, under mandatory sentencing rules, to life in prison.

Florida—where our investigation discovered nearly a thousand people serving life or life without parole for felony murder—is one of more than twenty states in which the law routinely strips judges of their discretion in sentencing those convicted on the charge. In many cases, a judge's only option is mandatory life.

Sadik's lawyer and the prosecutor scrambled unsuccessfully to settle on a plea deal, and Sadik duly took his seat at the front of the courtroom, his brother and sister filing in behind him. Friends and relatives of the victims had filed in, too, and, in a trial that lasted just two days, several witnesses took the stand to recall the last moments in the lives of Christopher McConnell and Dean Amelkin.

James Bolger had biked with the two men every Sunday morning for years. On that final morning, Bolger told the courtroom, he'd been approaching a green light, trying to catch up with McConnell and Amelkin, who were riding ahead of him. Suddenly, Bolger testified, "there was a silver blur of a car going through, and they were gone." Bolger, a trained paramedic, raced over. "And what did you see?" the prosecutor asked. "There wasn't anything to be done," Bolger replied. The men's severed limbs were strewn in multiple directions.

Although the testimony was devastating to McConnell's wife, Denise, she told me that, at the time, she had found comfort in the felony-murder doctrine, sensing its moral solidity. She had married her husband when she was twenty-one, and he'd been her stabilizing force. They'd raised a family and run an air-conditioning company together, and his death, she said, had put her "through hell." Listening to the evidence, she had concluded that the defendant had decided to steal and dragged his friend into it, so why shouldn't he be held accountable for the ramifications? No one mentioned that, if convicted, Sadik Baxter would get life in prison—a prospect that later disturbed her.

After the prosecutor called more than a dozen witnesses, including Bradley Kantor, the man from whom Sadik had stolen the sunglasses and loose change, Sadik's attorney called just one: Sadik himself, who was nervous and struggled to speak clearly. He confessed to the thefts, hoping that the jury would value his willingness to take responsibility. When Sadik finished and returned to his seat, O'Brian Oakley's attorney shook his head and said, "You dumbshit! You just convicted yourself." It took the jury thirty-seven minutes to reach a verdict. On both counts, Sadik was guilty of first-degree murder.

Ian Marcus Amelkin, back in Brooklyn, was shocked to get a call from the state's attorney's office telling him the trial was over less than forty-eight hours after it had begun. Hanging up, he felt his grief compounding. He'd spent two years consumed by postmortem logistics—reminding his mom to eat, settling Dean's debts—while also wrecked by his own memories: Dean's "Wayne's World" impressions; his turning the volume up high for everything Jimi Hendrix, whom he'd seen in concert on New Year's Day in 1969; his lessons, as a meat man, on how to grill the perfect steak. And now Dean's death was being used by the state to separate someone else's father from his child.

"Another life is ruined," Ian wrote flatly to his family in an e-mail. He'd recently forsaken corporate law to become a public defender ("Would you really leave all that money on the table?" his dad had wondered shortly before he died), and the brevity of Sadik Baxter's trial made him wonder if a real defense had even been mounted. He called his sisters, Brett and Chelsey, to ask what, at this point, the three of them might do.

Ian had attended New York University School of Law, where he joined a clinic run by the Alabama civil-rights lawyer Bryan Stevenson. ("That was back when he was legal-nerd famous, not Oprah famous," Ian said.) At the time, Stevenson was preparing to litigate a groundbreaking felony-murder case before the Supreme Court: that of a fourteen-year-old who had been sentenced to life in prison for a killing done by one of his companions. That case contributed to the Court's declaring that mandatory life-without-parole sentences for juveniles were unconstitutional. Ian was assigned to work with one of Stevenson's death-row clients, a case that immersed him in his professor's contention that "each person is more than the worst thing they've ever done."

From the beginning, Ian had tried to apply that same perspective to Sadik Baxter and O'Brian Oakley, and when he and his sisters learned that the two men would be charged with double murder in the first degree, they also sensed, as Brett put it, that "Dad would

think it's bullshit." Knowing that the State of Florida gives special weight to crime victims' perspectives, Ian decided to try to persuade the prosecutor to dismiss the murder charges. "I didn't go in with an abolitionist perspective," he recalled. "A reasonable sentence would have been fine with us"—say, a maximum of ten years for Oakley and a few years for Baxter.

In a phone call with the prosecutor, the champion debater tried to be chummy and measured as he suggested that, after an accident, locking up two young fathers (Oakley had a daughter, too) for lengthy terms wasn't his family's idea of justice. His arguments failed to land, and, Ian told me, the prosecutor later called to float the idea of Oakley's pleading to forty years. "Very, very harsh," Ian exclaimed, growing frustrated. Afterward, he swung between anger at a prosecutor who seemed to want him to be "out for blood" and guilt that he'd let Baxter and Oakley down.

With Baxter's verdict now in, Chelsey contacted his lawyer to ask if she and her siblings might help at sentencing. The attorney was stunned—it was the first time that a family of a crime victim had reached out in this way to help one of his clients. Although Baxter's sentence was pretty much a foregone conclusion, the lawyer thought the fact that Dean's kids were asking for restraint couldn't hurt. It might even help someday, the Amelkins figured, should Baxter appeal.

In early June, 2014, when Sadik returned to court to be sentenced, his lawyer approached the bench, holding aloft the Amelkin siblings' plea for mercy. It argued that Sadik had been in handcuffs when the chase began and that a life sentence without parole would be "cruel and unusual punishment" and leave them "heartsick." After acknowledging the missive and calling Sadik forward to read a letter of apology, Judge Levenson decreed the inevitable: life without parole. "The law in itself, good, bad, or indifferent, is enacted by the legislature," Levenson said, concluding, "Good luck to you, Mr. Baxter."

The man who killed Donna Amelkin's first husband got nine months. The man whose friend killed her second husband got life without parole. As "nuts" as the discrepancy seemed to her, she told me, she hadn't lost much sleep over it. (Either way, she said, "I'm still the one who's left alone.") She had been more preoccupied by a different injustice: that the felony-murder rule was being used to obscure the role that the Broward County Sheriff's Office had played in Dean's death.

Donna ran a high-school English

department, and while sitting shivah she'd received a letter from the husband of a former co-worker. A former law-enforcement official in South Florida, he'd enclosed a copy of the county sheriff's policy on high-speed chases, with key phrases highlighted. Deputies were barred from starting hot pursuits if the suspects weren't immediately endangering other people's lives or engaged in a "forcible felony," such as a rape, a murder, or a home invasion. Such policies exist for a reason: high-speed law-enforcement chases are often lethal, causing roughly one death per day in the U.S., according to a 2017 report by the Bureau of Justice Statistics. The Amelkins began asking why Baxter's thefts had necessitated such a chase, upon which the sheriff denied that a chase had even occurred. In 2014, the family filed a wrongful-death claim against the sheriff's office and reached a settlement that came with no admission of fault.

Felony murder "made it easier for the sheriff's department not to take responsibility," Donna told me. Once Baxter and Oakley were charged with murder, she said, "the question of how the deaths happened got pushed aside."

In our reporting lab, we identified more than thirty instances of high-speed law-enforcement chases that resulted in fatalities and were followed by a felony-murder charge. In some of these cases, police had violated their own pursuit policies.

Another subset of felony-murder cases we examined involved shootings by people in law enforcement. In many states, when an officer fires a lethal gunshot at a crime scene, individuals who were with the victim may be charged with the killing. (The rationale is that, without the instigating felony, police wouldn't have been on the scene in the first place.) We compiled twenty cases in which an officer pulled the trigger and someone else assumed the charge; the best known of these cases is that of LaKeith Smith.

In 2015, when he was fifteen, LaKeith and four friends broke into two unoccupied homes in Millbrook, Alabama, to steal Xbox games and other electronics. A neighbor called the police, who appeared, guns drawn. LaKeith ran into the woods, and one of the officers shot and killed his friend, sixteen-year-old A'Donte Washington, who they said had a gun. The prosecution alleged that one of the older teen-agers had fired a shot, and a grand jury found that the officer's use of force was "justified." LaKeith was charged as an adult with murder, for the killing at the officer's hand.

Reviewing our felony-murder data, which included more than a thousand cases involving teens like LaKeith, my lab colleagues and I were struck by a contradiction. The Supreme Court has acknowledged that adolescence is marked by "a lack of maturity and an underdeveloped sense of responsibility," which make juveniles "less deserving of the most severe punishments." But when it comes to felony murder, we discovered, being younger was not a mitigating variable. The average age of individuals convicted of felony murder appeared to be lower than for standard murder—in many states, more than four years lower.

Jenny Egan, the chief attorney for the juvenile division of the public defender's office in Baltimore, told me, "Because of peer pressure, young people tend to commit crimes in groups," and, when a death results, "all of the kids involved get charged with murder, and it gets used as a cudgel to get kids to coöperate against each other." Nazgol Ghandnoosh, the co-director of research at the Sentencing Project, notes that youth of color are particularly likely to be "punished for presence."

LaKeith watched as, one by one, his friends took pleas that ranged from seventeen to twenty-eight years. But LaKeith and his family, some of whom knew firsthand how violent the state's prison system could be, decided to take his case to trial. In 2018, LaKeith, who is Black, was sentenced before an all-white jury to sixty-five years in prison, later reduced to fifty-five years. "There's no sugar-coating it," LaKeith's mother, BronTina Smith, told me. "He was punished for bucking the system and trying to exercise his right to a trial."

BronTina has since become a prominent voice in a movement to challenge the felony-murder rule—a movement led for many years by families of incarcerated people and lately galvanized by Black Lives Matter. BronTina works with a coalition spear-

"Just wave your watch over the screen for a while, then audibly sigh and swipe your credit card."

headed by Represent Justice, a nonprofit organization, and together they persuaded celebrities from Erykah Badu to Kim Kardashian to direct attention to LaKeith's case. One of the coalition's goals is to lobby for state reforms that would limit how the felony-murder charge can be used against defendants who didn't actually kill, including those held responsible for shootings by law enforcement.

Marshan Allen, a Represent Justice staffer who canvassed Millbrook residents on the issue at bars and tailgates, said, "We spoke to a lot of very conservative people, and most of them had no idea how this law works. But, once we explained it to them, we found that they didn't agree with LaKeith's sentence at all. It's intuitive. People get it."

Last December, under pressure, the judge who'd originally sentenced LaKeith to sixty-five years agreed to a resentencing hearing. "GOD IS REAL!!!!!" his mother posted online. In court, the civil-rights lawyer Leroy Maxwell would have a chance to make the case that LaKeith's original public defender had neglected to present mitigating evidence. Maxwell hoped that his client might be resentenced to time served, and walk free.

Last March, on the night before the hearing, LaKeith's supporters held a vigil in Montgomery. While making posters to take to court, his family chatted about the meal they'd serve when he came home. "Greens and chicken and mac and cheese—all the soul food," BronTina said, smiling. "Cereal," countered LaKeith's aunt Gladys, remembering how the boy would come to her house "and suddenly all of my Cinnamon Toast Crunch and Frosted Flakes would be gone."

The next morning, LaKeith—now a twenty-four-year-old who'd spent a third of his life behind bars—entered a courthouse in Wetumpka, Alabama, in orange shower shoes and chains. His mom, in sparkly green sneakers and a fedora, sat in the first row. Judge Sibley Reynolds listened to a series of witnesses, including A'Donte Washington's father, who testified that he hadn't been called at the original trial. What he would have said, he told the judge, was that LaKeith shouldn't serve time, because "he wasn't the one that murdered my son." Even the D.A. appeared receptive to a lighter sentence, saying of the original attorney, "Hell, I wouldn't hire her!"

Finally, the judge looked down at LaKeith. "I'm sentencing you to thirty years in custody," he said. Many people in the gallery gasped. "Dirty bigot judge!" a woman behind me shouted. "The *cops* killed A'Donte!" That night, the homecoming feast that the Smiths had optimistically prepared was used to feed a tearful group.

Because Florida is one of many states where what begins as a visible first-degree felony-murder charge in the data gets mysteriously truncated, after conviction, into first-degree murder, Sadik Baxter was now, to the system, just another killer—a wary lifer who passed the years performing prison jobs with antebellum-sounding names, like "houseman" and "groundsman." But, on his own time, Sadik had channelled his inner Uncle E. and evolved into a jailhouse lawyer whose mastery of felony murder surpassed that of many professional defense attorneys. Three filing boxes of annotated case law were among his most valued possessions; he carted them from prison to prison over the years.

He'd come to believe that one of the most promising defenses in his case was the "independent act" theory, which had received passing mention in State v. Amaro. It established that a defendant wasn't responsible for an illegal act by his "co-felon" if that act was committed after, and apart from, the original felony. Sadik believed that O'Brian's fatal police chase, having come after his own arrest, was an independent act. He just needed to prove it to a judge.

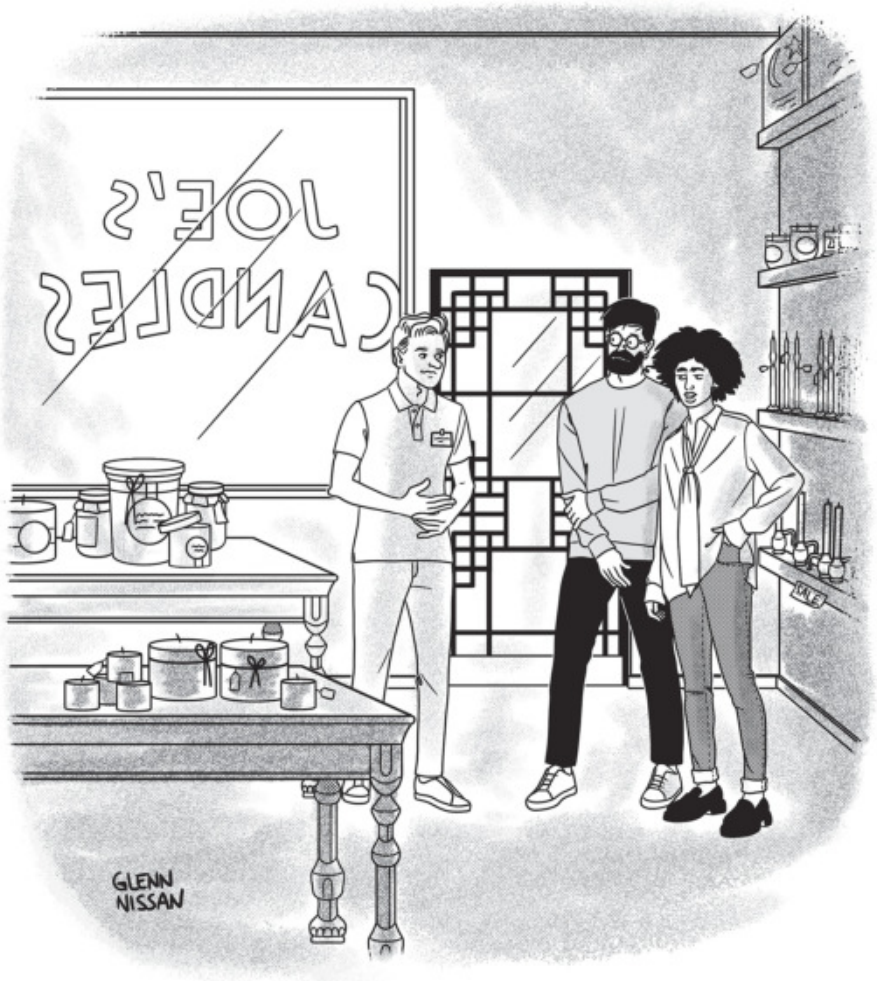
On good days, he hunkered down with a copy of "The Jailhouse Lawyer's Handbook," sixth edition, and wrote and rewrote his pro-se legal briefs, Jamaican dancehall music blasting in his earphones. On days when the fight seemed hopeless, he turned to "Conversations with Myself," by Nelson Mandela. "At least, if for nothing else," Mandela had written in a letter from Robben Island, "the cell gives you the opportunity to look daily into your entire conduct, to overcome the bad and develop whatever is good in you." Mandela turned to meditation, dream journaling, and letter writing. Sadik took up all three.

A particular obsession was imagining his way into the life of his daughter, Danasia. If he couldn't join her at her basketball games, he could at least commune with her in his manifestation journal, where he would articulate his wishes for her future as if they had already happened. One day, having heard that she was selling lip gloss, he'd written, "Danasia's lip gloss company has sky rocketed in sales and is the most popular lip gloss company in the world. It is currently net worth 7 million dollars between the 7 stores she owns and is climbing by the day."

Danasia was now a teen-ager. Sadik had been filing motions and appeals since she was in the first grade. As he discovered, litigation is a waiting game; years could pass between a petition and a ruling. He tried arguing that he'd had ineffective representation, and that the sharing of sixty-nine "gruesome" photographs of the victims' body parts and a bloody crime scene had biased the jury. He tried to get his sentence reduced, appealing to "the mercy of this court" to convert his charge to manslaughter; in May, 2018, the court replied: "DENIED." In 2019, he filed a motion for post-conviction relief ("DENIED"), and in 2020 a motion for a rehearing ("DENIED"). In 2021, he ventured a Motion to Correct Illegal Sentence ("DENIED").

Sadik also wrote to half a dozen journalists, and to more than twenty law-school clinics and civil-rights attorneys around the country. In a letter to then President Barack Obama, he explained that he'd faced discrimination in court because of his race and his poverty, and concluded, "I humbly ask you to point me in the right direction to help me with my case." These efforts came to nothing.

Elsewhere in Florida, in another prison cell, his co-defendant, O'Brian



"Do you have one that smells like something interesting is happening in our lives?"

• •

Oakley, was waging a similar battle. O'Brian had been convicted on even more grounds than Sadik, including two counts of first-degree felony murder and two counts of vehicular homicide, as well as five counts of burglary. (The court was evidently unmoved by another of Ian Marcus Amelkin's letters: "Now four lives—my dad's, Mr. McConnell's, Mr. Baxter's, and Mr. Oakley's—are forever destroyed by the events of August 5, 2012. . . .")

O'Brian appealed: How could he be guilty of four counts of murder when only two deaths had occurred? In 2018, an appellate court agreed and dropped his two vehicular-homicide convictions. But the mandatory sentence—life without parole—remained.

When I spoke to O'Brian last spring, he wept throughout the conversation. "People lost their lives, and I have to live with that," he told me, describing how often he replays the scene of the accident, and his panicked decision to flee. "Every day, I wake up and realize that I feel pain even in my dreams," he said. Before his incarceration, lyrics and musical ideas came easily to him. "But I'll try to write a song now and I can't finish it," he said. "I try to sing, but with the pain I can't."

By the fall of 2021, Sadik's options for appeal in Florida were dwindling and he realized that he had one real hope left: a federal claim. He'd already argued that his life sentence was "repugnant to the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment," because discretion in sentencing is a paramount function of the judicial system, and the judge in his case had been stripped of it. Now, citing the "independent act" doctrine and State v. Amaro, he would make a key assertion—that his life sentence was an "unreasonable application of established federal law," reflecting the kind of "grossly disproportionate" sentencing that is prohibited by the Eighth Amendment.

Not long after Sadik filed his argument, I happened to write to him for the first time, requesting an interview. His response to my letter came almost immediately: "I must say this still feels surreal, as for years I've been searching for a listening ear to hear the corruption and injustice in my case, or even to be acknowledged as a human being." Soon, we were talking almost daily.

One night in April, Sadik called, anxious. He believed the federal judge would be ruling soon, and asked, "Have there been any updates in my case?" Not having a lawyer put him at a serious disadvantage; it often took weeks for him to receive basic updates from the court, even on time-sensitive matters.

I logged into PACER, a federal-records database, and there it was: a ruling from U.S. District Judge Beth Bloom. I downloaded the file, quickly scrolled to the bottom to find the judge's decision on his habeas petition, and read it aloud: "DENIED." Then I read more closely, and said, "Hold on."

The judge had rejected the appeal on thirteen grounds. Her reasoning turned on a little-known but extraordinarily consequential law, the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996. Signed by President Bill Clinton, the law radically curtails the rights of incarcerated people. Even if Judge Bloom agreed that Sadik was in prison unconstitutionally, she'd have to defer to the Florida court, unless a very narrow set of conditions could be met. The surprise in the ruling came on the ninth page, when she took up Sadik's Eighth Amendment claim.

"The court agrees that the life sentences in this case were harsh," she wrote. She later quoted a sentencing statement from Judge Levenson in 2014, acknowledging that the defen-

dant had had little to do with the two bicyclists' deaths: "Notwithstanding your involvement in the case, which I think we all agree was not a significant involvement, I am mandated to sentence you to life in prison." On Eighth Amendment grounds, Judge Bloom had decided to grant Sadik's case a precious "certificate of appealability," allowing him to present his argument to a higher court. Over the phone, he exclaimed, "I'm not fully dead!"

Although defenders of felony murder often cite its value as a deterrent, none of those I interviewed who had been imprisoned for the crime, including Sadik, knew of the statute before being charged with it. In 2021, a task force commissioned by the Minnesota legislature further explored such questions of deterrence. This inquiry was spurred largely by two mothers, Toni Cater and Linda Martinson, whose daughters were serving time on the charge after a man they'd met only minutes earlier shot and killed someone.

Upon analyzing state data and reviewing empirical research, the task force concluded that the felony-murder charge "does not deter behavior" and "does not reduce the risk of reoffense." What's more, it intensified inequities. A Black person in Minnesota was five times more likely to be charged with felony murder than a white person, and a Native American person ten times more likely. Fully a third of those locked up for murder in the state were in for felony murder, and most of them had no prior conviction for "an offense against a person." This spring, the legislature decided to curtail severe sentences and limit the future use of the felony-murder charge for defendants who did not commit a killing. Because the reform will apply retroactively, hundreds of people, including the daughters of Cater and Martinson, may have a chance to win relief.

Minnesota legislators took their cues from California, where, after groundbreaking reforms, more than six hundred people have had their sentences reduced and, according to a study by California's Office of the State Public Defender, taxpayers have saved as much as $1.2 billion in prison costs. Illinois and Colorado have also recently narrowed the use of the felony-murder doctrine, and a bill now pending in New York would permit the use of the felony-murder charge only if a defendant "directly caused the death recklessly" or served as "an accomplice . . . in the felony, and acted with the intent to cause death."

But, as some states pull back from the concept, others are expanding it. In Arkansas, legislators have considered a bill allowing district attorneys to charge women who obtain unauthorized abortions, and anyone who aids them, with felony murder. (In the Dobbs decision, Justice Samuel Alito wrote that abortion offered America its "proto-felony-murder rule"; in the colonies, if a doctor gave a pregnant woman a "potion" to aid in an abortion and she died, he could be charged with murder.) In the wake of Dobbs, other states have proposed legislation similar to the Arkansas bill. Some legislators are also pushing felony murder's expansion into another fraught terrain: overdoses tied to the opioid epidemic.

"These cartel bosses, who have taken advantage of the weakness of the Biden Administration, must be held accountable for the millions of lives they have destroyed with this horrific drug," Senator Ted Cruz said recently, in support of a bill to make the lethal distribution of fentanyl punishable with federal felony-murder charges. A mere two milligrams of the synthetic opioid, which is cheaper than heroin and is often used as a filler by underground drug producers, can be a lethal dose. As deaths of unsuspecting users soar, red-state politicians have rallied around this cause.

Some defenders and prosecutors argue that this hard line will lead to more deaths, as fellow-users hesitate to dial 911 when they witness an overdose. But proponents underline a payoff: that felony-murder prosecutions will bring down drug kingpins and major suppliers.

When I examined more than three dozen overdose-related felony-murder prosecutions, I didn't find kingpins. What I found instead were defendants like Jacob Sayre, of Ozark, Missouri. Last December, when he was seventeen, he was charged with killing a sixteen-year-old girl, Victoria Jones, whom he'd met at church.

One night in September, 2022, Jacob, a homeschooled kid whose mom helped run a Bible-study group, had received a Snapchat message from Victoria, a softball whiz who was also a gifted student. ("She was headstrong in science," her father told me.) According to the probable-cause statement, Victoria wanted Jacob to bring her some cocaine, but his dealer didn't have any. Jacob gave her a Percocet instead. "Only do a quarter and then do the other quarter if you don't feel it," he messaged. "Please be smart."

Victoria locked the door to her bedroom, on whose wall hung a periodic table she knew by heart. Not long afterward, she messaged Jacob, "Ok, I took it, like a 3rd, fucking cut it wrong, holy duck, I feel it." The next morning, her dad forced open her door with a screwdriver. Victoria was dead, and on the nightstand was a rolled-up twenty and the remains of a small blue pill.

Shortly afterward, Jacob, who had never before been in trouble with the law, was charged as an adult with felony murder and other offenses. "Her loss affected the whole community, and we are one hundred per cent in agreement with the state," Victoria's father, David Jones, told me. "We don't believe a felony-murder charge is overreach."

When Jacob and I spoke this summer, he was on house arrest, trying to keep calm as he awaits trial by practicing Van Halen covers on his guitar. His mom, meanwhile, conducts ongoing imaginary conversations with the district attorney: "So when you charge Jacob, and you put him in prison, does that make our society any safer?"

Joshua Elbaz, of Gwinnett County, Georgia, is well positioned to understand the urges for both retribution and mercy. When he was twenty-one, his older brother, Brenden, died of a heroin overdose. In 2018, Joshua went to law school, imagining that he'd become a defender and try to guide people who were battling addiction

toward help, not prison time. But in February, 2020, while he was in class, his dad called, and called again. His younger brother, Alex, was just two months away from earning his accounting degree when a Percocet laced with fentanyl killed him.

This time, Joshua became obsessed with tracking down the man he called "my brother's murderer." The attitude of the local police being, as he put it, "Tough shit, get over it, there's no case," he investigated on his own. Alex's Samsung watch contained copies of his text messages, which identified a landscaper named Phillip Patterson as the person from whom he had last bought drugs. Patterson was soon arrested in a sting.

Upon graduating from law school, Joshua joined the Gwinnett County district attorney's office as a prosecutor. The office helped bring four felony-murder cases against dealers, and, while he didn't formally work on Patterson's case, he said, "I was so angry. I'd say, 'I'm going to take that man to trial, and I hope he gets life.'" In early 2023, three years after his younger brother's death, he was in the courtroom for Patterson's pretrial hearing.

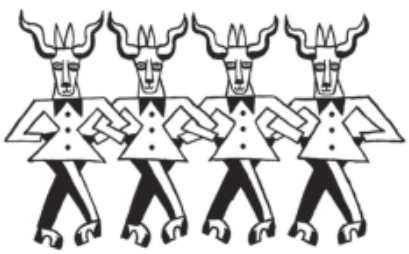
Like many people accused of felony murder, Patterson had taken a plea, conceding to voluntary manslaughter and drug trafficking in exchange for a forty-year sentence, with the possibility of parole after thirty. In court, Patterson read a letter of apology to the Elbaz family as tears streamed down his face. "He said, 'I really didn't know the drugs were laced,'" Joshua remembered, "and I believed him."

Joshua was struck by something else he'd learned in court: that Patterson had suddenly stopped attending his family's Sunday dinner, which had later seemed like a clue that he was suffering from addiction. "When I heard that," Joshua said, "the most human part of me thought, That's the exact same thing that happened to Alex. He just stopped coming to Sunday dinner."

Although he still believes that dealers who intentionally sell fentanyl-laced pills should be liable for murder, Joshua now thinks that murder charges against those who are struggling with addiction themselves won't touch the root causes of the crisis. And, as much as he'd dreamed of seeing Patterson led off in shackles, when it actually happened, he told me, "it hit me like a train."

Sadik is now incarcerated in the Okaloosa Correctional Institution, in the Florida Panhandle, hours from where most of his family lives. One recent Saturday morning, I joined a line of women holding special transparent purses they'd bought to allow them to carry money for snacks through the prison gates. Inside, I spotted Sadik instantly. Living up to his mom's nickname, Coconut Tree, he stood even taller than the two palms painted on a prison wall—part of a beach scene where loved ones could pay to get their photo taken. "I'm nervous," he said. He hadn't had a visitor in five years, when Danasia had last come with her mom and his sister.

Sadik remembers every detail of that encounter: how Danasia covered her face when she arrived; how he'd coaxed her forward by singing "Gon' Get Better," by the Jamaican artist Vybz Kartel; how, when he'd finished, she'd asked him to sing it again until, finally, he protested, "You sing *me* a song!" For the next five hours, they'd played Life and Connect Four at a picnic table, and when visiting hours were up they had both cried. In the following years, his efforts to sing his way



into her affections grew less successful. "She's, like, 'Daddy, I'm fifteen now, I don't watch "Strawberry Shortcake" anymore,'" he told me. Recently, she had been missing his calls altogether.

He was telling me this as we sat in the stupefying heat of the prison yard—a spot that afforded us some privacy from guards who called him Too Tall and Sasquatch. Sadik was eating a box of fruit snacks from the canteen which looked to me like processed plastic but reminded him of the Jamaican fruits that had led him to God. He wanted to know what I'd learned from other families fighting for felony-murder-law reform, and when I left he asked me to tell him something of the natural world outside the prison walls. That evening, I went for a swim at a nearby beach and sent him a photo of a waning moon over the water.

Once home, I would check PACER for updates on his federal case, and one afternoon I found a startling posting: the court would toss out his petition if he didn't reply within fourteen days. He'd made a mundane filing error but had yet to receive a copy of this notification himself, and had only a matter of days left to sort it out. I called a lawyer who I thought might help me find someone to translate the court's almost incomprehensible instructions. He described the case to Christine Monta, an appellate attorney at the MacArthur Justice Center, who felt stunned when she looked it up. This was the kind of legal challenge to felony murder, she told me, that she had longed for years to take on.

Sadik Baxter's case, she said, represented a chance to challenge the "triple injustice" that many people incarcerated in state prisons have experienced. First, prosecutors hit them with charges, like felony murder, that are disproportionate to their crimes. Second, because of mandatory sentences, defendants get "extreme, unconstitutional sentences." And, third, because of the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act, they are hindered from bringing their claims to federal court. To prevail, they typically have to identify either a significant and indisputable factual error made by a state court or a preëxisting Supreme Court case that clearly backs up their argument. "Congress has erected this very, very difficult standard, but we really think he meets it," Monta told me. As a number of Supreme Court precedents have established, she went on, "punishment should not be vastly disproportionate to your culpability, and everyone agrees that culpability for murder here is really, really strained."

With Sadik's permission, she began to craft a habeas appeal on his behalf. She hopes to argue in federal court that his mandatory life-without-parole sentence is unconstitutional and that his case should be remanded back to trial court for resentencing.

Not long ago, while assembling the case, she encountered an intriguing relic: the impassioned letter by Ian, Brett, and Chelsey Amelkin arguing that Sadik's sentence was cruel and unusual, which had been omitted from his official post-conviction court record. Moved by this lost document, she sat at a desk lit by her own late father's lamp and began to type the outlines of an argument.

Could former President Trump be prosecuted for felony murder for urging on the January 6th attack on the U.S. Capitol, which led to a number of deaths? Could fossil-fuel-company executives be held liable for murder for criminally deceiving the public about carbon emissions that killed people? If we take the felony-murder doctrine's core premise seriously, it's easy to imagine a radically different justice system. But, after two years of closely reviewing cases, I can state with confidence that the doctrine is rarely levelled against people of influence. It is used instead to impose some of our society's harshest punishments on low-income defendants, young people, and defendants of color.

I was reminded of this imbalance when I tried to reach out to Bradley Kantor, who had called the police when Sadik stole the loose change and sunglasses from his car. Searching online, I learned that two years ago Kantor had been arrested in a federal raid. He pleaded guilty to conspiracy to commit forty-two million dollars' worth of health-care fraud and conspiracy to commit money laundering. He was sentenced to a decade in prison, and the government seized his multimillion-dollar home, his two Winnebagos, and his thirty-seven-foot yacht. When I shared this news with Ian recently, we decided we were looking at a parable of American sentencing: Sadik Baxter stole a few dollars, a drum set, some used baseball equipment, and a pair of sunglasses and got life, while Bradley Kantor stole millions and got ten years.

"It's fine—on the label we'll write 'scientifically tested' instead of 'scientifically proven.'"

• •

Brett and Chelsey Amelkin are now, like their brother, public defenders. When they heard the news of Sadik's momentum in his federal case, all three siblings felt heartened. "He deserves a shot," Ian said, "and so does Oakley." If Sadik gets his second chance, Ian has already pictured the scene. Before showing up at the hearing, he'll play the music Dean loved—Hendrix, Led Zeppelin, Blind Faith—and grab from his closet a striped tie of his dad's that he thinks brings him luck in court. "It's all fucked up," he said of the tie, grinning, as he laid it out for me. "I tape it together when I wear it."

This fall, Sadik was placed in solitary confinement after a dispute with a guard. In a cell whose window was covered over by aluminum, his mind kept turning to Lolita, an orca at the Miami Seaquarium he'd loved to visit as a child. When young, she'd been taken from her home in the Salish Sea, north of Seattle, and spent the next fifty years penned in the Seaquarium. Indigenous activists, many of whom knew her as Tokitae, had recently won a multi-year battle to bring her home. But, just before Sadik was put in solitary, she died, still in captivity.

Less morose distraction could be found in his manifestation journal. When the broader public learned the details of his case, he wrote one day, "it was such a shock to everyone that they changed the Law." When he was finally released from solitary, he called Danasia, eager to tell her how real this vision had seemed. She picked up for the first time since May.

"I still want to take you to all the places you asked me to take you when you were younger—the water park, Disney World, the beach," he said. She grew quiet, and then had to go, but the conversation continued in his head. "I want to take you to my daddy's farm and show you the apple trees, and the jackfruit trees, and the mango trees. I'll show you how to chop the sugarcane. And I'll show you how to take the bamboo and use it to make a kind of slingshot, so that you can place an apple blossom inside it, and let it fly." ♦

PROFILES

WATCH THIS SPACE

The global ambitions of Invader's street art.

BY LAUREN COLLINS

The ground was squelchy, leading the mind to wonder what sort of organic matter was decomposing underfoot. A topsoil of potato-chip bags and soda cans disturbed the silence that Invader and his accomplice, Mr. Blue, were trying to preserve. It was 1:03 A.M. on a Wednesday in mid-July. They had parked their van nearby, and were picking their way down an overgrown service path that led to a sliver of land alongside the A4 highway, just past the eastern limit of Paris.

"Flatten yourself against the wall if a car comes," Invader told me.

He wriggled past a phantasmagorical fern.

"You always get some crazy plants, with all the carbon dioxide from the cars," he said.

Our destination was a forty-foot-high concrete pillar that supported a smaller road passing over the A4. Traffic raced by at eighty miles an hour. Invader rummaged in the underbrush, trying to find a pair of polypropylene supermarket totes, filled with supplies, that Mr. Blue had tossed out of the van on an earlier run past the site. Mr. Blue, meanwhile, was wrestling with a telescopic ladder. He extended it and propped it against the pillar while Invader, kneeling, laid out a series of panels made from fifteen-centimetre-square tiles. They were labelled A1, A2, A3, A4, B1, B2, B3, and B4.

"It's like a bank robbery," he had said a few minutes before. "I know exactly how everything needs to go."

For twenty-seven years, Invader has been decorating the walls, bridges, monuments, tunnels, sidewalks, staircases, railings, gates, curbs, benches, bollards, posts, poles, pipes, columns, fountains, pools, docks, seawalls, roofs, chimneys, medians, bus stops, train stations, storefronts, bookshops, and bars of Paris and beyond with playful mosaics. They have depicted everything from winged insects to cartoon characters and slot-machine fruits. Invader calls his interventions "invasions," and the mosaics themselves are known as "invaders." He has executed more than four thousand in a hundred and seventy-two cities in thirty-two countries, grazing permanence in the traditionally ephemeral world of street art.

Invader couples the methods of graffiti artists with the materials of the Mesopotamians. He often works in twenty-five hues offered by Émaux de Briare, a French tile company. "Unfortunately, they don't do a nice pink," he told me. His works are so coveted that he has been forced to employ stronger and stronger glues to keep thieves from hacking them out of the urban environment. He also uses a protective process that involves baking the tiles in an oven and then plunging them into cold water. "The tonic shock makes it so they crumble like a cookie if someone tries to remove them," he said.

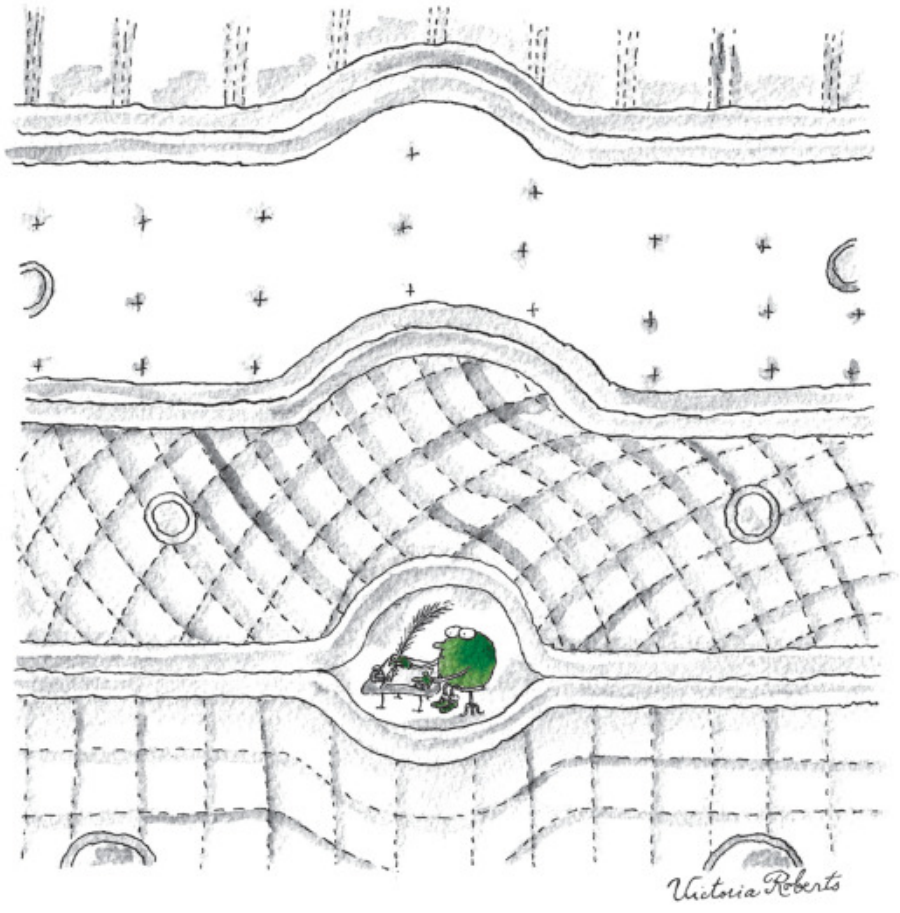
At first, Invader made pieces and then found places to put them. But the colors would blend into the walls, or the eyes on an alien would glance away from an architectural feature that he wanted to emphasize, creating, he said, a "very, very stressful" situation. So now he creates custom pieces for specific places, plucked from a running list. (A Super Mario mosaic that he installed just above a New York sidewalk appears to bop between two street pipes.) He documents each one in a meticulous archive and in self-published maps and books. He likens his process to "urban acupuncture," saying, "I need to find the neuralgic points of the cities I visit." Watching a movie, he's been known to hit the Pause button to isolate a tantalizing wall.

At any given moment, millions of people around the world are attending Invader's expositions, knowingly or not. Around three hundred and fifty thousand participate in FlashInvaders, a mobile reality game in which players

In twenty-seven years, Invader has placed

more than four thousand mosaics in cities around the world. He's even sent two into space.

PHOTOGRAPH BY LOU ESCOBAR



"My dear princess, it has never been my intention to cause you pain."

• •

compete to find and then photograph, or "flash," his mosaics. Some invaders are riffs on the four characters—crab, squid, octopus, and U.F.O.—of Space Invaders, the video game created by Tomohiro Nishikado in 1978. Others are inside jokes, requiring a moment to decode. On the Rue Duroc, passersby encounter a duckwalking Chuck Berry. In Versailles, the crablike aliens wear crowns. You can even find one of his pieces in an unexpected cranny of the Eiffel Tower.

The mayor of Paris, Anne Hidalgo, has an Invader piece in her office, but much of his work qualifies under French law as vandalism, which can be punishable by prison time and fines of up to thirty thousand euros. This is the putative reason that Invader works pseudonymously, posing for the infrequent photograph in a Salvador Dalí mask or ski goggles. There is also a spiritual dimension to this decision. "He really is that Invader man—he believes that shit," the artist Shepard Fairey told me. "He lives it one hundred per cent." Once Invader has installed a piece, he comes back the next day and takes a picture, like a pyromaniac returning to a blaze.

Three decades into his *projet sans fin*, Invader is more monomaniacal than ever. His secret-agent side, characterized by intense organization, conspires with the punk fan in him that bristles at authority and rules. "He's always planning things out really well, but if something goes wrong he doesn't want to give up his spot," Fairey said. Invader once told *Libération* that it was "the obsessive beauty of the gesture" that had kept him hooked. The paper allowed him to invade its pages in 2011, replacing each "A" that appeared in a headline with a pixelated alien.

In the roadside brush, Invader, wearing a headlamp under a black cap, was applying cement to the back sides of the panels, squeezing it out in great slugs from a plastic sack that he had fashioned into a sort of piping bag. Mr. Blue worked at his side, adding daubs of a thinner adhesive. Invader climbed the ladder, which jiggled like a suspension bridge under his weight. Early in his career, he often placed works at eye level, but then he realized that being higher up improved their survival rate.

Perched on the eleventh rung, he took a level out of his pocket and held it against the pillar. Then he stuck a panel to the surface and pounded the tiles with a fist. Mr. Blue—an old friend, a computer programmer by day—handed him more segments. Was that a pincer taking shape?

Halfway through, Invader scrambled down.

He worried that the piece was slightly crooked, but he was relieved that, so far, he had placed the segments in the right order. Even though they were labelled, it was hard to manage at thirty feet up, especially when he was rushing to finish without being detected. He and Mr. Blue were both wearing fluorescent safety vests, as a subterfuge, and were covered in glue. (Fans eager to deduce Invader's identity ought to look out for someone with very sticky hands.) They carried the B pieces to the ladder, and Invader climbed back up to finish the mosaic.

Suddenly, it wasn't as dark as it had been. Just above Invader, on the overpass, one could make out three glowing points—police flashlights, shining in his face.

Earlier in the summer, after weeks of trying, I finally set a date to meet Invader. The night before, I had received a text from Julie, who manages his affairs and also happens to be his partner.

"Hi Lauren," she wrote. "Would you agree to meet me at a café near Bastille, and then I can cover up your eyes and take you to the studio?" She continued, "If you can't because you are claustrophobic, we'll find another solution."

The next afternoon, Julie, in a navy dress and metal tortoiseshell glasses, was waiting for me at the appointed spot. She smiled sheepishly as she presented me with a sleep mask, which would serve as my blindfold. "You can hold on to my arm," she said, as I put it on. She led me through the streets, absorbing the stares of onlookers who must have suspected some sort of bachelorette-party stunt. I

felt a little dizzy, so I peeked at my feet from time to time. It wouldn't have been too difficult to orient myself, but I was willing to go along with the game, just as I am happy to respect Invader's anonymity, even though his name can be ascertained without much effort.

After about five minutes, we entered a building, and Julie told me that I could remove the blindfold. We were in a gleaming atelier. A couple of assistants were working quietly to low jazz music.

"Space?" Julie called. (Every once in a while, she would slip and use his real first name, but I give them points for committing to the bit.)

A few seconds later, Invader came jogging down a staircase. I was surprised to see that his face was uncovered. He was dressed in faded black, from ball cap to jeans and band T-shirt. He and Julie have a school-age child (she knows that her dad is Invader but has been sworn to secrecy), and I could easily imagine him blending in at drop-off.

Invader was eager to show me some mosaics he was preparing for a solo show at the Over the Influence gallery, in Los Angeles. The tiles were arranged to create a sort of camouflage, allowing his creatures to hide not only in their urban environments but also within the frames. In addition, he was making a series of landscapes created entirely from Rubik's Cubes, a three-dimensional pointillism that he calls Rubikcubism. Invader has made Rubikcubist versions of Old Master paintings and of Warhol's icons. The Paris Saint-Germain star Kylian Mbappé commissioned a Rubik's Cube portrait of Pelé, and then Mbappé's mother ordered one of her son. At first, Invader spent hours scouring secondhand toy stores for materials; now the company supplies him directly. In a corner of the studio, boxes of key-chain-size Rubik's Cubes were piled ten feet high. "We have twenty thousand of them," he said, smiling. We walked over to a computer, where he showed me how he uses Photoshop to translate his designs into squares.

"The main point of my work is that I give physical materiality to the pixel," he said.

In the nineties, Invader completed a master's degree at the Sorbonne and the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, France's élite fine-art academy. After dabbling in painting, drawing, film, and various things with computers, he chose the mosaic as his medium. "I said to myself, 'Everything you're doing, there are other people who are already doing it,'" he recalled. " 'With mosaic, you can bring something new.'" The form requires him to abide by strict geometries, but he has found these constraints to be productive. A quote attributed to the Italian Renaissance painter Domenico Ghirlandaio became a touchstone: "Mosaic is painting for eternity."

Ghirlandaio was making Bible scenes for the Pope; Invader was interested in digital culture for the masses. He had spent long hours playing Space Invaders as a kid, one of what Martin Amis called the "proletarian triffids" addicted to the "radar, rumble, and wow of friendly robots." Invader was also thinking about "The Invaders," the nineteen-sixties TV series, with its Technicolor graphics and indelible voice-over about alien beings from a dying planet. His work transposes these generationally primordial references from the screen to the street, merging geek aesthetics with urban heroics. "Invader's first innovation was in *not* writing letters," the gallerist and curator Magda Danysz told me. "He took the graffiti way of doing things, but suddenly he was putting up an image."

Invader first laid siege to Paris, mounting a hundred and forty-seven pieces in 1998 alone. Some of these still exist, presiding over the Pont d'Iéna tunnel or blending into the stone of the fountain at Châtelet. (Invader says that the mosaic near the Fontaine des Innocents, at Les Halles, is the all-time most flashed creation on his app.) Others live on only in photographs—a scarlet alien surveying a student protest from the République monument, like a benevolent ancestor of CCTV. "When I put something in the Métro, more people see it than if it were in the Louvre," Invader told me, paraphrasing Keith Haring. (Invader actually did sneak ten pieces into the museum at one point, saying that this made him the only living artist on display.) In 2011, employees at Ubisoft's Paris headquarters used sticky notes to form a Space Invader on a window, kicking off an informal citywide contest that came to be known as the Post-it War.

Laurent Le Bon, the president of the Centre Pompidou, associates Invader with the Parisian archetype of the *promeneur*. "I'm thinking of Georges Perec and other extremely important figures," he said. "Invader shows us another city, and he tells us, 'Look at her. Look how interesting she is.'" To me, he qualifies as one of the philosopher Guy Debord's psychogeographers, people who "turn the whole of life into an exciting game." Invader has said, "My palette is the memories of a place."

His creations are landmarks for the metropolis. "We orient ourselves by their presence, like that of an old lamppost or a Guimard Métro entrance," *Libération* wrote. Sometimes the joy of finding an invader is incidental. You're on your way to the dentist and you spot a sly critter on a pediment, as though the streetscape has rolled up its sleeve and displayed an unexpected tattoo. "Thanks to you, many feel pleasantly accompanied on their journeys and trips," Dimitri Salmon, a conservator at the Louvre, wrote. They even influence the way that Parisians move. One fan explained, "Because Paris has so many invaders, you'll be walking down the streets, there'll be a cutback in a wall, and you kind of instinctively assume there will be one."

Invader has spawned legions of imitators, such as the individual who recently erected a large Queen Elizabeth II mosaic on the Rue Saint-Honoré. (An Invader alien that happens to occupy the same wall looks away with seeming disdain.) These derivative pieces lack the graphic punch and immediate legibility of Invader's work, like documents that have been through the copy machine one too many times.

To the street-art impresario Steve Lazarides, Invader is a purist in a milieu awash in easy money and obvious gags. "He's willing to put his liberty at risk, right?" Lazarides said. "Which is very different from the kind of person who hires a cherry picker and paints an eighty-foot photorealistic mural of *a*

fucking Chihuahua." (He was referring to an actual work by an East London duo known as Irony and Boe.) Lately, Paris has become so cluttered with street art that Invader can hardly find an appealing wall. "There is a kind of saturation, because now there are four or five copycats doing the same thing," he admitted. "Even for the public, it's a kind of assault."

One day not long after my visit to the atelier, I encountered a ceramic mouse pasted to the front of a recently opened toy store. It looked suspiciously fanciful, but I opened the FlashInvaders app and snapped a photograph anyway. A message filled the screen: "WORKS BETTER IF YOU AIM AT A REAL SPACE INVADER."

It took Invader only a year to develop imperial ambitions. In 1999, he ventured out of Paris for the first time, putting a yellow alien on the leg of a bench in Antwerp. Soon, he began working internationally, visiting London, Tokyo, Amsterdam, and Los Angeles, where he managed to plant an invader on the Hollywood sign.

In 2000, he invaded Jacques Chirac, surreptitiously patting a sticker onto his lapel as he worked the crowd at an art fair. "The basic premise of modern graffiti is that the winner is whoever's up the most," Magda Danysz said. "Invader managed to get a sticker on the President of France." On two occasions, he has launched pieces into space. (The first time, he used a homemade weather balloon; the second time, he used the astronaut Samantha Cristoforetti.) The highest invaders are situated forty-three hundred metres above sea level in Potosí, Bolivia, and the lowest one resides on an underwater sculpture off the coast of Cancún. (You can flash it if you scuba dive twenty-six feet.) There are invaders on passageways in Varanasi, and there is a pixelated cheeseburger above the Waverly Diner, in New York. Once, Invader spent the night in jail and slapped a mosaic onto a police-station desk as he left the next morning. Just looking at a world map, he told me, makes him unhappy: "I realize that there are lots of places where I'm not."

A full-scale invasion takes about twenty days. Invader uses Google Maps to scout his targets in advance, arrives with dozens of premade mosaics, and puts up about three pieces a night. (His record is eight.) Then he documents the work. "Some of the photos look cooler years later," he told me. "The clothes become vintage, and you can see changes in the architecture."

Invader acknowledges that his choice of placement is "highly subjective." In "Chasseur d'Invader: Comment des Mosaïques Ont Changé Ma Vision du Monde" ("Invader Hunter: How Mosaics Changed My View of the World"), the graphic novelist Nicolas Kéramidas observes, only half jokingly, that there are invariably "one or two borderline depressing" sites in every locale. Invader is mindful to cover as much terrain as possible, creating the sense that he's everywhere at once. "There have to be little dots all over the city, because I think that goes with the concept," he told me. "Then it's a real invasion."

I asked whether he'd ever considered the colonialist connotations of his work. "I don't want to go in like a conquistador," he said. "I'm doing something poetic, playful, aesthetic." His imagery can occasionally seem reductive: pretzels and beers in Munich; magic carpets, aliens wearing fezzes, and a genie in a bottle in Rabat. "They look like the first page of a Google search," the Moroccan muralist Mehdi Annassi (a.k.a. Machima) said. "Like an Orientalist who doesn't know much about Morocco. But, in his

DISINHIBITOR

There's a sadness I'm avoiding

It's why I live like this

The truth is I know I can't hide

From it. I know I can't

But I *can* hide from you

Or I somehow still think I can

& what that really means is hide *it*

From you. It's not that I don't trust

You. I'm just scared to lose

It. I'm not avoiding

My sadness I'm trying

To protect it. What I lost

I already lost a really

Long time ago. Whatever

I tried to do apart

From what I lost had more

To do with covering it

With probably some kind

Of monument than "moving on"

But I'm the only one who needs

To know that it's a monument

Or what it's for. Anthills

Mountains out of molehills.

Growing a roughness into

A jewel: Aphrodite's secret.

I am ignorant of my people's

History but I have seen the scrolls

In their crowns and gowns.

The times I won I wasn't able

To celebrate. So I learned equanimity

But equanimity's as tricky

As any other state. These may

Not be words of wisdom

But they've got no other

Place to live

—Ariana Reines

defense, I think he's not just doing it for the locals. He's working for international followers, so he's doing things that are recognizable, and iconography that can be easily connected to Morocco."

In rare cases, if a site seems sensitive—a synagogue in Djerba, for example, where Invader sought to install a menorah mosaic—he will ask before making a move. His invasions are occasionally repelled. In 2018, Invader travelled to Bhutan with a handful of pieces. He installed one of them, depicting a mandala, on a wall at the historic Chagri Dorjeden monastery, and posted about it on Instagram, where he has more than seven hundred thousand followers. Invader says that the chief monk authorized his work. But, he recalled, "there was an American who came up to me, very aggressively saying, 'What are you doing? Are you doing graffiti in a country that is not yours? It's disrespectful.'"

Invader was unmoved: "Frankly, he annoyed me, because he was telling me not to do something in a country that wasn't mine—but it wasn't his, either." The fight soon spilled over onto social media. "You are an incredible narcissist," one commenter wrote, on Invader's Instagram page. Another suggested, "You should do the Grotte de Lascaux next since you're such a brave irreverent artist, no?"

Not long afterward, the Bhutanese government removed the mosaics. (Neither the chief monk nor the Bhutanese government could be reached for comment.) Invader remains stung by the incident. "It's a little black spot on my record, but, at the same time, I'm happy to talk about it, because it was completely ridiculous," he said, describing his antagonist as an American interloper—"the tourist, the savior of the people."

"It was someone who, more than the Bhutanese inhabitants, didn't want Bhutan to change," Julie told me. "He wanted to go there and find a Disneyland."

Invader doesn't say much about his past. He was born in the Paris area in 1969, and he allows that his parents were "normal people," members of the mercantile middle class. In high school, he loved punk rock, film, and photography. He failed the baccalaureate the first time and decided to be an artist, even though he felt stupid saying "I'm an artist!" outright. The punk ethics of D.I.Y., of high tech and "bits of string," and of contrarianism within community were important to him even before he became Invader. When World Cup mania seized France in 1998, he helped launch an "anti-foot" association that organized a slate of activities—pétanque, Brazilian dance, a "mini techno festival"—for fellow soccer dissidents. On the tournament's opening night, like-minded souls were reportedly invited to hurl deflated soccer balls at an effigy of Footix, the World Cup mascot.

For a while, Invader pursued a project he called VNARC. It involved a computer virus personified as a man in a hat and a mask, and the acronym stood for *Vous n'allez rien comprendre* (You're not going to understand anything). In 1999, he and Zevs, an artist who was making a name for himself in graffiti, formed a collective called @nonymous. Inspired in part by the avant-garde situationists, they roamed the city seeking *le détournement*—diversion, in the sense both of causing a scene and of having fun. "We loved art, but what we loved most was anti-art," Zevs told me. In a short film they released, they rush into a subway car and start to scream. The gag seems more terrifying than funny now, but the passengers of the day appear to have seen them as mere weirdos. "We bombed it with our voices

instead of aerosols," Zevs recalled. They fancied themselves hackers of the city, urban pirates "creating dysfunctions and disrupting the everyday."

Invader got to know other graffiti artists who were active in the Bastille neighborhood. "It was a social network before social networks," he recalled. The nineties were a propitious moment for French street artists (initially derided by one prominent pundit as "retards who schmear their shit on the walls"). However, Invader's first show, at the Castelbajac concept store, was not a success. "I prepared maybe fifteen mosaics and nobody bought anything," he remembered. "Nothing." No one knew quite what to make of him. "People saw the mosaics and thought it was some kind of cult, or a sign that someone had come to rob their house," he recalled. He kept on invading, evolving his work through repetition and iteration.

Invader eventually built a fan base, and the theoretical dimensions of his project impressed the cognoscenti. "Referencing domains typically removed from urban art—from the video game to the history of ancient art, and even cartography—he brings the discipline into a more conceptual phase and represents the renewal of the movement," Magda Danysz wrote in a monograph that accompanied "Capitale(s): Sixty Years of Urban Art in Paris," a show at the Paris city hall which recently enjoyed so much success that its run was extended by several months. For a 1999 invasion of Montpellier, Invader came up with the idea to literally zoom out, spacing his mosaics so that, if you plot them on a map and connect the dots, you encounter the image of a giant alien.

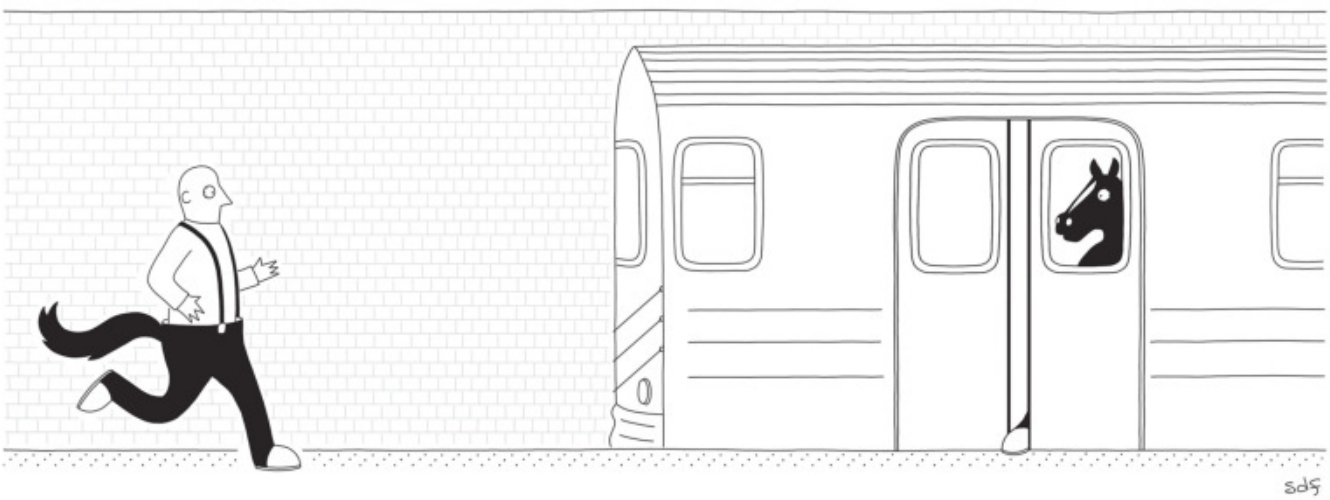
One of Invader's highest-concept invasions took place in Florida in the summer of 2012. It was a difficult trip, with a hurricane brewing and crates of supplies stuck in customs. He put a mosaic on the staircase of the Miami apartment building where the chainsaw scene in "Scarface" takes place. Days later, he set out for a sugarcane field in the Everglades. According to a Miami *Herald* reporter who accompanied him, he was wearing "a white plasticized jumpsuit and a cloth mask that made him look like a cleanup worker at a biochemical spill or maybe just Woody Allen dressed like a sperm in 'Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex.'"

The first try was a disaster, but Invader eventually sent a piece to space from the field, using a helium-weather-balloon contraption that he'd been tinkering with for months. The mosaic ascended for several hours before the balloon burst, miles above the Earth. After an odyssey involving alligators, red ants, and a county sheriff, Invader was able to track down the mosaic, still attached to a mini-camera that had recorded the trip. The resulting video is surprisingly touching: a solitary creature surveys the clouds, the deepest blue looming over him, and then—*pop!*—plunges back toward human civilization, the layers of the atmosphere whooshing by, before crashing through a canopy of leaves and coming to rest in a grassy field.

"I'd always thought his work was a bit too simple," the artist Damien Hirst told me. "The thing that sort of made me take notice was when he used that weather balloon to put a piece into space, right? I just thought, Wow, the levels." Hirst told me that he was equally beguiled by Invader's fervent following on Discord, the social platform, and by his "reactivators," self-appointed guardians who reconstruct invaders that have been damaged or have disappeared. "In art, the object is everything, but with Invader the idea is everything," Hirst said. "He's created this community of people who care about his works enough that they can't be destroyed." Reactivators operate independently, but they submit their handiwork to Invader's atelier, to be validated before reinstallation in the wild (and reinstatement in FlashInvaders). "They're like a second army," Danysz said.

A couple of years ago, Hirst sent Invader an e-mail asking if he wanted to collaborate on a series of N.F.T.s. Invader said no. "I wanted to have a really strong idea, and I didn't have one," he told me. But the two artists became friends. "He started sending me some images when he was out putting things up in Paris at night," Hirst explained. "And you just go, Man, I'm all cozy in bed, and he's out there doing it."

The art market has also come around to Invader. In 2000, he began creating "aliases"—"unique doubles" of his street mosaics, meant to be sold in galleries rather than enjoyed outdoors for free. Each alias comes with an "identity card," or certificate of authenticity, that slides into the Perspex box upon which the mosaic is mounted, like a computer disk. In 2019, the alias of TK_119—a likeness of the manga character Astro Boy that Invader had installed above a pedestrian



tunnel in Tokyo—sold on the secondary market at Sotheby's for more than a million dollars. Pieces from his Rubikcubism series have also fetched high prices: four hundred and eighty thousand euros, for example, for a "Mona Lisa" made out of the plastic toy.

As the value of Invader's works has increased, so have efforts to procure them without paying. In 2017, a pair of men posing as city workers propped a ladder against a wall in the Sixth Arrondissement and, in broad daylight, chiselled away an alien mosaic. The men helped themselves to more than a dozen pieces around the city. Onlookers took pictures and posted them on social media, hoping to stop the heists in real time. Invader was incensed, calling the men "greedy thieves." He argued that his work had no value outside its original context, and that without a certificate of authenticity it was "barely worth the cost of the tiles used." But the thieves, according to *Télérama*, continued their spree until their ladder broke. Since then, the reactivators, by complicating notions of authenticity and authorship, have succeeded in largely shutting down the illicit market for Invader's work.

Invader idolizes Revs, the New York street artist who has steadfastly refused recognition and remuneration, and who argues that, "once money changes hands for art, it becomes a fraudulent activity." But Invader says that he is perfectly comfortable, at this stage in his career, with cashing in. He has designed a wine-bottle label and sneakers (their tread leaves behind an alien-shaped footprint); recently, he worked with Comme des Garçons PLAY on a collaboration that included a five-hundred-dollar cardigan. "I lived the first part of my life like van Gogh," he told me. "Now I'm starting to live more like Picasso." He admitted that, with encouragement from Hirst, he was trying to increase his output. "I think Damien has been a bad influence on me, because he keeps telling me I have to produce more," he said. "All the famous artists, they're the ones who made the most."

In late November, Invader showed me around the premises of a deserted building where he will mount his largest-scale exhibition to date, in January. The offices, at 11 Rue Béranger, served as *Libération's* headquarters from 1987 to 2015. This summer, the new landlord called Invader and offered him carte blanche to invade the thirty-seven-thousand-square-foot space before it undergoes renovation. Invader almost declined—too much volume, too little time. But the offer was irresistible. "It's a total takeover," he said. "It's going to be called Invader's Space Station, because the building will be like a mother ship, a starship." We hiked up a ramp that leads to a showstopping rooftop terrace, passing by a porthole window where, in a famous photograph, Godard puffed a cigar while contemplating the city. Back when he invaded *Libération*, Invader, noticing that the terrace floor was made of square-shaped cement tiles, had painted it with a red-white-and-black invader designed to be visible from the sky. The colors were faded now, and he planned to refresh them.

Invader paced around the terrace, taking in the view. Suddenly, he stopped talking and walked to the edge, looking out over the Marais, and, farther on, to the Pompidou's tubes and pipes. He leaned against the railing, squinting into the distance. I wasn't sure what had caught his eye. Then, just as we were about to leave, he showed me: sturdy-looking scaffolding, freshly mounted on the roof of an apartment building, right in front of a huge blank wall.

Anytime people ask me what to do in Paris, I tell them to download FlashInvaders.

Invader created the game in 2014, preceding Pokémon Go by two years. The more points you amass, the higher you move on the scoreboard. Part of the appeal is that the game is simultaneously mass culture and a niche entertainment. No matter how many thousands of people are playing at a given moment, it feels like a shared secret.

My kids introduced me to FlashInvaders after hearing about it at school. "Mom, can you download this app?" does not typically lead to countless hours of intergenerational harmony, but, like a lot of Parisians, we use the game as an invitation to explore the city, a goad to wander one more block. (At the city-hall exhibition, I met a seventysomething mother and her adult son who get together for weekly flashing walks.) It forces you to pay close attention to your surroundings, noticing not only the places that Invader favors but also the shops, schools, bars, restaurants, and parks that surround them—the arcade of everyday life. You get your dopamine hit—*doo doo da lee doo*, +30 POINTS!—but you can't stay glued to your screen, lest you miss a specimen.

My kids love scrolling through the game's gallery feature, which displays their invaders by order of encounter. It's a repository of memories—they can recite the exact circumstances under which we flashed each one. "I love that someone decided to devote his life to giving other people that experience," an American friend remarked, after spending the better part of her Paris vacation chasing aliens. While playing, you often meet people. A pair of strangers got to talking in front of the Pink Panther mosaic in the Impasse Delaunay, in the Eleventh Arrondissement, and married a year later. "We weren't looking for love, but Invader offered it to us," the wife told a reporter.

A live feature allows you to follow along as fellow-fans play around the world. Just before lunchtime on a recent Monday morning, one player was flashing a skull-and-crossbones-themed invader in Rennes. Another spotted a cobalt-colored cephalopod in Rotterdam, and in Djerba someone captured a pair of fish pasted onto the chimney of a traditional house. The pictures are a mesmerizing sliver of someone's day—an open window, different weather. A shot of a yellow creature in Amsterdam doubled as an accidental candid of an elegant mother in a gray coat and her small, watchful son.

Hard-core flashers demonstrate an enthusiasm that borders on compulsion. When Invader posts about a new mosaic, or a reactivation team puts an invader back in play, they will drop everything to rack up points. The No. 1 player is said to be a French airline pilot who schedules his routes so that he can snap invaders in far-flung locales. "I'm

crazy, but you need to have one crazy thing in your life," one player, a telecommunications engineer who goes by the handle R4Y, told me. He has four children at home, but this year he managed to flash in Switzerland, Austria, Germany, Mexico, Japan, South Korea, Thailand, Nepal, India, Hong Kong, Morocco, Spain, Belgium, the United States, and Israel, travelling to Eilat for less than twenty-four hours in pursuit of two mosaics. Another enthusiast recently created a sort of open-air flasher's hall of fame in Paris, installing mosaics of players in the vicinities of their apartment buildings.

Another flasher I met, a retired midwife who uses the name Illanéo, talked about the pleasure she takes in mapping out her flashing itineraries, using clues gleaned from photographs. "It's like an investigation," she said. "I spend hours and hours on Google Maps." She and her husband, who ran a driver's-ed school and is now a psychologist, are respectively ranked as the tenth and eleventh most accomplished flashers in the world. Before they started flashing, they had hardly left France. "It changed our lives, because we have a common project—now we make plans to travel, just for this game," Illanéo said. Her Instagram page features pictures of the couple against various backdrops—Bangkok, Málaga, Potosí—often accompanied by a Teddy bear in a sweater, knit by Illanéo, that matches whatever Invader piece they've just found.

The rules of FlashInvaders are uncodified, and there is no reward for winning. Some people consider flashing by proxy a travesty, for example, while others guiltlessly partake in crafty schemes such as one that recently sent a player trudging to the top of the Eiffel Tower with a backpack full of other people's phones. Theoretically, anyone can succeed, but the game favors the free, the nimble, and the ecologically unconcerned. I asked Invader, who doesn't eat animals for ethical and environmental reasons, if he still believed it was tenable to go chasing aliens around a burning planet. "It's something that I think about a lot," he said. He was considering removing the game's Top 100 list, to de-incentivize the most active players.

In September, five Parisians embarked on what they called a "road trip for crazy people." They were mostly strangers to one another, and their plan sounded like the setup for a joke: a location manager, a general practitioner, a customs officer, a train dispatcher, and a retired legal secretary heading off together on a week-long safari that would require more than fifty hours of driving and take them from Paris to Valmorel, Anzère, Bern, Lausanne, Munich, Ljubljana, Grude, Ravenna, Rome, Menton, Monaco, Nice, Esterel, Sainte-Maxime, Calvaire, Aix-en-Provence, and back. Their ages ranged from twenty-eight to sixty-seven. They were all chipping in for gas, listening to Invader-themed podcasts as they drove.

They allowed me to join them in Ljubljana. I arrived a few hours before they did, and by nine we were seated at a table on the terrace of a Slovenian restaurant.

"We left Paris at midnight on Sunday and saw the sun on the mountains at Valmorel," Ghislain, the train dispatcher, reported. "We didn't eat until Bern on Monday night."

The two men were sharing a room, as were the three women. They settled on an eight-thirty call time for the next morning. The mission was to flash all forty of Ljubljana's extant mosaics in the six hours they'd allotted. On the way back to their hotel, they stumbled across LJU_33, featuring a dragon, the city's emblem, breathing out a red alien in a speech bubble. The team formed a semi-

circle in front of the mosaic and decided to allow themselves a flasher's amuse-bouche to the next day's feast.

"Turn your music up!" Harold, the location manager, shouted, as they raised their phones in unison. "One, two, three!"

The next morning, we convened at a coffee shop. The plan was to get the outlying mosaics first, then work our way back into the city center. Harold had mapped out the whole thing two years earlier, during one of France's strict pandemic lockdowns. He was eager to start.

"*Allez!*" he said, once the stragglers had finished their coffee.

By 9:30 A.M., the action was under way. The group flashed a mosaic that looked like an extraterrestrial mosquito, then continued northeast at a brisk clip, sweeping through a former squatters' village, a high-school basketball court, a residential district with kitchen gardens full of cabbage and roses, and a mid-rise housing project where Invader had left a fruit mosaic on the façade of a ground-floor supermarket. At one point, they flashed a "ghost," aiming their phones at a building wrapped in nylon construction sheets. The hope was that, one day, the mosaic would be reactivated, and they'd be awarded points for having already flashed its geolocation.

"My daughter was, like, 'Mom, this is crazy—you're going all the way to Bosnia with a bunch of strangers?'" Martine, the retired legal secretary, said, as we walked. "I wanted to get in the top five hundred, and I got that, and now I want to get in the top two hundred."

Ghislain bent down to remove a rock from his shoe.

"I'll catch up with you!" he yelled, as the others rushed on.

It was a gorgeous day in a picturesque city, but there was no time for sightseeing. By early afternoon, I'd already logged around twenty-five thousand steps on my phone's pedometer. This was art that lived in your body, art you had to work for. "There's one right there," Harold said, indicating an ivy-covered bridge spanning a river the color of olive oil. This was his first time in Ljubljana, but he'd memorized the city in advance. Sure enough, there was a blue invader peeking out from under the leaves. As we approached the city's market square, Jeanne announced that she needed to get something from the pharmacy.

"Some are here more as dilettantes," Harold remarked. "Others are here to flash."

After fifteen minutes, Jeanne and the other women, who'd accompanied her, returned from the pharmacy.

"*Allez!*" Harold said.

LJU_35 was supposed to be somewhere nearby, but the map was proving imprecise. Harold took off running down a cobblestone lane.

"I can't find it!" he yelled. Someone

had put Invader stickers on a nearby lamppost, suggesting that the mosaic was close at hand. Harold resorted to searching Google Images for a photo that would provide some context. He darted into an archway, leading the group to a courtyard, where the invader appeared, a bashful white creature set into a speckled wall.

"That's gonna be annoying with the shadow," Ghislain said. He blocked the dappled light with his hand so that the group could flash.

"We've got a technique!" Martine said, triumphantly.

"*Allez!*"

By three o'clock, we were all dripping sweat. A final count, over ice cream and Aperol spritzes, confirmed that the group had located all forty mosaics. They got right back into the car and started driving to Grude.

On the night I accompanied Invader to install his mosaics, he continued putting up tiles even as the police flashlights shone down on him from the overpass, perhaps figuring that, if he were to be punished, he might as well finish the crime. Mr. Blue and I stayed silent. A few minutes later, it was dark again. Invader scampered down from the ladder with a satisfied look.

"I don't think they're waiting for us," he said, his upper lip beaded with sweat. "I think they understood that it was street art."

Invader drove us to his next stop. Instead of punching his destination into the G.P.S., he navigated by his art works, pins on a personal road map.

"Look, there's a small one," he said, as we drove. "It's been here for twenty years, can you believe it?"

Just after two o'clock in the morning, we pulled up to the corner of the Avenue de l'Opéra and the Rue Thérèse to park the van. The streets were mostly deserted, with the late hour and with many people having left town for the Fourteenth of July holiday.

"I like to work in summer," he said. "It's calm with no Parisians."

Invader's original idea for the night's second mosaic had involved the upper half of the smiley-face-with-sunglasses emoji. He'd wanted to install it so that it emerged from a street sign that was missing the semicircle on top, but another artist had got to the butchered sign first. The new site was more exposed than he liked, and he had decided to do the full emoji. He assessed the scene: "It'll take three minutes to put it up, but if someone happens to drive by you're dead."

He was aiming for a high corner of a Haussmannian building. He used a comb-like device to apply cement to the mosaic's back side. Then he picked it up by a plastic handle that was affixed to the frame and dangled it like a Christmas ornament.

Within seconds, he was up on the ladder. "There's one of my copycats," he said, ascending past a blue alien with a triangular chin and red eyes. He kept going until he was flush with the second-floor balcony, about fifteen feet above the sidewalk. Then he drubbed the emoji onto the wall and scooted down.

"I was hoping to get it a little higher," he said.

I assumed that Invader would be ready to call it a night; it was almost three o'clock. No, he said, he was headed back to the atelier to archive the two new creations, to be known henceforth as PA_1486 and PA_1487. "I'm going to put them in the database," he explained. "Because at 8 A.M. people start flashing."

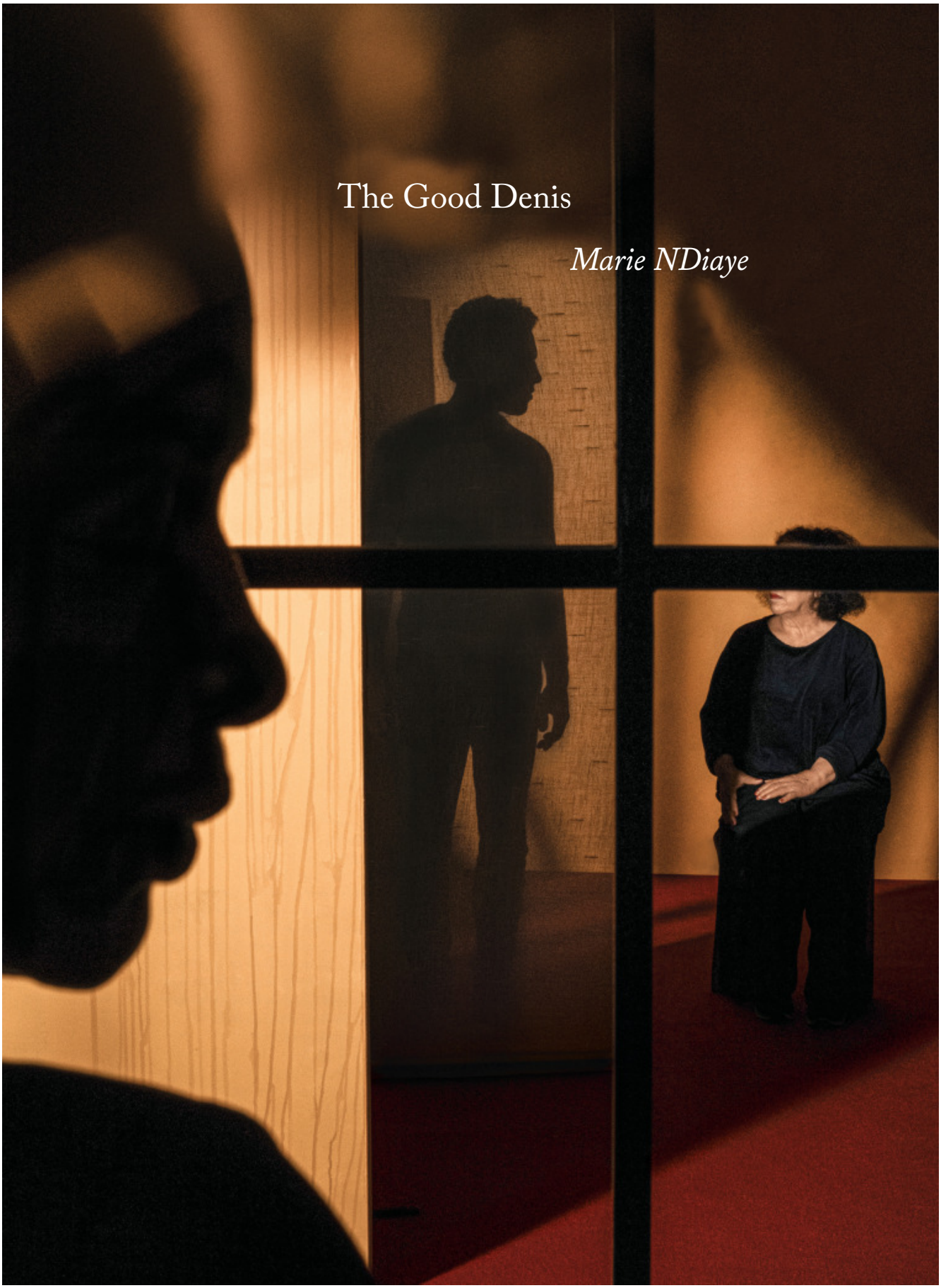
Before pulling away, he sat still in the silence, taking in the haloed lights, the hushed avenue.

"I love the night—it's another city," he said. "And it's still so early, you know?" ♦

"Let's run away and make a new life for ourselves filled with completely different problems."

The Good Denis

Marie NDiaye



PHOTOGRAPH BY SARAH VAN RIJ AND DAVID VAN DER LEEUW

When—after I'd long hesitated, lost my nerve, thought better of it—I finally gathered the strength to ask my decreasingly lucid mother if she remembered a certain scene that still brought an ache to my grownup heart, she gave me a mystified, offended stare, a stare of virtuous indignation, and then, collecting herself, answered gently, as you might answer a very old person who, you realize, didn't mean to say such a ridiculous thing, that what I was talking about not only hadn't happened but could not, in any case, possibly have happened.

My father, of whose face and voice I had no memory, who was preserved in my childhood recollections only as a tall form, enormous, eminent, and dark, could not have walked out of our apartment in 1969, could not, closing the door behind him, have left the weeping woman I could only vaguely picture but whose sobs, whose despair, in the tiny entryway of that modest apartment, had always had for me the sting of a genuine memory. My father could not have abandoned her, my mother claimed, since in the first month of that year she herself had gone to live with another man, a certain Denis, who with the deepest goodness had also taken in the very young child that I then was.

It was she, my unsteady-minded mother asserted, who had left my father, not the other way around.

And how, she murmured in a voice now disappointed, now accusing, depending on whether the morning had found her weak and drained or full of vigor, how was it that I had not the slightest memory of that exceptionally kind and decent Denis?

Denis, a custodian at the Malakoff primary school where my mother had spent a few months substituting for the fourth-grade teacher, had immediately agreed—since he'd fallen in love with my mother, had even fallen under her spell, she would say with a sort of pained modesty, and apparently had no children—to learn to love and care for me as if I were his own daughter.

Those words would often return to my confused mother's tongue: Denis had treated me "like his own daughter." How, she asked, could I have forgotten a man like that while imagining I remembered some pathetic scene of her keening and hiccupping before a door that my father had closed behind him? No such scene could ever have happened, she assured me, because my father had disappeared from our lives as soon as he'd realized that she wouldn't be leaving Denis, that admirable man whom, to her deep disappointment, I couldn't recall even though he'd loved me far more than my father ever did.

For example, Denis, unlike my father, talked to me. Yes, my mother said, he looked you straight in the eye and talked to you, even though you were only one or two years old and few fathers did such things in those days. Your biological father never spoke to you, said my mother, whose memories were perhaps corrupted by senility, and he never put his face near yours to tell you things or just give you one of those tender little smiles which even the most indifferent parents lavish on their young ones.

Only from a distance, my mother said, did he gaze on the sweet, lovable little girl you were, and it seemed, she went on despite my mumbled attempts to interrupt her, that there was something about you that repelled him. Yes, my doddering old mother added pensively, there was something about you, beautiful though you were, that inexplicably disgusted him. Did that aversion spring from something of himself that he saw in you or something of me or, my uncertain, unsound mother said, did he see in you some element of the wider world which displeased or eluded him? He didn't like the wind, or cold shadows, or ice under the thin soles of his shoes. Any fondness for twilight made him cackle with horror, with scorn.

As best I could, I spoke up in my own defense.

I had to intercede on behalf of the baby I'd been, whose flaws were still insidiously being held against me.

I could not, I assured my musing mother, have been so unsavory a child that my father, in his wholesomeness, should feel obliged to keep his distance from me. At the dawn of my life, I could not, I insisted tremulously, have been visibly dangerous, strange, depraved.

I don't know, I don't know, she would sigh, and then add, moved, that Denis had chosen not to see those putative failings in me. He had accepted me, she said, as I was.

But who was I that anyone should have to deign to accept me, and that raising me for two short years should seem the work of a saint?

Oh, you were nice, you were very pretty, my mother said hesitantly, as if to reassure me, as if she didn't entirely believe what she was claiming. No, you weren't unpleasant, far from it.

A long time (decades!) had gone by before I'd dared to have these brief talks with my mother, and certainly nothing had prepared me, when I finally ventured to bring up my father's leaving, for the eruption into our shared history of Denis Rouxel, since that was his name.

And now my surprise, perplexity, and vague rancor could no longer be expressed—as they used to be, for other reasons, when I was younger—in the form of caustic retorts, whining reproaches, or long, sonorous sighs.

I had to make do with a stunned little laugh.

I looked away from my mother's vacant face and turned toward the window, but there I found her reflection, since darkness had fallen—she was scowling, thinking I couldn't see her, perhaps in sorrow.

Or was this her way of getting back at me?

For having moved her, with her consent, to be sure, and at the cost of much complicated paperwork, into this first-class rest home?

There were very old trees on the grounds, and benches designed by artists of some renown.

Two or three times already I'd lunched with my mother in the dining room, where we were served quail with grapes, strawberry cake, and very fresh goat cheese, all on elegant dishware.

My mother, with her failing mind and her wobbly legs, had pronounced herself satisfied with this haven, though in a voice so stiff and stolid that I could only conclude, as she wanted me to, that no such thing was true, that she hated the place and had

resigned herself to it only out of politeness and respect for my efforts.

•

Some of her clothes disappeared from the dresser.

"All the nicest things," she told me with a shrug. "My sky-blue cardigan with the mother-of-pearl buttons, my lace-cuffed blouse, my silk nightgown."

"I'll tell the floor monitor," I said, unable to conceal my rage.

In the long, silent hallway, I came across a resident who gave me a cheery hello.

She was wearing my mother's cardigan, despite her own girth and height—the little mother-of-pearl buttons weren't done up and the sleeves came just halfway down her forearms.

Then I passed by a room with an open door and, reflexively glancing inside, glimpsed a very old woman sitting on her bed, wearing a cream-colored silk nightgown with long balloon sleeves which I immediately recognized, since it had been a present from me, as my mother's.

I turned back.

I lied to my mother, told her I couldn't find the floor monitor.

She said it didn't matter, I could forget the whole thing, it didn't trouble her in the least.

She still had more nice clothes than she'd ever get a chance to wear in this place of death.

"Are you sure," I asked meekly, pretending to see no disturbing implications in her use of the word "death," "are you sure you couldn't have given those clothes to your neighbors?"

"Why would I do that?" my mother exclaimed.

She laughed, indulgently, thinking me very silly.

"I have no friends in this squalid place. There's no one I spend time with. I don't know anyone's name," she added, sourly pleased.

I refused to back down, suggesting that she might have given away clothes that she herself admitted she didn't need.

"Maybe you don't remember," I said, looking away from her face toward the face in the dark window, which was again horribly deformed, upper lip pulled back over diseased teeth, eyes cynically narrowed, as if, while pretending to listen, my mother were mocking me, closing her ears to arguments she'd already foreseen, weaving the threads of her future—secret, hateful, and meticulously planned.

She coolly replied that she remembered everything.

She hadn't taken those three outfits out of the dresser since she'd arrived at this facility, and she hadn't for a moment thought of giving anything to her "prison mates," whom she wanted nothing whatever to do with.

Because the few friends she'd had in the course of her life, nearly all dead now, had been chosen on the basis of subtle, exacting affinities. Out of self-respect, she would not even contemplate the possibility of allowing a friendship to develop in this lugubrious place.

Better to know no one than to resign herself, thanks to an excess of solitude, to fraternizing with "not very interesting" people.

You're wrong, you're wrong, I shouted at her silently, as I always had. Any perfectly ordinary person is more "interesting" than you think you are, in your tedious, predictable vanity, you who, on the pretext of not wanting to encourage other people's supposedly improper curiosity about you, never tell a single story from your drearily respectable life.

Then I saw that her face, whose vicious reflection I was still staring at in the window, had turned peaceful.

I whirled around, full of hope.

I saw my mother's face smooth and pink, almost satiny with good will.

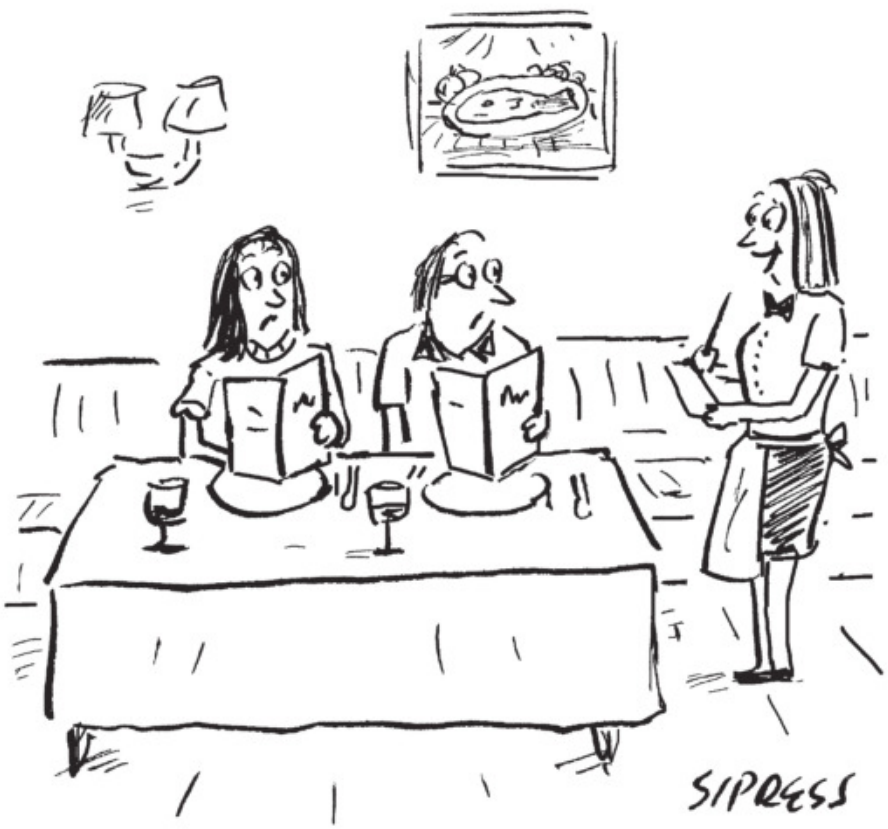
She calmly explained that she herself lacked the generosity of, for example, since we'd been talking about him, the good Denis.

I whispered, "Denis Rouxel?"

"If you like," she said impatiently. "I'm talking about just Denis. He gave away what few clothes he had. He didn't like owning things, you see. If he were in my place, yes, he would have handed out the cardigan and the blouse and the nightgown. But I'm not good like Denis, and I would never have done such a thing. Why should I? I'm not him."

•

When, later, I told my husband the things my mother had said that had so shaken me—first, that it was she who'd broken up with my father, rather than the other way around, and then that the good Denis had been the loving, vigilant guardian of my first two



"Would you like to see my one-woman show about the specials?"

or three years—he stepped away from the picture window in our living room, making an effort that I could see, and that touched me, to suspend his numb, torpid contemplation of our neglected gray yard and the cornfields beyond and the mauve hills in the distance.

I took his hand, put it to my cheek.

It pulsed against my skin like a startled heart.

Short of any more meaningful pleasure, I found myself not unhappy that I could share with my husband something that was troubling me and, by rousing his concern for me, extract him from his gloom, if only briefly.

For twenty-five years, he'd run an antique shop on the ground floor of our house, in a small city in the Gers which I've since left.

Austere, sombre, moral, and ardently pure, the shop sold only representations of the Virgin Mary—painted, marble, plaster, wood, or glass—even some that were blasphemous or clumsily obscene, which offended certain people.

My husband had no fondness for smut, for assaults on the sacred. He often railed against indecency and, particularly, the obsession with provocation that he saw in some of the profane, heavy-handed works he offered for sale.

But the profound integrity and even, perhaps, the maniacal rectitude that fuelled his pleasure in selling useless old things had always forbidden him from excluding works that repulsed him, with the result that his shop-window sometimes displayed a Virgin masturbating under her plaster dress, on the ground that his aversion to such an image not only shouldn't prevent him from showing it but made showing it a sort of duty: were he to follow only his own deeply wholesome tastes, he would categorically ban that outrageous object from his shop, even though it lay squarely within the domain of his mania (Maria!), and so he felt obliged to exhibit it, lest people think he chose his merchandise according to a conventional morality, private and uninteresting, rather than his rigor as a specialist.

That was how my husband was, conscientious to the point, sometimes, of exaltation, of blindness, such was the man who, that evening, would pretend to set aside his melancholy and tell me what he knew of the good Denis.

First, he let me take his hand, let me hold it delicately between my own hands like a precious little organ.

It had been months since we'd touched in any way.

He was bankrupt.

His shop had not survived the lockdowns, and beneath our feet stood a stock of Virgins that he struggled to sell on the Internet and lacked the energy even to dust. To be honest, we both felt a strange terror at the thought of approaching them, now that the shop was likely closed forever, as if they might suddenly awaken and call us to account, their dull-blue, animated eyes looking into ours, perhaps murmuring, Why do we fascinate you so?

"I know about this good Denis," he said. "I never met him, no, of course."

He smiled at me, as he hadn't done, I thought, for a very long time.

"Your mother told me about him a few years back, when we had that little party at our house, you remember?"

"Yes," I answered immediately. "The third of June, 2017."

"She'd had a few that evening," my husband said, still smiling, not at me but at the memory, which I immediately thought impossible, of seeing my mother drunk.

"She never drinks," I said quietly.

"I'm more than happy to believe that," he said, slightly amused, "but I'm telling you she was smashed that evening, and maybe, oh, yes, it might be, I hadn't thought of that, maybe because she wanted to hide from you and your certainty that she never drinks she sought shelter or maybe, yes, cover at the far end of the yard, you know, where we dump the grass clippings, and I happened to stroll over that way, and there she was, very friendly, hammered but lighthearted and funny, all alone at the far end of the yard, with her very full glass, and, I must say, we chatted more freely than we ever had before."

"She was drinking iced tea," I said, deeply disoriented but knowing that with those naïve words I could amuse my husband after months of despondency.

"Then her tea was heavily spiked with vodka or gin," he merrily shot back.

Some long minutes went by in silence.

"So," I said, surprised that I had to get him started again, "what about the good Denis?"

"Oh, yes."

My husband stepped away from me and back toward the window, staring out with his bewildered, mournful gaze.

"That evening your mother told me, yes, that she'd taken up with a certain Denis when you were a baby. As I said, she was very drunk, so I was only half listening, and I don't recall the details, but, as I remember them, her words made it clear that Denis's goodness, since that vague quality seemed to define him completely, could never have been expressed by some triviality like donating clothes in a retirement home. It seems your mother left Denis because she didn't think she could live up to the moral heights that life with that man—not that he ever said a word about it, not that he ever asked anything of her, not that he even realized it, perhaps—evidently entailed."

"Meaning? She didn't give you any examples?"

"Examples?"

From his muted, weary voice, I sensed that the subject had lost its hold on him, that he had even, possibly, in his discreet way, stopped listening to me, that he'd forgotten I was there, very present, beside him.

"Yes," I said, "some concrete manifestation of his goodness. What form did it take in their day-to-day life? Maman had nothing specific to tell you?"

"Oh, no, no, nothing specific. I don't know if she could have."

"Why?" My tone was suddenly more tense than I would have liked. "Because she was drunk?"

I saw him making another earnest, laudable effort to remember what exactly we were talking about, to summon what little energy he had in him to consider my question and answer it as honestly as he could.

"No, everything she said of him was

astute and judicious. Being drunk made her clear-eyed, cruel, vaguely tormented but ironic about it. I don't believe there were any examples. This Denis was apparently an ordinary man, perhaps, I believe, even shy, retiring, his goodness was like . . . a scent."

"A scent?"

"That emanated from him, though he was the only one who couldn't sense it. Evidently, to anyone who noticed it, that essence felt like an obligation they didn't always have the courage for, or the strength, or who knows, who knows. . . ."

My husband let his voice fade away, making a bit of a show of it, no doubt overplaying it a little, in order to tell me, Summoning up for you these memories of little consequence has exhausted me—now leave me in peace with my gloom.

But in our thirty-five years together hadn't I done far more than that for him? Many times, for his benefit, I'd recalled pieces of my life that weren't pleasant, and so often I'd supported him, encouraged him, consoled him, caressed him.

Why didn't he want to help me understand the nature of Denis Rouxel's goodness, what I'd got from it, and from him, and if I owed that man anything, if I had some obligation to seek him out because he'd looked after me, or if, on the contrary, I had to banish any thought of finding him because he was responsible, despite or because of his goodness, for my most grievous flaws, my most hidden failings, most hidden but most condemned in the courtroom of my conscience?

The idea of a consoling kiss didn't even enter my husband's mind. He went back to his grim, silent contemplation of the violet hills in the distance, his hunched, emaciated back suddenly, subtly straightening to throw off any attempt to make him tell me more.

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But he, at least, had had a reasonable conversation with my mother, something now forbidden to me, or almost, and the fact that, according to my husband, she had been drunk that night in the garden in no way implied she wasn't a more reliable source—surely more precise and sincere—than the suspicious, crafty old lady I had to deal with now.

I thought that she was making up secrets to keep me from guessing the real secrets, the ones she'd defiantly sealed away in her now savage, proud, and primitive heart.

I suspected that she didn't remember those deep, true secrets.

She remembered that she had secrets but not what they were, and she didn't care.

Secrets have to be hidden—this much she knew, like a disoriented high priestess, mechanically performing the rituals of her cult.

Which was why, when I went back to see her in her "funereal home" (as she liked to call the facility), I not only brought along a bottle of champagne and two crystal flutes but popped the cork nonchalantly, without a glance at my mother, as if all this were an everyday routine between the two of us.

She looked on coldly as I held out her glass.

She simply sat there, shaking her head.

"I never drink, my poor girl, have you forgotten that? Do you know anything about me?"

She let out a sardonic little laugh even as, I could see, her gaze grew troubled.

She looked toward the dark window for help, tried to twist her lips into an intimidating rictus.

So she knew I could see her! She was manipulating her reflection to deceive me!

That's all over, Maman, that's all over now! I cried mutely.

And then, It's no good trying to scare me!

I set on her nightstand the champagne flute she'd declined.

I calmly filled my glass, drank it down in one go, and concluded with an expansive "Mmm" of delectation.

Turning back toward me, she fixed me with a defiant, reproachful stare while her right hand stealthily moved toward her left and clasped it to stop it from trembling.

"Maman," I said offhandedly, pouring myself another glass, "tell me about Denis Rouxel."

"The good Denis?"

She gave me a sarcastic smile, but her eyes seemed as unquiet as her hands.

It occurred to me then that she might have refused the champagne not because she didn't want it or because she had so long pretended she didn't drink but because her fingers could no longer hold a delicate glass without the risk of dropping it or spilling its contents.

Chiding myself for not having thought of this earlier, I went into the bathroom for her tooth glass, a solid plastic goblet. I half filled it with champagne.

"Here, Maman," I said plainly.

And I feigned a perfectly neutral expression, forcing myself not to look at her so that she wouldn't have to put on an act.

She took the glass in both hands and raised it to her lips.

Before her first sip, she whispered, in a voice I thought mischievous, "Cheers, my girl!"

Then: "You don't need to get me drunk to make me talk about the good Denis, you know. I'll listen to all your questions, but, my poor girl, I won't have many answers."

"But," I said, with a touch of impatience, "you lived with him for a while, and I was there. You must have some memories of the three of us together."

"Well, really . . ."

To my great joy, she kept her grip on the glass and drank it down.

And I hurried to pour her a bit more, so she wouldn't have to ask.

No sign, now, of her turning toward the dark transforming window!

No aspiration to some metamorphosis that would erect a wall of terror between her and me!

Only the formal, superior, ingratiating welcome she reserved for my curiosity: "What would you like me to tell you, my girl?"

"Well, for one thing, why do you call him the good Denis?"

She gave a little laugh, coquettish or cunning or maybe sweet—I wasn't sure of anything.

"Because to me he was the incarnation of the purest goodness."

"Maman, those are just words. What, in your everyday life, made you think that man exceptionally good? How did he treat you, treat us?"

She reached toward me with both

HERE ARE AMBIGUITIES

Here are the chaffinches we saw crossing the road dividing the forest.
Here are the blue-numbered logs we saw by the fast-flowing stream.
Here are the voles we saw moving through leaf litter, nibbling.
Here are red kites we heard high in the pines holding down their flight.
Here are fruit trees that sheltered us, shedding petals and forcing out new leaves.
Here are the plastic streamers that blocked our way, fluttering over the path.
Here are the gradations of those gauge boards as the water reached up.
Here are the meadows effusing and fermenting—spontaneously erupting.
Here is the mayfly on my hand bringing itself into synch with my biorhythms.
Here are the same steps redirected uphill taking so much more work—a test.
Here are horses being led by riders searching the forest for an inner light.
Here are resplendent blue beetles glowing next to a dead comrade—*to grieve*?
Here are blue stars evoking purple flags evoking white-winged flowers as aftermath.
Here is a record of passing as nettles vibrate and pinecones drop.

—John Kinsella

thin, ropy, trembling arms, summoning, I thought, what was left of their strength to help the two hands holding the glass.

"This champagne of yours isn't bad."

Had she ever held out loving, consoling arms to embrace me?

She must have, even if I had no memory of it.

I poured her another glass.

A faint pinkness rose to her cheeks, not as if she'd been rouged but as if the young, still vital woman inside her, encased in a sheath of decrepitude, had, thanks to the champagne, found a crack through which to appear.

"Well," she began.

She closed her eyes, slowly drank down her glass.

I took it from her so she wouldn't have to go through the effort of setting it down.

She was smiling, distant, gracious.

She bent toward me, murmured, "Denis, you see, was a liberal."

"Is that all?" I gasped.

"Oh!"

Suddenly her lips were quivering in shock.

She waved her hands in front of her face, now drained of its color, and whispered, dismayed, "Isn't that enough?"

Tears came to my eyes, tears less of sadness than of cruel disappointment.

"Maman," I pleaded, abandoning all dignity, "tell me something! Just one single scene, I don't know, one single moment with Denis!"

"A moment?"

She sat down on the bed.

Her bony knees seemed about to poke through the fabric of her skirt—and those thighs, skeletal. . . . My mother had never been very solid, as they say, but I couldn't help noticing that since moving to this beautiful retirement home she'd become drastically thinner.

"Do you like the food here, Maman? Is everything good?"

"I don't know. I don't care about that."

Irritated, she raised her index finger beside her temple to indicate that my bland questions were disturbing her ruminations.

Her gaze was cool and stern. To my relief, she seemed to be not looking at me but watching for her memories to appear on my bare, blank, indeterminate face, a screen onto which her mind, commanded to remember, would project the images I was waiting or hoping for.

"Well, speaking of food," she began, now wearing a forthright, pure, amused smile that was, I sensed, addressed not to me but to the visions taking shape on my face, "Denis is a fine chef. He won't let me do the cooking. I don't have his talent, it's very true. He whips up wonderful dishes for my little girl. 'Only the best foods can go into that little body,' he sweetly repeats. Oh, yes, what a cook is my good Denis!"

She closed her eyes and opened them again, coming back to me and to the new expression on her face, a look of quiet terror at the thought of what I might be expecting from her. Now she was afraid of disappointing me!

Wouldn't I have preferred to see the reflection of her cruel gaze in the dark window?

Wouldn't I have preferred to see her savage, unjust, unfeeling, and unhinged?

Wouldn't that be preferable to this pleading look, even if, for the moment, all she wanted was to satisfy my wish, my need to learn more about myself than I could remember?

"Thank you, Maman. Tell me, do you have any idea where Denis lives now?"

My voice was gentle, beguiling, so low that she didn't understand.

Simpering, she pretended to have heard.

"Yes, yes, Denis is still alive, I'm sure of it. You see, my girl"—she gave a little laugh—"the good Denises of this world always outlive the others, and that's only right! Your father wasn't good. He died. And what will that mean for me?"

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Two days later, my husband tried, unsuccessfully, to be dead.

He was trying not to die, I'm quite

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sure—that's too hard—but to go directly from living to dead, from one moment to the next.

He wasn't young anymore, but he wasn't yet old.

So, for my mother, he was neither a good man nor a bad man but simply a nobody.

"He jumped out the window, you say? My girl, I know your house, and I know he had no chance of killing himself that way. The worm! What a sorry excuse for a man, never did well at anything!"

"Maman, I don't want you talking about my husband that way! I love him, I love him so! I have no choice but to love him, to love him so!"

"Then, my girl, ask this one little thing of him: that he not fail at dying the way he's failed at everything else."

"Maman, this attitude of yours is quite simply fascist. A successful death, a glorious suicide . . ."

"Yes, yes. . . . 'Fascist' is just the word you're using right now. It doesn't in any way alter the truth of what I'm telling you about your husband, about that particular man who happens to be your husband. As you see, unlike you, I'm not generalizing. I'm telling you about that man whom I knew well, my son-in-law, whom I never thought much of. I never understood how you could feel such a fanatical love for him, when, unlike Denis, there was nothing special about him, apart from a few ridiculous manias, like his passion for the Virgin Mary or his much vaunted knowledge of wines and varietals or whatever they're called, which made me sick with boredom when, too often, too pleased with himself, he lectured me about it, though he had to have noticed my disgusted indifference to the whole subject. Whereas the good Denis never talked to anyone, not even a child, not even a dog, unless he was sure that what he was saying had some chance of interesting them. The good Denis would never have failed at his own suicide. But, of course, the good Denis would never have wanted to die."

"What connection are you making, Maman, between Denis's goodness and his taste for life?"

"But, my girl, it's obvious. How could you of all people not understand? You're sometimes cowardly, you lack backbone. You're not good like Denis—you're just weak and ordinary and tormented because you think too much of yourself, your little anxieties take you over, you torture yourself and coddle yourself. You'll never be a good person. Unfortunately, I was like you! The good Denis would never have forced anyone to find his dead body, to deal with his 'suicide,' would never have left others wondering whether they could have prevented that fatal act. But your failure of a husband! What a joke!"

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I spent the next few weeks trying to add to what little I knew of Denis by means of a careful, unhurried, groping search through the infinite space of the Web.

My husband, whose attempt had fortunately left him physically unscathed, now needed treatment and a stay in the country, for the good of us all, for our peace of mind. How I wished never to have to think of his well-being again!

How I wished never to have to think about anything that concerned him, be it his love for me, which I felt responsible for and duty bound to maintain, for his good and his peace of mind, or be it his future, which I secretly, scandalously hoped he might envisage without me in it, without my playing even a minor role in it.

How I wished he would forget me!

Yes, how I wished his various hurts and his irrefutable age might make him miraculously forget I existed!

Maybe not that I *had* existed, since I liked to think that our many happy years together had given my otherwise colorless life (my face, my figure, my profession: all insipid) a density, a significance, a singularity that I could attribute only to my particular capacity for affection.

My husband had a similar capacity, and so, although we were, alas, childless, we had always been quiet champions of long-term love.

I hoped now that he would preserve a memory of me that might soothe his bitter heart, and that once in a while, from around the corner of a hospital hallway, or through the window of his room, or when he reached for the remote on his bedcovers, there would come a fleeting assurance that the two of us had been stout-hearted and valiant in our journey through married life.

But I also wished, fiercely, that he would believe I was dead, for my peace of mind.

Oh, not that I wanted him to suffer, no!

Only that he might hear in his disturbed mind a blithe, carefree voice, an obliging whisper informing him that I was no longer a woman on this earth but a soul in the cosmos, for his peace of mind and my own.

P.F.H.! P.F.H.! Pray for her!

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And then, miraculously, I made the acquaintance of Régine.

"How did you find me?"

"By chance and persistence, which is to say that the tenacity I devoted not to finding you, exactly, since I had no idea you existed, but to following the trail of the good Denis led me to you, by accident, by fortune."

"Yes, Denis. Why do you call him the good Denis?"

"That's how people speak of him to me. Is it not true?"

"Oh, it is, it is. Oh, yes, yes. The too good Denis, if you see what I mean, the excessively good Denis, perhaps, but, yes, he was good, I suppose."

"You're not sure?"

"Oh, I am, I am. His goodness was like a thunderbolt, you see. No, I'm wrong, his goodness was like the slow fire that descends from the heavens and settles over your soul and convinces you, numbs you, makes you feel you're nothing much but gives you hope that with meditation, integrity, and honor you may eventually become blessed yourself. You see, Denis, without knowing it or wanting it, was truly a saint. Like any saint, I suppose, he could be fearsome and terrifying in his greatness, that greatness of which he was unaware. Implacably rigorous in pursuing a goodness he clearly didn't register. That's where you come in."

"Me? But, you understand, I don't know him."

"You did, though, even if you were too young to remember. And what matters in all this is that he knew you well, he raised you, he cared for you like his own daughter, and he loved you the same way, happily, passionately. It was because of you that he refused to have a child with me, out of a monstrously virtuous fidelity to his memory of that tiny girl, you. 'I can't let another child into my memory,' he would tell me. 'I can't think of creating any competition between my memory of Mimi and the memory I might have of another little girl.' And I answered, 'But what makes you think you'd lose our child, too?' And he said, 'It happens. I owe it to Mimi to forever think of her as the only child I ever loved.'"

"But I'm not dead!"

"He lost you—it's the same thing. As I understand it, your mother took you away one day, left him just like that, and of course you went with her. Denis's glorious simplicity shielded him from hard feelings, and even from pointless anguish, from vainly protracted grief. He endured his lot with a smile. And, at the same time, he resolved to remain forever the father of only one child, you. Oh, not, as you must already understand, to spare himself other sorrows. He never gave that a thought. He had no fear of sorrow, and he didn't wallow in it. It's just that

the inexorable, unyielding nature of his marvellous humanity had led him to decide that because he'd loved you desperately, and because you'd been taken away from him without your wanting it at all, he owed it to you never to attach himself to any other child, ever."

"That's ridiculous! It's absurd!"

"I don't know. That was Denis. That was why I left him. I went on to have the children I wanted, of course, with other men. But I miss the child Denis and I would have had, so I can't help resenting you a little. Forgive me, it's not your fault."

The strange damage that goodness can do!

When I asked Régine how she felt about my wish to meet in person, she seemed surprised and shocked, as if I were proposing something utterly immoral.

"What reason would I have for meeting you? The adult that you are has no place in my life, you don't interest me. And also I want to forget the good Denis—I've been working on that all this time. Meet you? Who do you think you are? How indecent! You do not interest me, Madame. To me, Madame, you are only the faded reflection of a child who caused my unhappiness. I couldn't hate the little girl Denis so loved that he couldn't imagine giving the smallest share of his unlimited tenderness to any other, even his own—I couldn't hate her, because you can't hate a child. But the woman you've become I can only resent, however unfair that may be."

Although it was hard, I decided not to ask for Régine's forgiveness.

I asked only if she knew where the good Denis lived.

"I do not, and I have no wish to. I'm not good. I haven't entirely freed myself from anger and acrimony, brooding and pointless self-pity. I'm quite sure that Denis, in his radiant, indifferent goodness, never broods. Happy are the blessed! Does he remember me? Or has he, for my own good, erased me from his memory? If you meet him, tell him about me, I'm begging you, mention Régine. . . ."

I wasn't good, either.

If ever I did have the chance to meet Denis, I would certainly not speak the name of this Régine, who had, there's no other word for it, cursed me.

I wasn't good, either.

I tried not to be proud of that.

I would have been ashamed of my pride, but still proud.

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Some of my dreams left me, in the morning, clammy with unease and a

strange sort of timidity toward myself—yes, the self I now barely recognized and didn't know quite how to address in my thoughts.

Because, in those intense, pleasant dreams, I was, alas, copulating with the good Denis.

It would have been more than enough to make me uncomfortable if those dreams showed me *making love* with the good Denis—but there were only absurd, impossible couplings, in which one sole thing was manifestly obvious, which was that Denis was pushing his strange genitals into mine, and I was delighted, alas.

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Long, cold, haunted years went by. I visited my mother as often as my husband, in their miseries.

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"The good Denis, the good Denis," my mother said again and again, "does he remember me sometimes?"

"My Virgins, all my Virgins, so patiently assembled, and I've abandoned them! My Marys, forgive me!" my husband intoned in a murmur that never failed to lull me to sleep, though he was entirely unaware, I was convinced, that he was doing so.

A start, the shadow of a fear, an irrational mistrust wrenched me awake.

And, from the armchair covered in gray vinyl—identical to the one I sat in while pretending to have stopped listening to my mother, hoping she might reveal secrets that were real and not imagined—from the hard armchair that had become mine in my husband's room, I saw myself tugging at my own hair, jerking my face back and forth, forcing myself to see with eyes no longer veiled by easy sympathy: my husband had become a mysteriously disturbing man.

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And in those days, in my misery, I thought I saw the good Denis everywhere.

And although, every morning, I tried to forget how I'd appropriated him in my dreams, how my sick dreams had pawed and besmirched his impeccably respectable body, the day found ways of reminding me how much he should, if he knew, fear my fantasies.

Because I thought I saw the good Denis everywhere.

"Does he remember me?" my mother kept asking.

"Just let this good Denis show up now!" I sometimes answered.

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I looked for him in the inexhaustible expanses of the Web.

I thought I found him in the person of a certain Flora, a beautician in Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port.

Because why, I said to myself, should the good Denis not be incarnated in bodies other than the one my mother had known? Why should he not manifest himself in a variety of forms, perhaps ambiguous, perhaps straightforward and clear, as that lady from the Pyrénées-Atlantiques seemed to be, her personality in every way one with the good Denis's?

Did he know, wherever he was, that I was on a quest to find him?

Was he entertaining himself by testing my imagination?

I had so little, so little, alas.

But enough to convince myself that Flora—whose Facebook account I'd come across, either accidentally or because it was the will of a fate governed by Denis—that Flora was one of the forms the good Denis had taken to reveal himself to my consciousness.

Unlike Régine, the good Flora had no objection to meeting.

But then—nothing, alas.

It wasn't him, couldn't be him—I could see that straightaway.

It was only Flora, absolutely, utterly, and unquestionably, in her own thoughtful, decent, humble goodness, a Flora who could not compare with what I expected from the good Denis.

After that, I met Régis, Sylviane, Maria, Alain.

The good Denis was not in them, no matter how hard I tried to draw him out.

He wasn't there. He wasn't anywhere.

•

"Big news, darling," my mother then told me. "Denis is coming to visit me. He'll be here Friday, in my room."

"No, Maman, that's not possible. You must be confused. I don't know who's coming to see you, but it can't be Denis."

My whole body was trembling, not because I saw in my mother's claim evidence of cognitive decline but because I was afraid that she was telling the truth.

She shrugged her slender shoulders, smiling, impassive, understanding me but not pitying me—with the serene, almost indifferent hardness that now marked her dealings with me, as if, resigned to finding me foolish, pointlessly complicated, she had, without vain regret, abandoned all hope of seeing me change.

On the day she'd named, which I wished I could put off forever, I found myself at her side, perched on the gray armchair as she sat on her bed, shrunken but valiant, bold, unafraid.

"I don't know, my girl," she said quietly, "if the good Denis will leave me in peace or torment me, but whatever his choice it will be the right one."

Then my racing heart, understanding before my mind, which was automatically formulating a sarcastic or perhaps infuriated answer, my enlightened, aware heart, prudent and sensible, began to pound so hard that I jumped up and ran from the room.

In the hallway, I met all the women wearing my mother's clothes, the cardigan, the nightgown, the lace-sleeved blouse—no, not all the women, maybe two? I don't know anymore.

I went home, making plans to flee.

Where could I go that the good Denis would never find me? Frantic, I called my mother, even as I suspected she might be more on Denis's side than on mine and would betray me without meaning to, without even knowing it.

I called her all the same, thinking that she was the only one who could give me, innocently, without thinking she was rescuing me or even wanting to rescue me, the best advice on how to escape the good Denis's embrace.

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"Maman, don't give Denis my address."

"It's no use, my girl. Apparently, he has a date with you."

"Is he there in your room?"

"Yes, of course, he always did come on time." (She thought she'd lowered

her voice, but she was whispering loudly, like a little girl who thinks she need only put on a costume in order not to be recognized or blindfold herself to keep from being seen.) "He said he'd come and join you in the place you decided on together."

"I never decided on anything with him, ever, not even in my thoughts!" I cried.

"I don't know, my girl, what am I supposed to say?" my mother whispered with what sounded like a last sigh, and then, to wrap things up, again called me "darling," which had always vaguely implied that she'd had enough of my questions. Because she never called me "darling" as much as when she wanted to be rid of me, rid of the sight of a woman she vaguely remembered she was supposed to love but in whose face or expression or anything else she found nothing to justify that love or even to suggest that the woman was particularly likable.

"The good Denis has a date with you, darling, wherever you are. He actually just told me that. And now, darling, let me talk to him, let me, darling, enjoy my reunion with the good Denis, please, darling."

And so, knowing there was no way my mother could flee, locked in the home I'd put her in, I gave up on warning her about the good Denis's intentions. In truth, I accepted the painful thought that not only had my mother resigned herself to her deadly fate but her weary heart, her bored old heart, had eagerly welcomed it.

As for me, oh, no, I wasn't ready yet. The sense that a great injustice was being plotted against me so outraged me that I imagined bursting into my mother's room, furious and triumphant, stronger than the good Denis, and spitting at him, "You won't get me! Impostor! My death will not wear your face!"

I imagined barricading myself in my house, turning a deaf ear to all coaxing entreaties, to all voices, unctuous or urgent, and, especially, to those that eloquently evoked a long-ago bond. But then, collecting my thoughts, I realized that the good Denis, if he was someone I should now fear, would know just how to convince me to open my door to him, and that my lost, desperate, submissive mind could never win a fight against his subtle brain, would never even dream of trying.

"Once you recover from the three hundred and sixty-eight texts it took to plan this, it really is nice to get together."

• •

I went to visit my husband in the home, where they were doing their best to make him understand that he had no reason to want to die before his time.

I found him glum, plaintive, sometimes strangely boastful.

He confessed that he was happy to be alive, in spite of everything.

All the same, he said, he was proud that he'd wanted to die, and he seemed determined to make something heroic of that intention, as if, having had to choose between the mindless reflex to stay alive and the noble aspiration to kill himself, he'd settled for the former only to make things easier for us—for me and the rest of the world.

I sat down in the gray armchair while he lay stiffly on his bed of lamentations, not ailing in any way, held down by nothing.

Oh, my husband!

I loved him so when we were young.

Now he was nothing like the man I knew then—his very eyes, once brown, seemed bereft of color, always full of fierce tears that never flowed.

"Denis will be coming here," I said to him. "You know, the good Denis?"

And I savagely, furiously hoped that when Denis entered he would take my husband in his grim embrace, forget about me, not even see me.

Wasn't that only right?

Because I myself, ardently, wanted to live. ♦

(Translated, from the French, by Jordan Stump.)

NEWYORKER.COM
Marie NDiaye on trying to define goodness.

A CRITIC AT LARGE

LAUGH LINES

The funny thing about comedy.

BY ADAM GOPNIK

In almost every TV comedy special, there's a telling cutaway that the director felt obliged to insert. It shows spectators in the theatre rented for the occasion—usually a half row, half a dozen people—erupting in laughter at something outrageous that the comedian has just said while turning with quick, happy complicity to exchange a guilty glance for having done so. As often as not, someone in the row covers her face or offers an abashed look, before rocking back and forth with renewed delight. It is a heightened emotion and clearly meant to allow us, watching, to join in. *Can we laugh at that?* they ask one another, giving us permission to laugh as they laugh.

It is, in a way, a version of the canned laughter that once enwrapped every situation comedy, and which, when now encountered on ancient shows on TV Land, sounds downright eerie in its mechanical, obviously overlaid quality. The two practices arise from a common idea: that laughter is a shared, not a solitary, experience, and needs a little kindling of collectivity to catch fire.

Mere physical, unmediated laughter might be a good place to begin exploring the higher morality of comedy—for comedy, like pornography, is the rare form that has a physical end, either achieved or not. The flutter in our heart we say we feel upon viewing a great painting is largely metaphoric; the laughter in our chests which comedy elicits is not. We can easily imagine an actor who is deeply "moving" but never makes us cry; it's a different kind of moving, we say. (Daniel Day-Lewis is like that.) But a clown who makes no one laugh is not a clown, or else is stuck in a Beckett play.

The harder question, these days, is what lines the clown may cross. It's easy to complain about neo-puritanism, but neo-puritanism does have the virtue of indicting comedy that is merely snickering cruelty. Yet the urge to make comedy "positive" runs up against the truth that comedy has always been a series of transgressions against piety and high-mindedness, stretching back to Aristophanes mocking Socrates' pretensions in "The Clouds," while Socrates sat there in the theatre, laughing at the mockery. So how to explain this urge: has comedy changed dramatically in purpose in our era? Or have its ideological trappings gone pious in ways that are at odds with what comedians have always done?

Kliph Nesteroff's "Outrageous: A History of Showbiz and the Culture Wars" (Abrams) comes with significant recommendations from various comedy worthies, including Judd Apatow, but it is essentially a history of American censorship of all kinds of popular culture. Many examples are drawn from obscure century-old sources. When someone with a provincial printing press attacks a form of American popular culture ("The so-called jazz music is an abomination," the Greeley *Daily Tribune* pronounced in 1920), Nesteroff sees proof that the form was under relentless assault, even though the assault was coming from the small-town paper exactly because the art form was becoming so successful outside the small town. Despite the notorious attempts, which Nesteroff documents in detail, to suppress Elvis's hips and Mick Jagger's lips, the final score in that battle was Rock and Roll: 100, Censorship: 0. (The real early rock-and-roll scandals—Chuck Berry's imprisonment for having sex with an underage girl and Jerry Lee Lewis's notoriety for having married one—look *worse* by contemporary standards than they did in their time.)

When it comes to comedy, Nesteroff describes American attempts to censor theatre and vaudeville and burlesque which date almost to the beginning of the Republic, along with all the misbegotten efforts to purge "vulgarity" from popular entertainment. Though he's generally cheerfully contemptuous of the censors, he is himself rather censorious about the indulgence back then of what is unacceptable to us now: not just blackface but also ethnic stereotyping of the kind produced by Jewish- and Italian-dialect comedians. "The *Topeka Daily Capital* argued that vaudeville's greatest sin was not insult comedy nor blackface caricature, but references to unwed mothers," he marvels.

"Vaudeville largely consisted of assimilated immigrants who held contempt for newer arrivals," he goes on. "And yet, the more established the immigrant group, the less patience they had for being insulted. By the end of the 1890s, Irish and Italian immigrants were objecting to portrayals of intoxicated leprechauns and moronic organ-grinders." He might have noted that the best and longest-surviving of all vaudeville acts, the Marx Brothers, depended on dated dialect comedy well into the nineteen-forties, with Chico Marx persisting in what are still some of the funniest of all American comedy routines—try the "Sanity Clause" bit, from "A Night at the Opera," sometime. What renders it harmless is the

ABOVE: PHILIPPE PETIT-ROULET

The urge to make comedy "positive" runs up against the idea of comedy as a series of transgressions against piety.

ILLUSTRATION BY JACK SMYTH

fact that its "ethnic" quality is dissolved into general commedia-dell'arte stylization, so that it can no more be taken as a stereotype of the Italians than Pierrot can be taken as one of the French.

What about the more overt persecution of comedy that Nesteroff traces? It's true that various comedians have been arrested for obscenity—and that for a long time the range of acceptable comedy was very limited—and yet none of them, in historical perspective, truly suffered for their transgressions. Lenny Bruce famously underwent a series of trials; his disciple George Carlin, who was present at one of Bruce's arrests and, allergic to authority, refused to show I.D., once travelled to the police station with him. But Bruce never went to prison, and the demons that tormented him were mostly personal. Carlin himself was arrested a few times for onstage performances of his famous "seven dirty words" routine, in which he itemized the words forbidden on the radio. But he, too, spent no time in prison, or even stood trial.

The fact is that, historically, censorship in a more or less open society has had little permanent impact on art or on entertainment. Bruce was put through hell by (mostly Catholic) prosecutors, but nobody had any trouble buying his albums, and he died of an overdose, not a broken heart. While absolutist states can imprison their authors and performers, as in contemporary Iran, this hasn't really happened in America, for all its Watch and Ward Societies and Hays Codes. The list of would-be censors is long, but one need only consider Tipper Gore's efforts to regulate rap to recognize a losing cause when one sees it. The Moral Majority was never a majority. Had Lenny Bruce not killed himself with morphine, he would be a grand old man of comedy, taking bows and grumbling about social media.

Nesteroff eventually goes from documenting, skeptically, the efforts that people have made to condemn comedy they deemed an affront to decency to joining those condemning comedy they deem an affront to decency, albeit from a progressive perspective. He endorses the assaults on the genuinely tasteless nineties standup Andrew Dice Clay, quoting the sainted Carlin: "Comedy traditionally has picked on people in power, people who abuse their power. . . . Women and gays and immigrants are kind of, to my way of thinking, underdogs." Henny Youngman himself gets to take a swing at Clay: "You're wrong if you think poking fun at helpless people makes you a comedian. My second opinion is that your jokes aren't jokes, they're ugliness." Even if the critics have a point, it's a little awkward to see this piling on after we've been instructed in the preceding pages to mistrust all moral censoriousness.

But social consensus can alter swiftly. A dozen years ago, an episode of HBO's "Talking Funny" showed three comedians (Ricky Gervais, Louis C.K., and Chris Rock) throwing the N-word around, as if to establish their sophistication and fearlessness. Jerry Seinfeld, who was seated with them, said he "wouldn't use it anywhere." At the time, he might have seemed unduly cautious and commercial; he now sounds like the voice of common sense and courtesy. The square becomes the sage.

It is similarly easy to forget that Chris Rock preceded Donald Trump in deriding John McCain for having been captured, during a 2008 performance in defense of Obama: "There's a lot of guys in jail that got captured. I don't wanna vote for nobody that got captured—I wanna vote for the motherfucker who got away!" What seems daring and courageous at one moment can seem cruel and unregarding at another; what's perceived as merrily provocative and what's perceived as mortally dangerous to the polity can shift overnight. Go ask Socrates.

Nesteroff's somewhat censorious study of censorship provides a useful reminder that censorship and censoriousness are significantly different things. Censorship is the actual government interdiction of forbidden speech, and in liberal-democratic countries there's essentially none of this when it comes to culturally contested zones. It's just that we're inclined to voice emphatic disapproval about certain forms of speech, which, though disconcerting for the subject of our disapproval, is not at all what we mean by censorship. Organized boycotts are unpleasant, and illiberal in their effects, but they have no resemblance to the actual government interdiction of free speech. Any user of Twitter (oh, fine, X) in its Musk era can see what happens when common sense and caution are removed from conversation. Censorship may be doomed; censoriousness has its uses.

Jesse David Fox's baldly named "Comedy Book" (Farrar, Straus & Giroux) is an attempt to study laughter as a common enterprise, as is suggested by its subtitle, "How Comedy Conquered Culture—and the Magic That Makes It Work." In Fox's view, comedy conquered culture only starting in the nineteen-nineties, with the success of "Seinfeld." The sum of his historical perspective is conveyed in this sentence: "Comedy has steadily grown in cultural relevance, from vaudeville around the turn of the twentieth century to *Seinfeld*." What preceded the nine-season NBC comedy was, he evidently thinks, a form "still in its nascency." Charlie Chaplin, W. C. Fields, S. J. Perelman, Jack Benny, Gracie Allen, Sid Caesar, Godfrey Cambridge, Bob Hope, Nipsey Russell, Carol Burnett—none of them gets so much as a mention. Comedy was marginal, now it's central, and "Seinfeld" and "The Simpsons" made it so. This is odd. In your book about baseball, even if the point you are going to make is that Babe Ruth's way of playing baseball is not our way of playing baseball, it would still seem wise to include Babe Ruth. Fox genuinely seems to have zero historical sense of comedy—and by historical sense here one doesn't mean some excursus into the Lord of Misrule figures who preceded Falstaff. One means Bob Hope.

What's curious about this is that Seinfeld, his hero and central figure, has a sharp sense of comedy history, and has devoted himself to producing a documentary tribute to Abbott and Costello—demonstrating a slightly perverse anti-arty taste—and cannot praise his observational predecessor Robert Klein often enough. More important, when a chronicler lacks a sense of history, everything old seems new. The famous line about Seinfeld's comedy being about nothing, which Fox gives an existential twist, saying it's really about "nothingness," changes meaning when you reflect that much great comedy, from Congreve to Wilde, has been about nothing—that is, it's about manners, how they change and how they serve to soothe and enrage us at the same time. Samuel Johnson called these kinds of manners "fictitious benevolence"—all

the things we say to ease our lives with other people, even if we do not mean them for a moment. In the work of both Molière and Larry David, the comedy lies in the main character's extreme self-awareness about the fictitious nature of the benevolence. You are expected to praise a friend's poem when it is passed to you, even if it's terrible; you should thank both members of the couple who have picked up the tab at a restaurant, even if only one earned the money being spent; you should seem bewildered if upbraided for having sex with a cleaning woman on the desk at your new job. Once you become aware that benevolence is fictitious, it's funny.

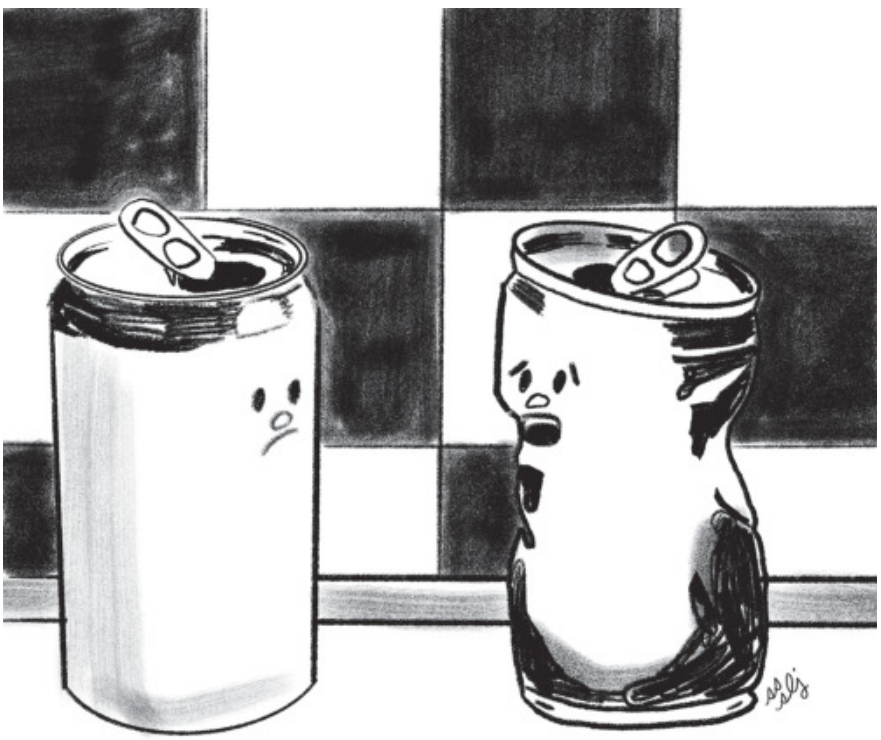
What people call "woke" is, in large part, just a more exquisitely attenuated system of fictitious benevolence, focussing on things you shouldn't say or perform because they might injure someone. We all recognize how fictitious it is—how could we not?—but we have a sense of its benevolence, too. Satiric comedy may have particular targets, but a comedy of manners—as in "situation comedy," a revolving set of people and predicaments responding each week to small social pressures—is always about nothing important and about everything human all at once. "The Mary Tyler Moore Show," in the nineteen-seventies, was about the manners of its time, and so about "nothing," in the same way as "Seinfeld" was. The episodes depicted struggles with fictitious benevolence, inspecting the rules of decorum which insist that, say, a funeral can never be funny, even when the deceased was crushed by an elephant while dressed as a peanut. Those who don't know the comic past may not be condemned to repeat it, but they'll miss the chance to laugh at it.

On the question of the "magic that makes it work," Fox has more interesting things to say, or, at least, to summarize. He reviews all the prominent theories of comedy, including Freudian theories of tension and release (we're letting out psychic energy connected with a repressed topic), classical superiority theory (we laugh at others' misfortunes to feel better about ourselves), structural theories of incongruity (the setup points one way, the punch line another), and ends favoring a theory that roots our need for comedy in an instinct to play, a theory whose fulfillment lies in the uses of comedy to create community. It is this ability to gather unlike listeners into an empathetic space that makes comedy worth celebrating, he proposes.

In this spirit, Fox recounts watching the wonderful John Mulaney performing, at Madison Square Garden, a show devoted to his experience with rehab. Mulaney observed, at a certain point, that his relationship with his audience was "the longest-lasting, most intimate one of his life." Fox was dismayed by the audience's response: "Many began to clap. He cringed and asked them to stop—he hadn't meant it was a good thing. Probably even more than Mulaney, I grew frustrated as the show wore on. I had felt connected to Mulaney and his process, but at the same time felt the audience wasn't giving him what he needed from us and, in turn, what we needed to give each other." It was supposed to be "a collective moment of healing," Fox tells us, but the audience fell down on the job. Only connect, he's saying.

The spirit of play, he suggests, is the spirit of connection. "The feeling of mirth one experiences watching comedy is similar at the most basic neurological level to the feeling one has joking around with one's friends and family," he writes. "Similarly, as we mature, we search for ever more sophisticated versions of laughing at a funny face a relative makes when we're a child. Comedians are able to artificially create that state of play by generating the same feelings of trust and safety that free you up to laugh most easily."

Are feelings of trust and safety what we typically feel in the presence of a great comedian? The idea jars a little. Those cutaways don't show moist exchanges of empathy; they show people checking to see if the redrawn boundary of the acceptable is indeed acceptable. Surely any relaxation that we feel, any release, has more to do with that sudden acceptance of our shared helplessness in the face of the comedian's gift for naming our best-kept secrets. Comedy is more likely to involve shared shock than communal bonding; impiety is its theme far more often than is any collective "moment of healing." In truth, the happiness we experience is the happiness of escape, however momentary, from the enforced good feelings that phrases like "a moment of healing" suggest. Piety is poison to comedy. A world in which comedy plays a healthy, constructive role in bridging social divides and making people share their



"What if there's no such thing as recycling and when it's over it's just over?"

feelings might be a good thing, but it would not be a funny thing. Bringing people together in high-minded community is the task of folk music.

If there is any kind of comic grammar that underlines comedy, it surely derives from the fact that our earliest experience of laughter comes when we are first tickled: laughter arrives at the moment when a baby grasps the difference between a real threat and a mock threat. If the baby senses she is in danger, she cries; recognizing that she is not, she laughs. This shift seems foundational to what comedy is. If comedy begins here, it rises to more complex forms, as this basic grammar encircles ever larger areas of experience. Comedy has a range as large as human feeling, and can express optimism (the Marx Brothers), pessimism (Jacques Tati), stoicism (Buster Keaton), and even humanism (Chaplin). But all comedians have to walk the line between real attack and mock attack as skillfully as lion tamers walk the line between the animal's attack space and its escape space. They violate our norms and then offer new ones, while reminding us that the norms are ours to violate and to make. What separates Chris Rock from Donald Trump is that Rock knows the liminal space he's in, poised between actual revelation and wicked hyperbole—a truth to which we are clued in as much by his performance style (his constant nervous pacing, his sidelong glances) as by his words. The impieties are to be taken as possibilities, not as actual truths. It may be that Trump intuitively understands this, too, and that one reason his sneers and terrifying invocation of cruelty are not taken as seriously as they should be is that some people think of Trump's discourse as that of the insult comedian: *He doesn't really mean it*. He does.

The role of self-knowledge connects the simplest forms of humor to the most complex. "Why do birds fly south in winter? Because it's too far to walk" has an implied speaker who doesn't grasp that this truth isn't the relevant truth, with the joke depending on the fact that the actual speaker does. When Steven Wright says that he stopped in a diner with a sign in the window offering breakfast anytime and ordered French toast during the Renaissance, we relish the overlooked ambiguity of "anytime," and the overlay of the ingenious performer and the ingenuous persona. Even the simplest comedy is always at least a little bit meta, making us aware of our awareness. Laughter is cognition examining its own navel.

There are recent books that embrace, rather than ignore, the history of comedy: Keegan-Michael and Elle Key's new "History of Sketch Comedy" (Chronicle Books) is almost too genially inclusive, bringing in everything from Tim Conway's work on "The Carol Burnett Show" to Paul Lynde's on "The Hollywood Squares." British genius is given its due, not only in the rightly inevitable Monty Python but in the preceding—and, in its way, more magical because more minimal—duo of Peter Cook and Dudley Moore.

The Keys have produced a book without a thesis but with something like a formula: they sum up sketch comedy as "characters, a premise, and escalation." They're aware that the old regime of "appointment television" has largely gone; people consume media on their phones, and often just in YouTube clips. "The US used to collectively wait for 11:30 on a Saturday night to find out what would be funny next week—which Saturday Night Live skit we would talk about around the water cooler," an advertising exec has noted. Other people worry that political tensions and anxiety over such things as the death of democracy and the climate crisis have left us collectively unsmiling—that now the only thing people are likely to talk about at a water cooler is cooler water.

Meanwhile, Mike Sacks's two compendiums of interviews with comedians—"Poking a Dead Frog" and "And Here's the Kicker"—are there to remind us that in no art form is the space between the bottom and the top quite so narrow. Back in the nineteen-sixties, Bruce Jay Friedman, having already published a story in *The New Yorker*, and at work on the classic novel "Stern," was employed at a men's-magazine mill, editing what he called "jockstrap magazines." Several decades later, Peter Mehlman, who'd written a few humorous sketches for the *Times*, was whisked into "Seinfeld" on a whim of Larry David's, where he advanced to in-group fame and, presumably, significant fortune. "It never happens," Mehlman remarks. "It's what a lot of freelance writers dream of, but it just never, ever happens." David's own crisp summary of the vertiginous nature of the comic's life: "I went from being a poor schmuck to a rich prick without hardly any transition."

We expect comedians to be vessels of impiety; the release we feel when we laugh derives more from the feeling "Yes, that's true, I hadn't admitted it before!" than from "How grateful I am to hear again that wise remark!" Yet impieties are explosive, which may explain why comic

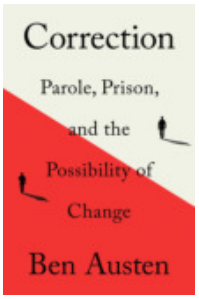
"Is there a doctor in this beautiful studio apartment with a balcony for only thirty-one hundred dollars per month?!"

careers oscillate between in and out, as with those of Lenny Bruce and Andrew Dice Clay—one going from sick to saintly, the other from provocatively transgressive to vehemently taboo, in short order.

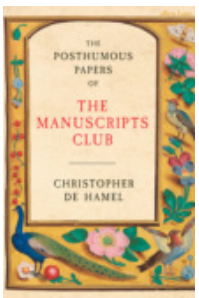
If the uses of comedy are endless, what seems to make us laugh loudest now are reminders of uncomfortable but permanent human truths. We laugh when John Mulaney tells us that, in the midst of his drug intervention, he stopped to count, self-approvingly, the celebrities who had come out to help intervene. We laugh harder when he realizes that, however well meaning they were, he will now have to pick up the tabs for his dinners with them forever. Even our greatest moments of crisis are never untouched by personal calculation. We laugh when Ali Wong notes an asymmetry in the sexual success secured by worldly success: "When a man finds any ounce of mainstream success in comedy, they get to date models, actresses, and pop singers. One of my dear friends is arguably one of the top standup comics in the world. And for the past year and a half, she's been dating a magician." We laugh when Louis C.K., who has his own checkered history of misconduct, explores the coexistence of "of course!" with "maybe" in our internal dialogue: "Of course if you're fighting for your country and you get shot or hurt it's a terrible tragedy. Of course. But maybe if you pick up a gun and go to another country and you get shot it's not that weird? Maybe if you get shot by the dude you were just shooting at, it's a tiny bit your fault?" It's the heart of comedy to hold two opposing truths, one the piety of fictitious benevolence, the other the troubling doubts that trail along.

This doesn't mean that the pieties are empty or useless. Just the opposite: they persist in the face of their violation. Comedy helps us hold them more conditionally than we did before, and that conditional state of mind is our most humane one. We turn toward one another at the show in delighted shock because we recognize that our deepest selves contain as much guilty knowledge as good feeling. The cognitive twist we call comedy makes the guilty knowledge *become* good feeling. We end with the "of course"s but also with common knowledge of the "maybe"s. The conditional mood—call it the conditional condition—is where comedy lives, because we live there, too. ♦

BRIEFLY NOTED

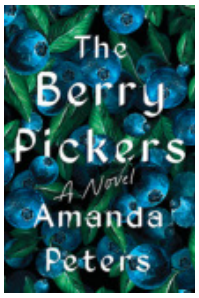


Correction, *by Ben Austen (Flatiron)*. In the nineteen-seventies, the so-called war on crime initiated a trend in extreme sentencing that, for the federal government and sixteen states, included the near-elimination of parole. While showing how parole decisions can be erratic, biased, and insufficiently focussed on the offenders' rehabilitation, Austen argues that the institution is nevertheless "an essential release valve." He anchors his reportage with two inmates in their sixties, who have been imprisoned for four decades and are among the last in Illinois to remain eligible for parole. The self-knowledge and resilience of these men gleam against the harsh conditions of prison, and Austen transforms a debate often conducted on the plane of stereotype and fearmongering into a close study of real people in a broken system.



The Manuscripts Club, *by Christopher de Hamel (Penguin)*. This inviting history brings together an eclectic group of medieval-manuscript lovers. In twelve gossipy chapters, de Hamel imagines discussing all things illuminated with, among others, St. Anselm, the eleventh-century monk and theologian; Belle da Costa Greene, the longtime director of the Morgan Library; and Theodor Mommsen, the German polymath whose transcriptions of classical texts earned him the 1902 Nobel Prize in Literature. Highlighting the sheer unlikeliness of any book lasting for centuries, de Hamel shows how each of his subjects helped to preserve manuscripts for future generations, and finds in their stories hope for the survival of these unique works in the digital age and beyond.

Treacle Walker, *by Alan Garner (Scribner)*. The protagonist of this spare novel, drawn from British folklore and Northern English vernacular, is a boy who lives alone in an old house, reading comic books and collecting birds' eggs, and whose life is disrupted by the arrival of a rag-and-bone man. The boy forges a friendship with the man, Treacle Walker, who speaks in rhymes and riddles and travels with a magic chest. When the boy visits a doctor for his lazy eye, he discovers that his other eye sees things that don't exist in the ordinary realm, and he begins to navigate an increasingly blurry boundary between reality and a dreamlike parallel world. The book examines knowledge and blindness, but its central concern is time, and what it means to step beyond its constraints.



The Berry Pickers, *by Amanda Peters (Catapult)*. The ghosts of lost children haunt generations in this lucid and assured début. The novel begins at the deathbed of a man from the Mi'kmaq Nation, who recalls a life transformed by the abduction of his younger sister, from a berry field in Maine, when he was six. His narration twines with that of a woman who grew up in a stable middle-class home but remembers understanding as a child that "my house was not my house." The story has an inevitability to it, but Peters's writing can surprise. At one point, the woman thinks of her elders, "We just start to separate from them, like oil from water, a line separating the living and the dying, the living carelessly gathering at the top."

BOOKS

I SPY

The Espionage Act is a disaster. Why is it still on the books?

BY AMY DAVIDSON SORKIN

In March, 1940, Edmund Carl Heine, a forty-nine-year-old American automobile executive, reached an understanding with a company then known as Volkswagenwerk GmbH. Heine, who immigrated to the United States from Germany as a young man, had spent years at Ford, first in Michigan and then in its international operations in South America and Europe, landing finally in Germany. In 1935, two years after the Nazi regime came to power, Ford fired him, for reasons that are unclear. Heine next signed on with Chrysler, in Spain, but the Spanish Civil War was tough on the car business. And so he was out of a job again.

Volkswagen offered to pay Heine, who was an American citizen, to collect information on the production of airplanes in the U.S., including military planes. This was odd. Volkswagen had been founded only a few years earlier, as a Nazi Party-managed project for building a "people's car"; it hadn't even mass-produced that automobile yet, let alone a plane. And Heine was instructed to send the information not to its headquarters but to addresses that included a mail drop in Peru and an apartment on East Fifty-fourth Street, in Manhattan, occupied by a sometime artist's model in her twenties named Lilly Stein, whose transportation-industry credentials were scant.

The act cannot possibly mean what it says and also be constitutional.

For more than a year, Heine assembled and submitted thick reports, rich in technical detail and illustrated with photographs of the latest military aircraft. Then, on June 27, 1941, Heine, Stein, and thirty-one other members of a would-be German spy ring were arrested. It turned out that the F.B.I. had been onto them for months. Heine was charged with violating both the Espionage Act of 1917 and the Foreign Agents Registration Act, or FARA, of 1938. Five days after Pearl Harbor, and after eight hours of deliberations, the jury convicted him and thirteen co-defendants. (The rest had already pleaded guilty.) He was sentenced to two years in prison for violating FARA and eighteen years for violating the Espionage Act. The F.B.I. was pleased enough with the operation to coöperate on a Hollywood film loosely based on the case, "The House on 92nd Street," which transformed Stein into a cross-dressing mastermind and moved her uptown.

But by the time the movie came out, in 1945, Heine had filed an appeal, and his case was working its way through the courts. His argument was that he couldn't be a spy because he hadn't actually stolen any secrets—he was just a guy helping out a car company. He had, he conceded, acted with a degree of subterfuge. (He'd signed his reports "Heinrich," for example.) Yet the information he gathered was what we'd now call open-source intelligence. He bought pictures of new planes from a commercial photographic service. He summarized articles in trade magazines, technical journals, and newspapers. He chatted up guides at the New York World's Fair, where the Aviation Building featured a hangar with planes suspended from the ceiling.

Heine's appeal landed in front of a three-judge panel, in New York, that included Learned Hand, one of the best-known jurists of the time. Heine's lawyer was George Gordon Battle, a prominent civil-rights advocate. (G. Gordon Liddy, one of Richard Nixon's White House "plumbers," was named for Battle, his father's mentor. Liddy would play an ignominious role in an Espionage Act case thirty years later: the prosecution of Daniel Ellsberg for leaking the Pentagon Papers.) Judge Hand was ad-

ILLUSTRATION BY ADAM MAIDA

mired for the clarity of his writing, and it took him only a paragraph to uphold Heine's FARA conviction: "Nobody but a simpleton could fail to detect" that his true employer was not Volkswagen but "the Reich."

Hand was, however, troubled by the Espionage Act charge. The act, passed in a frenzy during the First World War, forbade the sharing or unauthorized retention of "information relating to the national defense" that might benefit a foreign power. But beyond giving examples of what that category might encompass—"document, writing, code book, signal book, sketch, photograph, photographic negative, blue print, plan, map, model, note, instrument, appliance"—the law didn't say what it meant. Hand pointed out that the law could not possibly cover every kind of data that had a connection to the national defense, "for in modern war there are none which do not." He didn't think Congress intended to shut down all international discussion of agricultural yields, medical breakthroughs, or train schedules.

Hand concluded that espionage must involve secrets. The word "secret" didn't appear in the law, but in a 1941 decision, Gorin v. United States, the Supreme Court had acknowledged that it would be difficult to show that someone had knowingly engaged in espionage if, say, the U.S. government itself published the information, and so there was no "occasion for secrecy." Hand broadened that notion, finding that "whatever it was lawful to broadcast throughout the country it was lawful to send abroad." As he saw it, no secret, no foul. Heine was soon free.

An obvious question today might be whether the information Heine collected was classified, but at the time the modern system of classification did not yet exist. Harry Truman introduced it in 1951, by means of an executive order that other Presidents—and not Congress—have refined. The obsession with labels like "Top Secret" was in part an unintended consequence of Hand's ruling, according to a timely new book, "State of Silence: The Espionage Act and the Rise of America's Secrecy Regime" (Basic), by the historian Sam Lebovic. If judges stipulated that national-defense information ought to be "secret," then the government would oblige by stamping that word on every piece of paper it could.

Classification is now an overbearing companion to the Espionage Act, rather than a clarification of its limits. In the view of the executive branch, everything that is marked classified is national-defense information, or N.D.I. And yet it reserves the right to call non-classified information N.D.I., too. (It has also argued that some information, like the name of a country that hosted a C.I.A. prison, can be deemed officially secret even after it is widely known.) Donald Trump, who is facing thirty-two Espionage Act charges in a federal indictment brought in Florida, has denied all wrongdoing and defended himself by saying that while still President he declassified documents that were later found at Mar-a-Lago—something he had broad power to do. As legal commentators have pointed out, having done so would not necessarily get him off the hook: an Espionage Act conviction requires only that material be N.D.I., classified or not. That's convenient for Jack Smith, the special counsel. But is it a good thing for the rest of us?

One peculiarity of the Espionage Act is that the Gorin and the Heine decisions—rulings from the nineteen-forties concerning a hundred-year-old law—still guide the prosecution not only of spies but of whistle-blowers, leakers, negligent bureaucrats, cyber activists, and, of course, a former President who kept documents marked "Top Secret" in his bathroom. Not that the law differentiates among those categories. Both Trump and Julian Assange, the co-founder of WikiLeaks, are currently under indictment for violating the section of the act that prohibits the unauthorized retention of N.D.I., among other charges. That section says nothing substantive about intent, and neither do several related provisions. It doesn't matter whether someone is using N.D.I. to aid a terrorist network, expose a scandal, write a memoir, or impress fellow-gamers (as may be the case with Jack Teixeira, the airman recently indicted under the act for posting files on Discord). It doesn't matter whether a leaker's object is to expose discrimination. In 2018, Terry Albury, an F.B.I. agent, was sentenced on Espionage Act charges for having given journalists confidential documents that, he believed, showed that the F.B.I. engaged in racial and religious profiling. What mattered was that the Department of Justice deemed the documents national-defense information.

There's been plenty of discussion about whether Assange is really a journalist, but the Espionage Act doesn't care either way—there is no journalist-exception clause. Meanwhile, media outlets, including this one, violate the Espionage Act regularly. The federal government relies on leaking to function, and also forgives a measure of sloppiness in its own ranks. (The fact that classified documents ended up in Joe Biden's garage is almost certainly less unusual than the subsequent appointment of a special counsel.) The law has always been applied selectively, which raises the question of how its targets are chosen.

By Lebovic's tally, before 2008 there had been only five prosecutions for giving information to the press. There were eight under the Obama Administration, and another six during Trump's single term, including that of Reality Winner, who gave the news site the Intercept a single document about alleged Russian meddling in the 2016 elections. Until now, the Justice Department has gone after journalists and publishers only for their notes, their testimony, or other materials as it pursued a leaker. Edward Snowden is the one living in exile in Moscow, not the journalists who published the information he leaked. Officials have regularly assured members of the press that the Espionage Act isn't meant for them. But this is a pact, not a legal commitment. Lebovic thinks it's a side deal that the press has made at the expense of its sources and the rest of the country. Assange, for whatever reason—the novelty of WikiLeaks, his personal unpleasantness, his perceived role in damaging Hillary Clinton in 2016—has been cut out of the deal. When the Trump Administration initially sought to extradite him from the U.K., it was on a computer-hacking charge related to his receipt of files from Chelsea Manning when she was a soldier in Iraq. It then added Espionage Act charges, which

the Biden Administration is now pursuing. (Assange is fighting extradition.) Manning, who had been sentenced to thirty-five years in prison and served seven years before Obama commuted her term, was jailed again in 2019 and 2020, for a total of more than eleven months, for refusing to testify in the case against Assange.

Because the Espionage Act is so old and the spate of cases against leakers is so recent, one might think that its use in confrontations with the press is new—that an archaic anti-spy law has been repurposed for the information age. In fact, speech was a target from the law's earliest days. Judge Hand was well aware of that history.

In 1917, as a forty-five-year-old district judge on the brink of promotion to the appeals court, Hand had heard a lawsuit brought by *The Masses*, a socialist magazine that the Postmaster General sought to prohibit from being sent through the mail. That, too, was an Espionage Act case. The Postal Service was using provisions against interfering with military enlistment or recruitment during wartime; a recent issue of *The Masses* contained a cartoon depicting the draft in a dark light and a poem praising antiwar anarchists. Hand ruled that the magazine was within its rights. He was overruled in a matter of months, and didn't get the expected promotion. That incident helps explain why Hand, despite his renown and the efforts of Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., and others, never made it to the Supreme Court. His wife wrote to him in 1918, "It was the Masses decision which had hurt you but dear, I feel just as you do about it. You couldn't have done differently and it was a fine thing to do."

Hand was grappling, just as he would in the Heine case two decades later, with a law that, on its face, appeared to be unworkably broad. In his decision, he wondered if one might run afoul of the Espionage Act by praising Quakers. The legislation covers traditional spying but also actions far afield from it. For President Woodrow Wilson, Lebovic writes, the term "espionage" meant "anything that interfered with the war effort." In practice, the new law was used to suppress socialists and labor unions, as if the Kaiser were behind every demand for fair wages. Eugene V. Debs was convicted under the Espionage Act after he gave a speech in which he told the people in the crowd that they didn't deserve to be "cannon fodder." He ran for President from prison, a fact that has become surprisingly relevant this election cycle.

As Adam Hochschild writes in last year's "American Midnight" (Mariner), the era's raids and mass arrests had a steep human cost. Hochschild's account captures how the war-fuelled fever rose and, eventually, broke. Certain parts of the Espionage Act were repealed or revised, including particularly outrageous provisions in a 1918 amendment known as the Sedition Act, which targeted "abusive language about the form of government" in wartime. But the bulk of the original law remained.

The effect of some measures was cushioned by a series of Supreme Court rulings that drew a sharper line between political speech and criminal incitement. And some jurists—notably Holmes, a pivotal figure in the speech cases—came to regard the restrictionist excesses of the nineteen-tens and twenties with regret, even shame. But regrets have a way of fading, and the backlash was never strong enough to get the act fully overhauled.

Instead, as time went on, more secrecy laws were added: certain types of information (cryptographic ciphers, agents' names, details about atomic weaponry—a possible problem for Trump) were further restricted, while federal employees were made liable for, say, mishandling classified documents or stealing government property. The Classified Information Procedures Act of 1980 sought to make it easier to use information deemed secret as evidence in prosecutions without revealing it in open court. Trump's

"Will she know what this is in reference to?"

Florida case has already been delayed by CIPA disputes, including about security clearances for his lawyers.

Books about the Espionage Act are, it turns out, the wrong place to look for suspenseful spy stories. "State of Silence" is no "Operation Mincemeat." That's almost a point of principle: in Lebovic's telling, spy scares have a way of being overblown or misused, which is fair enough. Still, he doesn't disregard the existence of real espionage or the need to deal with it. It's the Espionage Act that he views as unsalvageable. That's a judgment shared by Ralph Engelman and Carey Shenkman, the authors of "A Century of Repression: The Espionage Act and Freedom of the Press" (Illinois), published last year. Each book argues, with some urgency, that the act should be replaced by laws that address whistle-blowing and spying separately.

Lebovic, in particular, finds it maddening that the Espionage Act—which cannot possibly mean what it says and still be constitutional—has time and again dodged its day of reckoning with the Supreme Court. He depicts the law like a jurisprudential Inspector Clouseau, eluding falling safes and strolling on to cause yet more havoc. The law's very name has helped to protect it. In 1957, John Nickerson, an Army colonel, was indicted under the Espionage Act for giving journalists a dossier rebutting a Pentagon memorandum that undercut a ballistic-missile project. (His mistake was suggesting that the Secretary of Defense was beholden to corporate interests—embarrassing someone powerful being a time-tested way to provoke a criminal investigation.) Nickerson so feared the disgrace of being labelled a spy that he agreed to plead guilty to fifteen Army security violations in return for the espionage charge being dropped.

The act's harsh penalties—up to ten years for each count of willfully retaining N.D.I., which can add up quickly—are also a powerful incentive for defendants to negotiate a guilty plea. Part of its allure for prosecutors is that it makes their jobs easy. More than once, though, the cases have fallen apart because of government misconduct or bungling. In 1950, the conviction of Judith Coplon, who worked in the Justice Department and, apparently, for the Soviets, was overturned because the F.B.I. had engaged in illegal wiretapping. (The chief appellate judge was Learned Hand—him again.) But one of Lebovic's greatest frustrations is the Daniel Ellsberg case.

In 1971, the *Times* decided to publish the Pentagon Papers, a classified history of the Vietnam War, leaked by Ellsberg, after its general counsel argued that the Supreme Court would surely see that any definition of "national-defense information" that included the study was unconstitutionally vague. (An outside law firm disagreed, and refused to even review the Papers.) The Nixon Administration tried to stop the *Times* from publishing by citing the mere potential for an Espionage Act violation. What followed was a flurry of litigation and an emergency appeal to the Supreme Court, which ruled that the government had failed to overcome the Court's "heavy presumption" against prior restraint. But the case yielded opinions by all nine Justices—an outcome that, Lebovic writes, "further muddied" the situation. Five Justices suggested that the Nixon Administration's error was trying to prosecute the *Times* before it published the Papers, rather than afterward. And nothing in the ruling precluded the prosecution of Ellsberg.

That endeavor fell apart because Nixon's "plumbers," in addition to breaking into Ellsberg's psychiatrist's office, had wiretapped a defense lawyer, leading the judge to throw out the case. It is not due to any lack of respect for Ellsberg that Lebovic wishes his legal problems hadn't been so tidily resolved. "The mistrial meant that the rickety laws of state secrecy weren't really put to the test," he writes.

Donald Trump, no doubt, presents a more confounding defendant for a landmark case than Ellsberg. And yet, after a hundred years of avoidance, the Espionage Act may finally receive proper scrutiny from the high court. Such a case may come amid a contested election and even a constitutional crisis. A number of rickety institutions will be under pressure this political-legal season. The charges against Trump, in four different jurisdictions, include violations of more than a dozen different laws. The fact that the Espionage Act could bring him down is no reason to cheer for it. It could happen to almost anyone. ♦

ON AND OFF THE MENU

TOKYO STORY

Greenpoint's upscale portal to Japan.

BY HANNAH GOLDFIELD

The neighborhood has specialty shops for dashi, soba, and shokupan sandos.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JUSTIN J WEE

About ten years ago, the concept of "Brooklyn" seemed to be trending in Tokyo. In 2013, a chef named Makoto Asamoto opened a (since shuttered) restaurant called Fort Greene, which joined the establishments Brooklyn Pancake House and Brooklyn Parlor (on the menu: roast chicken, Brooklyn Session I.P.A.). The coffee label Brooklyn Roasting Company has set up locations in Tokyo, and a neighborhood called Daikanyama, a destination for brunch and vintage clothing, is sometimes referred to as Little Brooklyn. In the past few years, Brooklyn's northernmost neighborhood, Greenpoint—once defined largely by its Polish and Puerto Rican populations; more recently, a relatively sleepy hipster hamlet—has seen a feedback loop emerge, with a wave of new Japanese businesses.

In the expansive dining room at the restaurant Rule of Thirds, panelled in blond wood and rimmed by sage-green velvet banquettes, you can order a gloriously puffy *hottokeki*, or soufflé pancake, for brunch, or sake-steamed clams for dinner. ACRE, a restaurant and gift shop around the corner, offers bento boxes and housewares; the other day, I bought sachets filled with fragrant curls of hinoki, wood from a Japanese cypress, to make my closet smell like a spa, and a small *tawashi*, a scrubbing brush made from tightly wound palm fibres, as spiky as a hedgehog. Afterward, I wandered north to the tea shop Kettl, where I drank a fragrant cup of *hojicha*, roasted green tea, and ate an exceptional bar of matcha chocolate studded with crunchy toasted buckwheat, its sweet, intense grassiness cut through with a jolt of salt.

If Japanese Greenpoint has an epicenter, it's 50 Norman, a chic warehouse-like space shared by a handful of upscale businesses. A few weeks ago, I had dinner at HOUSE, which serves a French-Japanese tasting menu, crafted by the chef Yuji Tani, at a counter concealed behind an opaque sliding screen tucked into the back of the room. Over plates of luscious, shoyu-marinated yellowtail with caviar and grilled maitake mushroom atop Japanese-pumpkin mousse, a host explained that the restaurant is meant to emulate Tani's home—or your own, if you spend enough money at 50 Norman. For a course of Wagyu beef, a nearly purple marbled wedge grilled on a charcoal stove called a *shichirin*, I was presented with a selection of rustic knives with handles made from tree branches or antlers. Similar ones were for sale at Cibone, a design store on the other side of the screen.

The dressing that Tani used for a baby-romaine salad was made with dashi from Dashi Okume, a local outpost of a historic shop of the same name in Tokyo, where savory dried ingredients are packed into translucent pouches, to be steeped in hot water like tea bags. The Greenpoint shop's rows of bins are packed neatly with choices of seaweed, mushrooms, and fish including mackerel, sardines, and the gloriously named blackthroat sea perch. Intimidated, on a recent visit, I opted for a pouch of premixed "premium" packets, filled with bonito, tuna, anchovies, flying fish, kelp, and shiitake, a combination that tastes richly of soil and sea.

When I asked Sanaë Lemoine, a French Japanese novelist and the coauthor, with Rie McClenny, of a new cookbook called "Make It Japanese," if she bought her dashi at Okume, she laughed. Every few weeks, she told me, she makes a "little pilgrimage" to Greenpoint, taking the G train from her apartment in Bed-Stuy, but she treats the shops at 50 Norman as "a sort of mu-

seum." Okume's dashi is too pricey to keep as a pantry staple; like so many Japanese home cooks she knows, Lemoine relies, instead, on Hondashi, an instant powder.

On a recent rainy Sunday, I met Lemoine and a mutual friend of ours for lunch somewhere more accessible. A place called Taku Sando had just opened on Greenpoint Avenue, offering sandwiches made on squishy white slices of house-made *shokupan*, or milk bread. Each was layered with katsu (breaded pork or chicken cutlets), pounded thin, or plump potato croquettes, plus finely shredded cabbage, pickles, and katsu sauce, then wrapped in crisp paper that was sealed with a cartoon-eyes sticker. Lemoine and our friend, a native of Paris, compared the neighborhood to that city's Rue Sainte-Anne, a street lined with Japanese businesses. "You see a lot of cross-pollination" between Tokyo and Paris, Lemoine said. "The Japanese chefs in Paris are better than the French chefs," our friend argued, citing buzzy restaurants such as Clown Bar and Abri. We left with loaves of bread in paper bags.

Some people have been tempted to anoint this area as Brooklyn's Japantown or Little Tokyo, but it is not a community of necessity, forged by a dense congregation of immigrants. (The Japanese population of New York City has never been particularly large—in 2020, it was around thirty thousand—and the area sometimes called Manhattan's Little Tokyo, in the East Village, is hardly a neighborhood of its own.) What has developed here is something more unusual: a vibrant, organic ecosystem of culturally specific businesses, unhindered by the Epcot feel of Eataly, José Andrés's Mercado Little Spain, or Japan Village, a two-story mall in Industry City, Sunset Park's imposing complex of co-working and commerce. But Japanese Greenpoint does indulge a certain fantasy: that the most quotidian objects and ingredients can be imbued with a sense of quality and craftsmanship which is often associated with Japan, where even the onigiri and egg-salad sandwiches from 7-Eleven are exquisite.

Japanese food has long held a lofty spot in the imagination of American consumers, but it's also been adapted to suit American tastes. Takeshi Matsui, a Tokyo-based academic who recently spent a year and a half studying Japanese cuisine in the U.S., told me that many of the Japanese restaurants in midtown Manhattan opened, in the seventies and eighties, to serve executives of corporations like Sony and Toyota as they courted American clients. These days, he observed, New York iterations of Tokyo establishments, such as the ramen restaurant Ippudo, tend to be more upscale than their counterparts in Japan. The dashi at the original Okume, which began in a fish market, is much less expensive than it is in Brooklyn, and cannot be customized. A choice of ingredients strikes Matsui as a very American amenity: "I often say in my marketing class, If you visit a sandwich shop in the U.S., you have to make a decision in every detail. This is not common in Japan."

If there is one Japanese restaurant in Greenpoint that best embodies understated luxury, it's Uzuki, a recently opened temple to soba, also known as buckwheat, that humblest of crops. The chef, Shuichi Kotani, is a master of noodles, which he makes daily from one-hundred-per-cent-buckwheat flour. (Packaged versions are usually cut with wheat.) Firm, slippery, and ever so slightly grainy, they're served warm—in a glistening hot dashi made with duck bones and topped with medallions of roast duck—or cold, in chilled dashi, layered with thin sheets of raw salmon, pearls of salmon roe, shiso leaves, and daikon radish. Every bowl is finished with a sprinkling of pale buckwheat kernels, simmered until glossy and chewy.

Such specificity might seem gimmicky outside Japan, where it's common for food businesses to home in on a single dish or ingredient; at Uzuki, the narrow focus feels earned. A dish of soba crackers—coarse, crunchy squares, hollow in the middle, scattered generously with chili crisp and salt—inspired a minor battle of chopsticks with my date. Soba miso is mixed with toasted buckwheat kernels, shiso leaves, scallions, dashi, and bonito to form a pleasingly gelatinous, tangy, umami-rich substance that's shaped into a triangular slab the exact size of the piece of pottery it's served on, then broiled until it bubbles and chars. I drank a glass of soba beer, and for dessert I had a large globe of soba ice cream, at once decadent and down to earth. ♦

THE THEATRE

DISPOSSESSED

"Manahatta" and "Life & Times of Michael K."

BY HELEN SHAW

Elizabeth Frances plays two Lenape women in interweaving time lines.

Theatre has always loved a good property-in-peril story: Theban royals fighting for a throne; struggling salesmen worrying about their mortgages; Russian gentry losing their cherry orchards. Our sense of fairness is piqued when a place—Elsinore, a house in Brooklyn—might be wrested away from the person who has title to it. But what if rightful ownership isn't possible, or is beside the point? It's a tricky, delicate task to construct a drama around a hero who refuses to stake a claim.

In "Manahatta," now at the Public, the playwright Mary Kathryn Nagle intertwines two stories of American disinheritance: the coercive removal of the Lenape from lower Manhattan, undertaken by land-hungry Dutch settlers, and the 2008 subprime-housing-loan collapse. In both the seventeenth century and the twenty-first, contract language obscures and enables predatory behavior. (The play was first staged at the Public in a studio production in 2014, and officially premièred at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival.)

On (almost) modern-day Wall Street, Jane Snake (Elizabeth Frances), a mathematician, gets a securities-underwriting job at the investment bank Lehman Brothers, while, back home in Oklahoma, her mother, Bobbie (Sheila Tousey), takes out a risky mortgage, the very kind that riddles Lehman's own vulnerable portfolio. Jane's mother holds on to things lightly: she lets her house start to slip away, never telling her banker daughter about her debts, and she's reluctant to lay claim to her Lenape language, even as her other daughter, Debra (Rainbow Dickerson), pleads with her to pass it on to the younger generation. Bobbie just shrugs, and opens her hands. She has nothing to offer.

The prodigal Jane's story alternates with that of an eager young Lenape trader, Le-le-wa'-yu (also played by Frances), whose family signs a sales contract for the island of Manhattan with the director of the Dutch West India Company, Peter Minuit (Jeffrey King). The Lenape believe they have merely promised to trade in perpetuity, but the Dutch soon enforce their "ownership" of the land at musket-point. The production, too, layers past and present New York. The costume designer Lux Haac makes the Dutchmen's slashed doublets out of modern pin-striped suiting material; Marcelo Martínez García's set design accentuates the Anspacher Theatre's neoclassical columns, which recall financial-district architecture, and the floor is studded with outcroppings of Manhattan schist. The Anspacher always shakes when a subway train passes below. Here, ancient bedrock seems to shake, too.

For all the cleverly choreographed interaction between the two time lines, each one is doggedly predictable. Neither Nagle nor the show's director, Laurie Woolery, wants us to believe that Bobbie's mortgage is ever going to get paid off, or to wonder, even for a moment, if the Dutch might mean well. And Nagle's decision to focus on Jane has certain dramatic repercussions. Scenes set in the seventeenth century have life and vigor, particularly when Le-le-wa'-yu speaks Lenape with her companion Se-ket-tu-may-qua (Enrico Nassi), but the scenes at Lehman toggle between clichés of the blinkered career woman—Jane ignores romantic overtures from her home-town buddy Luke (also Nassi)—and globs of financial jargon. "I've got sellers like American Dream and ABC trying to jam in prior drops, and I mean, drops like a stated loan with CLTV above 90," Jane rattles off to her boss, and no one, least of all Jane, seems to know what she means.

Yet, despite the production's frequent clumsiness, there's a pocket of grace at

ILLUSTRATION BY DIEGO MALLO

its center. Woolery encourages a broad, telegraphic style in her actors, but Tousey, as Bobbie, operates from a stillness as foundational as that Manhattan schist. At first, Bobbie seems like one of several characters who behave artificially for plot mechanics: she appears to have no reason other than pride to keep her bankruptcy a secret, a stance that becomes increasingly self-defeating and bizarre as the play pushes her into foreclosure. Why wouldn't she do everything possible to keep the house, which was built by her grandfather? The dictates of Aristotelian drama, in which the climax should also reveal some hidden truth, seemed to be calling her narrative shots.

But Bobbie's actions don't just build the structure of "Manahatta"; they also—productively—break it. During the show's next-to-last scene, she's presented with the possibility of rescue, and she refuses. "We don't own anything. We live in our home because the Creator gave it to us," she tells her frazzled children, picking up a box and heading out the door. Much of the play has a kind of prosecutorial flavor: Nagle is also a lawyer, specializing in tribal sovereignty, and Jane and Debra's attitude toward Manhattan becomes one of return, restitution, and reclamation. Jane's final words even suggest that she sees her rise in the financial industry as a step toward undoing old Dutch wrongs. Bobbie, though, takes seriously the principle of non-ownership. She walks not only out of her house but out of the drama itself: a dispossession plot can have no power over a woman who won't recognize its terms.

Bobbie at least has some stuff to take with her. In a dramatization at St. Ann's Warehouse of J. M. Coetzee's Booker Prize-winning novel "Life & Times of Michael K," from 1983, the man at the center of the story, a park gardener in Cape Town under apartheid, lives through a series of displacements, internments, and losses, casting away everything until his unburdenedness becomes a kind of sainthood.

The show was created by the director Lara Foot, of Cape Town's Baxter Theatre Centre, in collaboration with the Handspring Puppet Company, the same group that brought the twelve-foot-tall Little Amal, a partly animatronic representation of a Syrian refugee, to New York last year. The adaptation dispenses with some of Coetzee's plot—Michael's detached Buddha nature no longer attracts an acolyte, for instance—but preserves the book's dreamlike quality. As Michael travels through a South Africa convulsed by a fictional civil war, first with his dying mother and then without her, starvation and exposure do not kill him; they only distill his yearning for purpose. The video designers Yoav Dagan and Kirsti Cumming project long roads or startling landscapes of rock and thornbush onto the set, and the mood drifts hypnotically as Michael approaches total attunement with the earth.

Michael, his mother, and several of the characters he meets are played by beautiful carved puppets, made by Handspring's Adrian Kohler. Michael is around three feet tall and is operated, Bunraku style, by three puppeteers. Patrick Curtis's set includes a housefront that seems to have been bombed, and various shattered pieces of wall. The show begins when a company member carries Michael onstage, bundled like an infant in a vivid-orange blanket, and this now familiar image of a child-size body amid rubble is, for many moments, unbearable. Bearing, though, is the point. The puppeteers' extraordinary tenderness with Michael—the way they seem to be helping him rather than manipulating his light limbs—takes on particular meaning the more he suffers. When he goes to the farm on the veldt where his mother was raised, a young man, the grandson of the farm's owner, treats him like a servant, which drives him away. The puppeteers, though, are always in Michael's service. Even when he finds himself in the high wilderness, wasting away from thirst, six gentle hands lift him up.

It's a coincidence, of course, that right before I saw "Michael K" I saw a sparkling workshop of Jess Barbagallo's "Laughing in Los Angeles," which referenced Hermann Hesse's "Siddhartha," a book preoccupied with asceticism, and it's undoubtedly coincidental that I had been thinking, as I have done often this fall, about Annie Baker's play "Infinite Life," which also explores radical self-denial. But so many people seem to be dreaming about how to want nothing, to own nothing, to hurt nothing, to lose nothing. Both "Manahatta" and "Michael K" offer glimpses of the sere, bright country that lies beyond having anything at all. ♦

THE CURRENT CINEMA

GRAY AREAS

"The Zone of Interest" and "Anselm."

BY ANTHONY LANE

Life is good, on a fine day, by a glittering lake. A family picnic on the grass, a merry swim, and the comforting of a crying baby. Such is the opening scene of "The Zone of Interest," a new film from Jonathan Glazer. The family is that of Rudolf Höss (Christian Friedel), his wife, Hedwig (Sandra Hüller), and their five children. Later, as darkness gathers, they drive back home to their orderly house, beside the walls of Auschwitz.

Christian Friedel and Sandra Hüller star in Jonathan Glazer's film.

Höss is not a fictional invention. He was the commandant at Auschwitz from 1940 to 1943, and returned there in May, 1944, on the orders of Heinrich Himmler, specifically to oversee the extermination of Hungarian Jews. Their arrival in unprecedented numbers—up to twelve thousand a day—was a logistical challenge to which S.S. *Obersturmbannführer* Höss was trusted to rise. Train lines were extended so that they ran right up to two of the crematoriums. The entire operation even bore his name: *Aktion Höss*. A rare honor.

Of the killings that were meted out under the aegis of Höss, "The Zone of Interest" shows none. Much of the story is set in the house where he and his loved ones dwell, with its pretty garden, rich in blooms. There are trips to the surrounding countryside, although, in one unfortunate incident, Höss is obliged to chivy his offspring out of a river, where they are paddling, because human remains have washed downstream. Another inconvenience: the daily routine of the Höss household is punctuated by yelps and cries, the chug of trains, the firing of weapons, and a low but discernible roar, as if some beast—a fire-breathing dragon—had its lair beyond the garden wall. What lies out of sight need not be out of earshot. Either way, you might think, it cannot be out of mind.

Think again. "Man is a creature who can get used to anything, and I believe that is the very best way of defining him." The words are Dostoyevsky's, in "Memoirs from the House of the Dead," and he is writing of prisoners in Siberia. The definition applies, however, not just to the victims of cruelty but also to its perpetrators. What is demonstrated by "The Zone of Interest"—which Glazer adapted, very obliquely, from a novel by the late Martin Amis—is that, given the right conditions, people can discover in themselves a pathological talent for ignoring the torments of others. Look at Frau Höss, sorting through clothing that has been stripped from those who are due to be gassed (the implication is clear, though never spelled out) and seeing what takes her fancy. Finding a fur coat, she models it in front of a mirror, turning from side to side to catch her best angle. This is, I would say, the most repellent image in the movie, enshrining all that is pitiless in Hüller's terrifying performance. Who will merit the lower circle of Hell: Höss, discussing the most efficient method for meeting his murderous quota, or Hedwig, serving coffee to friends?

It's no surprise that, when Höss is posted to another job, Hedwig is aghast. She *wants* to stay at Auschwitz, tending her flowers, rather than uproot the children and move on. Such is the plain shape of the plot. In a sense, "The Zone of Interest" is a simple work: calmly composed, fiercely controlled, and dedicated to the proof of one central irony—the nearness of ordinary lives to a tumult of death. Glazer achieves what he sets out to do, and you have to admire his tenacity, his technical skill, and his tact. Too many dramatizations of the Holocaust have left us flinching and queasy, whereas Glazer, in choosing so precisely what to show and what not to show, gives us no chance (and no excuse) to look away.

Yet one has to ask: Is this movie couched in its most effective form? In making the same point, however morally urgent, over and over again, does the film fortify or weaken its case? Go back to "Night and Fog," Alain Resnais's Holocaust documentary, from 1956—filmed partly in Auschwitz and Majdanek, another site of organized slaughter in Poland—and you will find the same argument put forward with greater economy. We see archival photographs of a commandant's residence (where, a narrator tells us, "his wife keeps house and entertains") and of guests playing chess and enjoying drinks. The sequence lasts roughly fifteen seconds; the whole movie is over in half an hour. If "The Zone of Interest" were that long it would attract fewer viewers, but I wonder if such brev-

ILLUSTRATION BY KAROLIS STRAUTNIEKAS

ity might not heighten its power to stupefy an audience, as "Night and Fog" does, and to reduce us to silence.

Glazer's previous feature, "Under the Skin," has clawed at me since it came out, ten years ago. It's too early to say whether "The Zone of Interest" will do the same. What will linger, no question, is the score by Mica Levi, who seems to make music out of pain, replete with whisperings and groans. Most extraordinary of all, we get nocturnal scenes, dotted throughout the movie and shot in black-and-white, using thermal imaging, in which a young girl is seen secreting apples in the landscape nearby. For a while, there is no knowing who she is, whether the fruit (which glows in the dark) is poisonous or life-giving, and whether we are watching a dream or a weird substratum of the horrors unfolding at Auschwitz. Nor is there any comfort in suggesting that the girl could have sprung from a book of old German fairy tales. We know how those can end.

One way of approaching "Anselm," a new documentary by Wim Wenders, is to see it as a sequel, of sorts, to "The Zone of Interest." The German artist Anselm Kiefer was born in March, 1945, just as the age of Rudolf Höss, and of all that he espoused, was falling apart. Whether you can or should create art in the wake of mass ruination, and what form that art will take, are matters with which Kiefer has rarely ceased to contend. In 1969, he photographed himself giving the *Sieg heil*—a criminal gesture in postwar Germany—at various European locations, including the Colosseum, in Rome. Since then, he has grown industrious and toweringly ambitious, to the point of constructing actual towers. Never is he more fertile than when dealing in blight. His sculptures, paintings, drawings, and books—not so much published texts as booklike objects, whose pages may be made of lead—seem like testaments to the memory of things too heavy to bear.

In choppy fashion, "Anselm" cuts to and fro among events in Kiefer's life. Dramatization abuts recorded fact. Anselm the boy, in shorts, with a satchel on his back, is played by an actor, as is the grownup Kiefer, with a mustache, setting off to meet Joseph Beuys (an early mentor) in a VW Beetle, with canvases rolled up and stacked like logs on its roof. Much of the movie, though, is set in the present day, with the real Kiefer going about his business. And what a business! Here is art made with muscle and cool tools. One painting is laid flat on the floor, so that Kiefer can lace it with molten lead; in closeup, we see the splatter and fizz. A long palette knife is the nearest that he comes to a paintbrush. Goggle-free, he wields a flamethrower, with which, like a farmer burning stubble, he sets fire to canvases pasted with straw—a material to which his work has obsessively returned. Assistants then douse the blaze.

Notice, also, the question of scale. The monumental (a far from neutral term, in the light of Nazi aesthetics) holds few terrors for Kiefer. Indeed, there is defiance in his panoramic ventures. I can't forget the shock of standing for the first time in front of "Aschenblume," or "Ash Flower," a vast painting that occupied Kiefer from 1983 to 1997, in which a dead sunflower clings, upside down, to a rat-colored surface, its seedless head bedded in cracked earth. In "Anselm," we see Kiefer using a motorized platform that can be raised and lowered, the better to toil on an especially large picture, as if he were washing windows. But how can a film begin to convey these Brobdingnagian dimensions?

Easy. Just find a cinema screen to match the art. I saw "Anselm" not only in 3-D but in IMAX—conditions I hadn't encountered since "Avatar: The Way of Water" (2022), which Wenders has said he loves. Here are Kiefer's epic installations, unfurling grandly across our frame of vision. We are ushered through the spaces that he has made his own: a studio so big that he needs a bicycle to scoot around in it; a repurposed brick factory; and a two-hundred-acre site in Barjac, in southern France. If the result is not as fluent as "Pina" (2011), Wenders's earlier exercise in 3-D, that's because "Pina" was about a dance company, to whose movements the camera became a willing partner. The latest movie is both more fractured and more indulgent, and I reckon that Wenders misses a trick; many of Kiefer's densest paintings are themselves in 3-D, as it were, with pigments and other ingredients jutting out like frozen mud, and they deserve to be filmed from the side, not merely head on. Nonetheless, "Anselm" compels attention. We long-term Kiefer nerds may not learn much, but so what? It's more important that newcomers thrill to—or recoil from—this self-mythicizing figure who forges sculptures out of fighter planes and U-boats. The zones of interest run deep. ♦

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Richard Brody blogs about movies.

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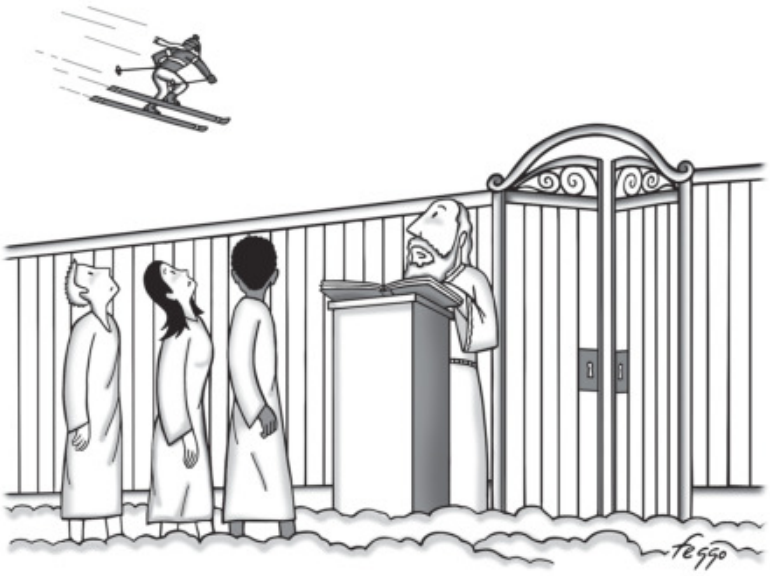
CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

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 Felipe Galindo, must be received by Sunday, December 24th. The finalists in the December 4th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the January 15th 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



“ ”

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THE FINALISTS

“Oh, no! The four emojis of the apocalypse!”
Naum Milyavskiy, Los Angeles, Calif.

“To think—this whole time I thought you guys were using filters.”
Jack Renois, New York City

“Which one shows my daughter that I'm cool and not desperate for her to not hate me?”
Dan Stromberg, Charlottesville, Va.

THE WINNING CAPTION

“Not the first time I've seen my portfolio go south.”
Kyle Evans Smith, Atlanta, Ga.


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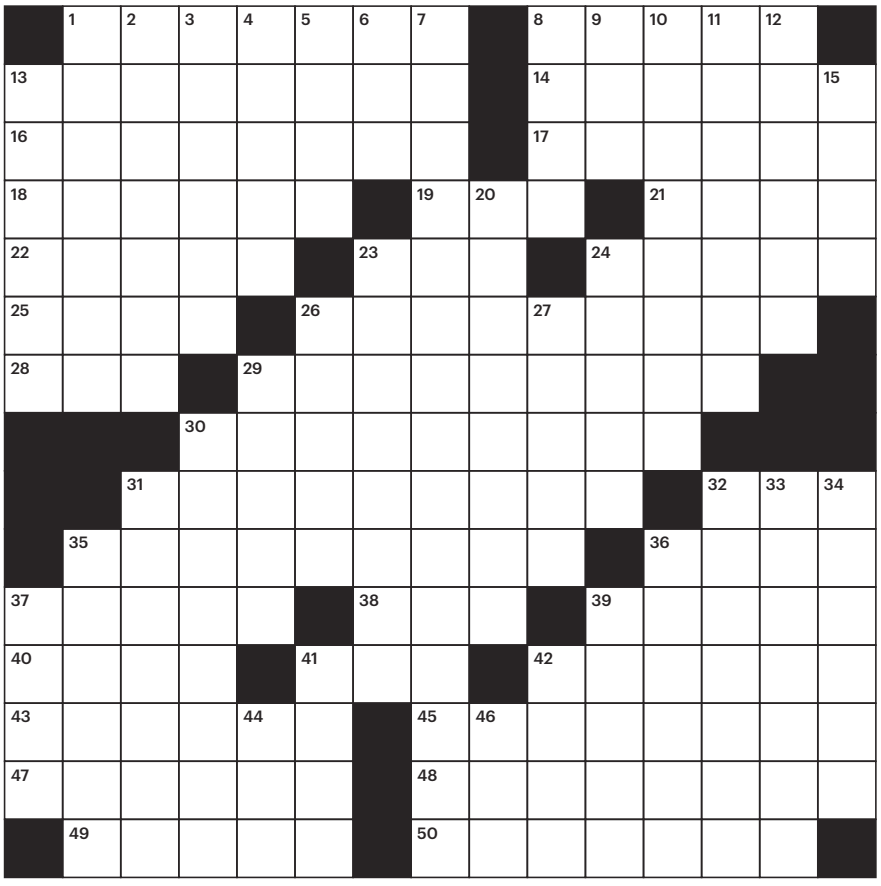
PUZZLES & GAMES DEPT.

THE CROSSWORD

A moderately challenging puzzle.

BY NATAN LAST



ACROSS

1 Fellow, often

8 They might be checkered

13 Handel's "Messiah," e.g.

14 Sitcom character whose idea for a muffin-top shop is stolen by her former boss

16 Polite response to "Do you mind?"

17 Rapper with the platinum 2003 album "La Bella Mafia"

18 Insignia

19 Bring an action

21 Middle of a famed Latin boast

22 Backstories, in video-game parlance

23 Boo

24 Classification

25 Just slightly

26 Culinary product made from the grass *Saccharum officinarum*

28 ___ name

29 Worker who might be pulled in several directions at once

30 Difficult set of circumstances, metaphorically

31 Some mental-health resources

32 Qualifier in quoted text

35 Designated places for pitching

36 Curse

37 Transform

38 "Better Off ___" (2020 episode of "The Simpsons")

39 Ball out

40 Jax's best friend, on "Sons of Anarchy"

41 "Yuck!"

42 Zimbabwean President ousted in 2017

43 Response to somebody holding up moldy food from the fridge

45 Supervillain's expression

47 Side ___ (income-supplementing undertaking)

48 One might be watered with a spray bottle

49 Jobs

50 David Hammons sculpture on Manhattan's West Side that's practically invisible at night

DOWN

1 Hype

2 High-fibre cereal

3 Lost freshness

4 Bags that are often branded

5 Whisky amount

6 Paint type

7 Author of the novel "Harlem Shuffle" and its 2023 sequel, "Crook Manifesto"

8 Athlete known as O Rei do Futebol

9 Best Supporting Actor winner for "Moonlight"

10 Rescued from ruin

11 Watering hole near a pool, perhaps

12 Twisted Sister lead singer Dee

13 Four hundred metres, on a track

15 Expressionist painter Nolde

20 Not deserved

23 Angling for a deal, say

24 Musician Nelson who leads the band Promise of the Real

26 Violent overthrows

27 Blackthorn fruits

29 "Rocky IV" actor Lundgren

30 Storms

31 Paste made with baklouti peppers

32 Desertlike

33 Stuck

34 Firmly establish

35 Bad excuse

36 Game with sixteen dice

37 Insect in many Nabokov texts

39 Shows nervousness, in a way

41 People of the Colorado Plateau

42 Wet and swampy

44 Kind

46 Through

Solution to the previous puzzle:

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

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

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