THE GOLDEN AGE OF AMERICAN JEWS IS ENDING

אוי, וואָס איז געוואָרן פֿונעם גאָלדענעם לאַנד?

The Atlantic
EST. 1857

AN ERA OF ACCEPTANCE & ACHIEVEMENT IS IN DANGER

וואָס טויג ניט פֿאַר אַמעריקע,
טויג אויך ניט פֿאַר ייִדן.

וואָס טויג ניט פֿאַר ייִדן,
טויג אויך ניט פֿאַר אַמעריקע.

ANTI-SEMITISM THREATENS THE AMERICAN EXPERIMENT ITSELF

BY FRANKLIN FOER

HATRED FROM THE RIGHT … AND THE LEFT

שווער צו זײַן אַ ייִד

JEWS FLEEING SCHOOLS

צי איז אַרײַן
אַ דיבוק אין די
גילדענע-פֿאָן-אוניווערסיטעטן?

אַ קאַצנשפּרונג פֿון טשאַרלס לינדבערג צו קאַני וועסט.

VANDALISM AND VIOLENCE ON THE RISE

מע דאַרף אײַך
אַרײַנלייגן אַ
פֿינגער אין מויל?

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Features

20

COVER STORY

The End of the Golden Age

Anti-Semitism on the right and the left threatens to end an unprecedented period of safety and prosperity for Jewish Americans—and demolish the liberal order they helped establish.

By Franklin Foer

46

After the Miracle

Cystic fibrosis once guaranteed an early death—but a medical breakthrough has given many patients a chance to live decades longer than expected. What do they do now?

By Sarah Zhang

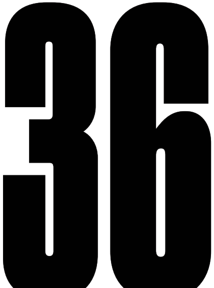
58

The Secret Gospel

A Columbia history professor claimed that he discovered a sacred text with shocking details about the life of Jesus. Was it real?

By Ariel Sabar

Jodie Foster, photographed in Los Angeles in December



JODIE FOSTER'S LIFE ON-SCREEN

By Jordan Kisner

Since childhood, she's struggled with one question: How much does she want the public to know her?

PHOTOGRAPH BY DANIEL JACK LYONS FOR *THE ATLANTIC*

Front

6
The Commons
Discussion & Debate

Dispatches

11
OPENING ARGUMENT
The Grumpy Economy
Why Americans trust feelings more than facts when it comes to prosperity
By Rogé Karma

16
VIEWFINDER
The Radio Squirrels of Point Reyes
Photographs by Ann Hermes

Culture & Critics

68
OMNIVORE
Sincerely Yours, Arthur Miller
In a newly discovered letter, the playwright explains how he adapted Shakespearean tragedy to a society defined by its unbridled optimism.

70
BOOKS
A Bloody Retelling of *Huckleberry Finn*
Percival Everett transforms Mark Twain's classic.
By Tyler Austin Harper

73
Tomato & Lettuce
A poem by Monica Rico

74
BOOKS
The Insider
Is Kara Swisher tearing down tech billionaires—or burnishing their legends?
By Helen Lewis

78
BOOKS
Why Do Animals Play?
Scientists want an evolutionary explanation. But maybe the answer is simply: It's fun.
By Sallie Tisdale

Back

82
FICTION
Saint Dismas
By Jared Lemus

92
Caleb's Inferno
A crossword by Caleb Madison

On the Cover

PHOTO-ILLUSTRATION BY PAUL SPELLA

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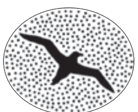

THE COMMONS

DISCUSSION & DEBATE

If Trump Wins

In The Atlantic's January/February issue, 24 contributors considered what Donald Trump could do if he were to return to the White House.

Letters

The Atlantic's January/February issue performs a valuable service by raising the country's awareness of what's in store should Donald Trump be reelected president. In the same way, the United States ought to understand how reelecting Joe Biden might benefit Americans and improve world security. We also need to learn about the inner workings of the Biden administration, its future policies and programs, and how another four years could affect the quality of American lives.

Todd Everett
Healdsburg, Calif.

Although the various articles in the "If Trump Wins" issue may have been accurate, I fear they didn't go far enough in analyzing the real problem: the Republican Party. Few of Donald Trump's successes as president could have been accomplished without the full support of nearly the entire GOP. Few of Trump's second-term goals will be realized without full Republican support. The United States doesn't have a Trump problem; it has a Republican problem. He is merely the latest and perhaps most powerful Republican voice calling for the end of the modern federal government, a position favored by many Republicans since President Ronald Reagan and Grover Norquist. The assaults on government, civil rights, and democratic norms that this issue so ably describes will continue with or without Trump as long as modern Republicans control any levers of government.

Catherine Whiting
Kensington, Md.

As experts in the fields of poverty and social policy, we were saddened that *The Atlantic*'s January/February issue ignored the damage Donald Trump would do to the social safety net if he were to regain the White House. As the 2024 campaign season ramps up, it is crucial that poverty and the safety net receive sufficient attention.

Throughout Trump's administration, we led a working group documenting the myriad ways that Trump and the GOP sought to weaken, retrench, and dismantle essential programs such as Medicaid and SNAP. Trump's efforts largely took place without public scrutiny, relying on changes to byzantine bureaucratic procedures and not congressional debates or policy discussions. He even sought to alter how the federal government measured poverty to kick hundreds of thousands of recipients off federal antipoverty programs or reduce their already meager benefits.

The safety net grew during the early days of the pandemic in an effort to protect America's most vulnerable citizens. But these programs were largely temporary, and the safety net has unfortunately returned to its paltry, pre-pandemic status. Even with a Democrat in the White House, the safety net doesn't receive the attention or focus necessary to ensure that Americans are adequately protected. But if Trump is given another

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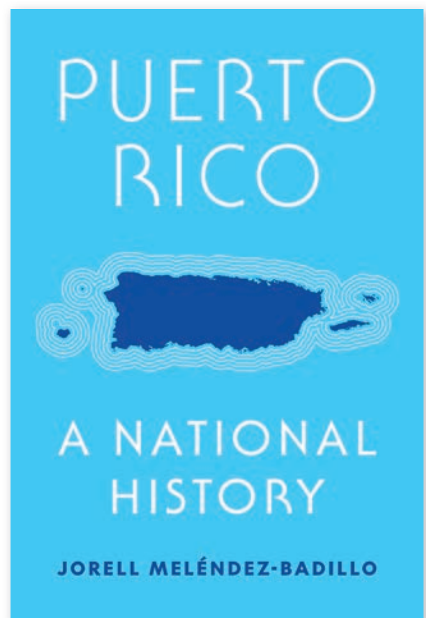
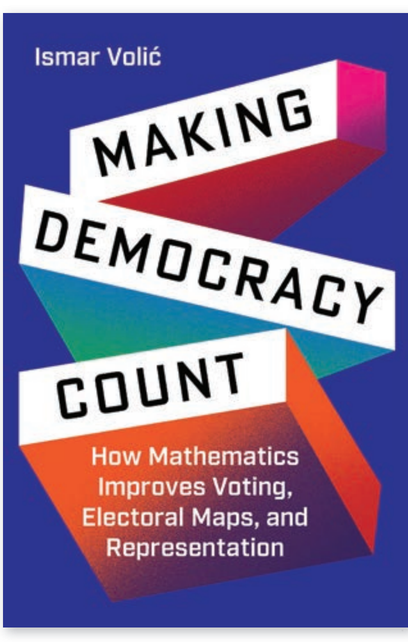
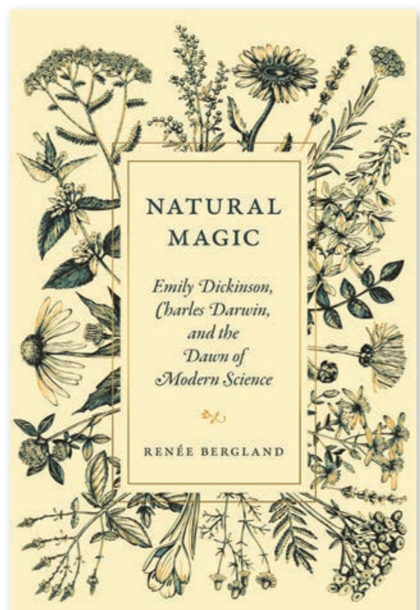


A panoramic history of Puerto Rico from pre-Columbian times to today



How we can repair our democracy by rebuilding the mechanisms that power it

A humanist manifesto for the age of AI



A captivating portrait of the poet and the scientist who shared an enchanted view of nature

The strange and surprising history of the so-called epidemic of bad posture in modern America—from eugenics and posture pageants to today's promoters of "paleo posture"

An investigation of what it means to have children—morally, philosophically and emotionally

term, he would continue his full-scale war on the nation's poor. We know what he can do, and what he will do.

Ryan LaRochelle
Senior Lecturer, University of Maine
Orono, Maine

Luisa S. Deprez
Professor Emerita,
University of Southern Maine
Portland, Maine

Why do articles like Mark Leibovich's "This Is Who We Are," which subtly derides Trump voters, seem to outnumber the articles explaining why people voted for Donald Trump? I live in a rural area, and I didn't vote for Trump—but I know many good people who did. I understand that the current system really doesn't work for them, and that they want things to change, much like the people who voted for Bernie Sanders and for Ross Perot before that. Why, for example, has wage growth stagnated since the early 1970s, while productivity has risen? For the sake of the country, *The Atlantic* should avoid articles like Leibovich's and focus on the real issues.

Robby Porter
Adamant, Vt.

Mark Leibovich's article, "This Is Who We Are," reveals an important truth, but I wish he'd gone even further. Trying to "understand" Trump voters is a pointless exercise.

I consider myself a political independent. Many of my family members voted for Donald Trump in 2016. I couldn't see why Trump's insulting comments about women and Senator John McCain weren't disqualifying for them, as they were for me, so I started engaging with my father, a college buddy of his from Ohio, and an uncle via email. What I learned from 2016 through 2020 was concerning. Most of their information came from nasty and transparently manipulative chain emails that put down "libs," vilified Nancy Pelosi, laughed off climate change. I wondered why my relatives—smart, successful people—found these emails useful. Naively, I started fact-checking them. But as Megan Garber observes in this issue, the truth doesn't matter. Once, I made the mistake of replying to everyone copied on the chain. I learned then of Trump supporters' group psychology—they will defend one another no matter what, ganging up on anyone not going along with their line.

Later, as fires burned on three sides of my California home, I emailed my father a basic primer on climate-change science. I remember taking time to find the best resources: short, factual, based on information from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and NASA. In response, he notified my family that he was never speaking to me again. He died of a heart attack in 2020. When I broke the news of my father's death to my uncle, one of his first reactions was to say that he was sorry I had decided to send that "disrespectful" climate-change email, implying that I had deserved to be ostracized.

I sent my father that email out of respect for him. He was an intelligent man. We had engaged in many thoughtful political discussions over a lifetime. The error I made was appealing to that intelligence post-Trump. After a steady diet of cynical half-truths and lies from chain emails and Fox News, my father could no longer absorb counterfactuals dispassionately; he saw them as attacks.

That was the end of my efforts to understand Team Trump's perspective. The media, too, need to stop trying to understand Trump voters as if they are aliens. They are our family members. Like us, they are human, with all the human susceptibilities. It isn't condescending to call them out.

Louise Yarnall
La Selva Beach, Calif.

Reading "If Trump Wins" was, in a word, exhausting. I came away thinking two things. First, the Democratic Party needs to get better at messaging, as was put best by Helen Lewis in her article, "The Left Can't Afford to Go Mad." Second, all of this just underscores the absurdity of the Electoral College. That Donald Trump—or anyone—doesn't have to win the most votes to be "elected," and that everything detailed in the issue could possibly come to pass even though a plurality of the country might vote against it, is Kafkaesque.

Ramsey Chilwell
San Francisco, Calif.

To respond to *Atlantic* articles or submit author questions to The Commons, please email letters@theatlantic.com. Include your full name, city, and state.

Behind the Cover: In this month's cover story (p. 20), Franklin Foer writes about the end of what he calls the "Golden Age of American Jewry." Rising anti-Semitism, on the right and the left, threatens to undermine an unprecedented period of safety and prosperity for Jewish Americans—and it could in turn destroy the liberal order they helped establish.

For our cover design, we drew inspiration from the aesthetic traditions of Yiddish-theater posters, adapting their colors, typefaces, photo treatments, and intermingled languages. (Special thanks to David Roskies at the Jewish Theological Seminary for his Yiddish expertise.) From the mid-19th century through the outbreak of World War II, Yiddish theater companies flourished across Central and Eastern Europe, as well as in London, Paris, and New York. For Jewish immigrants to the United States, the critic Jesse Green has written, Yiddish theater offered "a keepsake of home, and yet also a means of acculturation." Their comedies, dramas, and melodramas explored communal and cultural concerns but also looked outward, taking up the stories of Jews in America.

On the cover, we sought to assemble a cast of icons from the Jewish Golden Age. Along the top row, from left to right, are Saul Bellow, Bob Dylan, Susan Sontag, Leonard Nimoy, Henry Winkler, and Betty Friedan. In the center is Barbra Streisand, surrounded, clockwise from the top right, by Lenny Bruce, Ruth Westheimer, Steven Spielberg, Adam Sandler, Jonas Salk, Gilda Radner, Winona Ryder, Ralph Lauren, and Philip Roth. Along the bottom row, from left to right, are Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Jerry Seinfeld, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Louis Brandeis, and Cynthia Ozick.

— Peter Mendelsund, *Creative Director*

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> Through the project I realized who Magali really is. I have seen that I can move forward, even though I have gone through many trials and many problems.

A JOURNEY OF REDISCOVERY

Name: Magali Martin May

Country: Mexico

Occupation: Mother, Entrepreneur

Children: Daughter, Zuleimy, and son, Juan

Characteristics: Nurturing, Knowledgeable

In the heart of Emiliano Zapata, Yucatan, Magali Martin May thrives as a member of the women-only Kikibá Collective. After experiencing a personal loss, she decided to rediscover herself as an entrepreneur.

Her journey, shaped by several years of caring for Melipona bees through a project called Educampo, took a pivotal turn when she received an invitation from Heifer International. After attending her first workshop alongside the Kikibá Collective, she discovered her desire to own chickens. She started with 50 hens, and she now has 160. They produce about 65–70 eggs a day, which she's able to sell at local markets, elevating her income.

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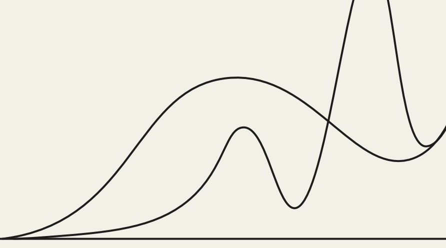

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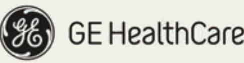

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DISPATCHES

OPENING ARGUMENT

THE GRUMPY ECONOMY

Why Americans trust feelings more than facts when it comes to prosperity

BY ROGÉ KARMA

What was the worst moment for the American economy in the past half century? You might think it was the last wheezing months of the 1970s, when oil prices more than doubled, inflation reached double digits, and the U.S. sank into its second recession of the decade. Or the 2008 financial collapse and Great Recession. Or perhaps it was when COVID hit and millions of people abruptly lost their job. All good guesses—and all wrong, if surveys of the American public are to be believed. According to the University of Michigan Surveys of Consumers, the most widely cited measure of consumer sentiment, that moment was actually June 2022.

Inflation hit 9 percent that month, and no one knew if it would go higher still. A recession seemed imminent. Objectively,

it's hard to claim that the economy was in worse shape that month than it had been at those other cataclysmic times. But substantial pessimism was nonetheless explicable.

Over the next 18 months, however, the economy improved rapidly, and in nearly every way: Inflation plummeted to near its pre-pandemic level, unemployment reached historic lows, GDP boomed, and wages rose. The turnaround, by most standard economic measures, was unprecedented. Yet the American people continued to give the economy the kind of approval ratings traditionally reserved for used-car salesmen. Last June, the White House launched a campaign to celebrate "Bidenomics"—the administration's strong job-creation record and big investments in manufacturing and clean energy. The effort flopped so badly that, within months, Democrats were begging the president to abandon it altogether.

Some kind of irreconcilable difference seemed to have opened up between public opinion and traditional markers of economic health, as many op-eds and news reports noted. "The Economy Is Great. Why Are Americans in Such a Rotten Mood?" *The Wall Street Journal* asked in early November. "What's Causing 'Bad Vibes' in the Economy?" *The New York Times* wondered a few weeks later. Terms like "vibecession" and "the great disconnect" were coined and spread.

More recently, consumer sentiment has improved. After falling for months, it suddenly rebounded in December and January, posting its largest two-month gain in more than 30 years—even though the economy itself barely changed at all. Yet as of this writing, sentiment remains low by historical standards—nothing like the sunny outlook that prevailed before the pandemic.

What's going on? The question involves the psychology of money—and of politics. Its answer will shape the outcome of the presidential election in November.

THE TOLL OF inflation on the American psyche is undoubtedly part of the story. That people hate high inflation is not a novel observation: The Federal Reserve has long been obsessed with preventing another '70s-style inflationary spiral; its patron saint is Paul Volcker, the former Fed chair who famously broke that spiral by jacking up interest rates, which plunged the economy into a recession. But although experts and political leaders know that inflation matters, the way they understand the phenomenon is very different from how ordinary people experience it—and that alone may explain why sentiment stayed low for so long, and has only now begun to rise.

When economists talk about inflation, they are often referring to an index of prices meant to represent the goods and services a typical household buys in a year. Each item in the index is weighted by how much is spent on it annually. So, for instance, because the average household spends about a third of its income on housing, the price of housing (an amalgam of rents and home prices) determines a third of the inflation rate. But the goods that people spend the most money on tend to be quite different from those that they pay the most attention to. Consumers are reminded of the price of food every time they visit a supermarket or restaurant, and the price of gas is plastered in giant numbers on every street corner. Also, the purchase of these items can't be postponed. Things like a new couch or flatscreen TV, in contrast, are purchased so rarely that many people don't even remember how much they paid for one, let alone how much they cost today.

SOME KIND OF IRRECONCILABLE DIFFERENCE SEEMED TO OPEN UP BETWEEN PUBLIC OPINION AND TRADITIONAL MARKERS OF ECONOMIC HEALTH.

The irony is that consumers spend a lot more, on average, on expensive, big-ticket items than they do on groceries or takeout, which means the prices we pay the most attention to don't contribute very much to overall inflation numbers. (Less than a tenth of the average consumer's budget is spent at the supermarket.) Some measures of inflation—"core" and "supercore" inflation among them—exclude food and energy prices altogether. That is reasonable if you're a Fed official focused on how to set interest rates, because energy and food prices are often extremely sensitive to temporary fluctuations (caused by, say, a drought that hurts grain harvests or an OPEC oil-supply cut). But in practice, these measures overlook the prices that matter most to consumers.

This dynamic alone goes a long way toward explaining the gap between "the economy" and Americans' perception of it. Even as core inflation fell below 3 percent over the course of 2023, food prices increased by about 6 percent, twice as fast as they had grown over the previous 20 years. "I think that explains a huge part of the disconnect," Paul Donovan, the chief economist at UBS Global Wealth Management, told me. "You won't convince any consumer that inflation is under control when food prices are rising that fast."

Consumers say as much when you ask them. In a recent poll commissioned by *The Atlantic*, respondents were asked what factors they consider when deciding how the national economy is doing. The price of groceries led the list, and 60 percent of respondents placed it among their top three—more, even, than the share that chose "inflation." This isn't exactly a new development. In 2002, Donovan told me, Italian consumers were convinced that prices were soaring by nearly 20 percent even though actual inflation was a stable 2 percent. It turned out that people were basing their estimates on the cost of a cup of espresso, which had abruptly risen as coffee makers rounded their prices up after the introduction of the euro.

What's more, most people don't care about the inflation rate so much as they care about prices themselves. If inflation runs at 10 percent for a year, and then suddenly shrinks to 2 percent, the damage of the past year has not been undone. Prices are still dramatically higher than they were. Overall,

prices are nearly 20 percent higher now than they were before the pandemic (grocery prices are 25 percent higher). When asked in a survey last fall what improvement in the economy they would most like to see, 64 percent of respondents said "lower prices on goods, services, and gas."

What about wages? Even adjusted for inflation, they have been rising since June 2022, and recently surpassed their pre-pandemic levels, meaning that the typical American's paycheck goes further than it did prior to the inflation spike. But wages haven't increased faster than food prices. And most people think about wage and price increases very differently. A raise tends to feel like something we've earned, Betsey Stevenson, an economist at the University of Michigan, told me. Then we go to the grocery store, and "it feels like those just rewards are being unfairly taken away."

If inflation is in fact the main reason the American people have been so down on the economy—and its future—then the story is likely to have a happy ending, and soon. My great-grandmother loved to reminisce about the days when a can of Coke cost a nickel. She didn't, however, believe that the country was on the verge of economic calamity because she now had to spend a dollar or more for the same beverage. Just as surely as people despise price increases, we also get used to them in the end. A recent analysis by Ryan Cummings

ILLUSTRATION BY CARL GODFREY

and Neale Mahoney, two Stanford economists and former policy advisers in the Biden administration, found that it takes 18 to 24 months for lower inflation to fully show up in consumer sentiment. “People eventually adjust,” Mahoney told me. “They just don’t adjust at the rate that statistical agencies produce inflation data.”

Mahoney and Cummings posted their study on December 4, 2023—18 months after inflation peaked in June 2022. As if on cue, consumer sentiment began surging that month. (Perhaps helping matters, food inflation had finally fallen below 3 percent in November 2023.)

THERE IS ANOTHER story you can tell about consumer sentiment today, however, one that has less to do with what’s happening in grocery stores and more to do with the peculiarities of tribal identity.

It’s well established that partisans on both sides become more negative about the economy when the other party controls the presidency, but this phenomenon is not symmetrical: In a November analysis, Mahoney and Cummings found that when a Democrat occupies the White House, Republicans’ economic outlook declines by more than twice as much as Democrats’ does when the situation is reversed. Consumer-sentiment data from the polling firm Civiqs and the Pew Research Center show that Republicans’ view of the economy has barely budged since hitting an all-time low in the summer of 2022.

Meanwhile, although sentiment among Democrats has recovered to nearly where it stood before inflation began to rise in 2021, it remains well below its level at the end of the Obama administration. It may never return to its previous heights. Over the past decade, the belief that the economy is rigged in favor of the rich and powerful has become central to progressive self-identity. Among Democrats ages 18 to 34, who tend to be more progressive than older Democrats, positive views of capitalism fell from 56 to 40 percent between 2010 and 2019, according to Gallup. Dim views of the broader economic system may be limiting how positively some Democrats feel about the economy, even when one of their own occupies the Oval Office. According to a CNN poll in late January, 63 percent of Democrats ages 45 and older believed that the economy was on the upswing—but only 35 percent of younger Democrats believed the same. To fully embrace the economy’s strength would be to sacrifice part of the modern progressive’s ideological sense of self.

The media may be contributing to economic gloom for people of every political stripe. According to Mahoney, one possible explanation for Republicans’ disproportionate economic negativity when a Democrat is in office is the fact that the news sources many Republicans consume—namely, right-wing media like Fox News—tend to be more brazenly partisan than the sources Democrats consume, which tend to be a balance of mainstream and partisan media. But mainstream media have also gotten more negative about the economy in recent years, regardless of who’s held the presidency. According to a new analysis by the Brookings Institution, from 1988 to 2016, the “sentiment” of economic-news coverage in mainstream newspapers tracked closely with measures such as inflation, employment, and the stock market. Then, during Donald Trump’s presidency, coverage became more negative than the economic fundamentals would have predicted. After Joe Biden took office, the gap widened. Journalists have long focused more on surfacing problems than on highlighting successes—bringing problems to light is an essential part of the job—but the more recent shift could be explained by the same economic pessimism afflicting many young liberals (many newspaper journalists, after all, are liberals themselves). In other words, the media’s negativity could be both a reflection and a source of today’s economic pessimism.

TO FULLY EMBRACE THE ECONOMY’S STRENGTH WOULD BE TO SACRIFICE PART OF THE MODERN PROGRESSIVE’S IDEOLOGICAL SENSE OF SELF.

What happens to consumer sentiment in the coming months will depend on how much it is still being dragged down by frustration with higher prices, which will likely dissipate, as opposed to how much it is being limited by a combination of Republican partisanship and Democratic pessimism, which are less likely to change.

Will the place that it finally settles in come November matter to the election? How people say they are feeling about the economy in an election year—alongside more direct measures of economic health, such as GDP growth and disposable income—has in the past been a good predictor of whom voters choose as president; a healthy economy and good sentiment strongly favor the incumbent. Despite all the abnormalities of 2020—a pandemic, national protests, a uniquely polarizing president—economic models that factored in both economic fundamentals and sentiment predicted the result and margin of that year’s presidential election quite accurately (and much more so than polling), according to an analysis by the political scientists John Sides, Chris Tausanovitch, and Lynn Vavreck.

It is of course possible that consumer sentiment is becoming a more performative metric than it used to be—a statement about who you are rather than how you really feel—and perhaps less reliable as a result. Still, the story that voters have in their heads about the economy clearly matters. If that story were influenced solely by the prices at the pump and the grocery store or the number of well-paying jobs, then—absent another crisis—we could expect the mood to be buoyant this fall, significantly helping Biden’s prospects for reelection. But the stories we tell ourselves are shaped by everything from the news we read to the political messages we hear to the identities we adopt. And, for better or worse, those stories have yet to be fully written. *A*

Rogé Karma is a staff writer at The Atlantic. *Support for this project was provided by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.*

EVERY CHOICE OF COFFEE AVAILABLE ON CHRISTOPHER ST, NEW YORK

ESPRESSO, DOUBLE ESPRESSO, QUADRUPLE ESPRESSO, RED EYE, SMALL COLD BREW , SMALL COLD BREW WITH VANILLA, SMALL COLD BREW WITH CARAMEL, SMALL COLD BREW WITH CHAI, SMALL COLD BREW WITH CHOCOLATE, SMALL COLD BREW WITH HAZELNUT, SMALL COLD BREW WITH LAVENDER, SMALL COLD BREW WITH ROSE WATERS, SMALL COLD BREW WITH HONEY, SMALL COLD BREW WITH CARDAMOM, SMALL COLD BREW WITH CINNAMON, SMALL COLD BREW WITH MASALA, SMALL COLD BREW WITH TUMERIC GINGER, SMALL COLD BREW WITH CHAGA, SMALL COLD BREW WITH PUMPKIN SPICE, SMALL CAPPUCCINO , SMALL CAPPUCCINO WITH VANILLA, SMALL CAPPUCCINO WITH CARAMEL, SMALL CAPPUCCINO WITH CHAI, SMALL CAPPUCCINO WITH CHOCOLATE, SMALL CAPPUCCINO WITH HAZELNUT, SMALL CAPPUCCINO WITH LAVENDER, SMALL CAPPUCCINO WITH ROSE WATERS, SMALL CAPPUCCINO WITH HONEY, SMALL CAPPUCCINO WITH CARDAMOM, SMALL CAPPUCCINO WITH CINNAMON, SMALL CAPPUCCINO WITH MASALA, SMALL CAPPUCCINO WITH TUMERIC GINGER, SMALL CAPPUCCINO WITH CHAGA, SMALL CAPPUCCINO WITH PUMPKIN SPICE, SMALL MOCHA , SMALL 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The Radio Squirrels of Point Reyes

Photographs by Ann Hermes

"Calling all. This is our last cry before our eternal silence." With that, in January 1997, the French coast guard transmitted its final message in Morse code. Ships in distress had radioed out dits and dahs from the era of the Titanic to the era of *Titanic*. In near-instant time, the beeps could be deciphered by Morse-code stations thousands of miles away. First used to send messages over land in 1844, Morse code outlived the telegraph age by becoming the lingua franca of the sea. But by the late 20th century, satellite radio was turning it into a dying language. In February 1999, it officially ceased being the standard for maritime communication.

Nestled within the Point Reyes National Seashore, north of San Francisco, KPH Maritime Radio is the last operational Morse-code radio station in North America. The station—which consists of two buildings some 25 miles apart—once watched over the waters of the Pacific and Indian Oceans. Both KPH sites shut down in 1997, but a few years later, a couple of radio enthusiasts brought them back to life. The crew has gotten slightly larger over the years. Its members call themselves the "radio squirrels." Every Saturday, they beep out maritime news and weather reports, and receive any stray messages. Much of their communication is with the SS Jeremiah O'Brien, a World War II–era ship permanently parked at a San Francisco pier.

Last July, the photographer Ann Hermes visited the radio squirrels and

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stepped into their time machine. To send a message, they tapped each Morse-code letter into a gadget called a "bug," generating a loud, staticky noise that reverberated throughout the whole building. "It's almost like jazz," Hermes told me—a music of rhythm and timing that can sound slightly different depending on who is doing the tapping.

Some of the hulking machines date back to World War II. The squirrels do their own repairs, and scrounge eBay for replacement parts on the newer units. To honor the station's past, the volunteers start each Saturday morning with "services" for "The Church of the Continuous Wave," in which they eat breakfast off vintage plates branded with the Radio Corporation of America's old logo.

Morse code is not quite extinct: The U.S. Navy still teaches it to a few sailors, and in 2017, a British man who had broken his leg on a beach used it to signal for help in the dark with a flashlight. Many of the radio squirrels are retired or nearing retirement. But when Hermes visited over the summer, she spotted one 17-year-old hovering around the squirrels in action. Born after the effective end of Morse code, he was nonetheless eager to help keep the jazz going.

—Saahil Desai

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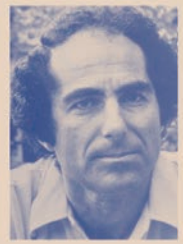
BY FRANKLIN FOER

THE END OF GOLDEN

פֿונעם גאָלדענעם לאַנד?



ANTI-SEMITISM ON THE RIGHT AND THE LEFT THREATENS TO END AN UNPRECEDENTED PERIOD OF SAFETY AND PROSPERITY FOR JEWISH AMERICANS—AND DEMOLISH THE LIBERAL ORDER THEY HELPED ESTABLISH.

THE AGE

וואָס איז געוואָרן

Stacey Zolt Hara was in her office in downtown San Francisco when a text from her 16-year-old daughter arrived: "I'm scared," she wrote. Her classmates at Berkeley High School were preparing to leave their desks and file into the halls, part of a planned "walkout" to protest Israel. Like many Jewish students, she didn't want to participate. It was October 18, 11 days after the Hamas invasion of southern Israel.

Zolt Hara told her daughter to wait in her classroom. She was trying to project calm. A public-relations executive, Zolt Hara had moved her family from Chicago to Berkeley six years earlier, hoping to find a community that shared her progressive values. Her family had developed a deep sense of belonging there.

But a moral fervor was sweeping over Berkeley High that morning. Around 10:30, the walkout began. Jewish parents traded panicked reports from their children. Zolt Hara heard that kids were chanting, "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free," a slogan that suggests the elimination of Israel. Rumors spread about other, less coy phrases shouted in the hallways, carrying intimations of violence. Jewish students were said to be in tears. Parents were texting one another ideas about where in the school their children could hide. Zolt Hara placed a call to the dean of students. By her own admission, she was hysterical. She says the dean hung up on her.

By the early afternoon the walkout was over, but Zolt Hara and other Jewish parents worried that it was a prelude to something worse. They joined Google Groups and WhatsApp chains so they could share information. Zolt Hara organized a petition, pleading with the school district to take anti-Semitism more seriously. It quickly received more than 1,300 signatures.

Most worrying was what parents kept hearing about teachers, both in Berkeley and in the surrounding school districts. They seemed to be using their classrooms to mold students into advocates for a maximalist vision of Palestine. A group of activists within the Oakland Education Association, that city's teachers' union, sponsored a "teach-in." A video trumpeting the event urged: "Apply your labor power to show solidarity with the Palestinian people." An estimated 70 teachers set aside their normal curriculum to fix students' attention on Gaza.

Even classes with no discernible connection to international affairs joined the teach-in. Its centerpiece was a webinar titled "From Gaza to Oakland: How Does the Issue Connect to Us?," in which local activists implored the kids to join them on the streets. They told the students—in a predominantly Black and Latino school district—that the Israeli military works hand in glove with American police forces, sharing tips and tactics. "Repression there ends up cycling back to repression here," an activist named Anton explained. Elementary-school teachers, whose students were too young for the webinar, were given a list of books to use in their classes. One of them, *Handala's Return*, described how a "group of bullies called Zionists wanted our land so they stole it by force and hurt many people."

The same zeal was gripping schools in Berkeley. Zolt Hara learned from another parent about an ethnic-studies class in which the teacher had described the slaughter of some Israelis on October 7 as the result of friendly fire. She saw a disturbing image that another teacher had presented in an art class, of a fist breaking through a Star of David. (Officials at Berkeley High School did not respond to requests for comment.) In her son's middle school, there were signs on classroom walls that read TEACH PALESTINE.

Zolt Hara didn't need to imagine how kids might respond to these lessons. After October 7, her son, who is 13, began coming home with stories about anti-Semitic jibes hurled in his direction. On his way to math class, a kid walked up to him playing what he called a "Nazi salute song" on his phone. Another said something in German and told him, "I don't like your people." A Manichaean view of the conflict even filtered down to the lowest grades in Berkeley. According to one parent complaint to the principal of Washington Elementary School, a second grader suggested that students divide into Israeli and Palestinian "teams," and another announced that Palestinians couldn't be friends with Jews.

On November 17, the middle school that Zolt Hara's son attends staged its own

In December 2023, a large menorah on public display in Oakland, California, was destroyed.

PREVIOUS SPREAD (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT): ROBERT MITRA / WWD / PENSKE MEDIA / GETTY; ULF ANDERSEN / GETTY; JEAN-RÉGIS ROUSTAN / ROGER VIOLLET / GETTY; CBS PHOTO ARCHIVE / GETTY; *DAILY HERALD* / MIRRORPIX / GETTY; BETTMANN / GETTY; DAVID LEFRANC / GETTY; BETTMANN / GETTY; FREDERICK M. BROWN / GETTY; CBS PHOTO ARCHIVE / GETTY; THEO WARGO / GETTY; MAX B. MILLER / ARCHIVE PHOTOS / GETTY; BERNARD GOTFRYD / GETTY; ABC PHOTO ARCHIVES / GETTY; MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES / GETTY; UNIVERSAL HISTORY ARCHIVE / GETTY; BACHRACH / GETTY; GETTY

walkout. Zolt Hara was relieved that her son was traveling for a family event that day. But she heard about video of the protest, recorded on a parent's phone. I tracked down the footage and watched it myself. "Are you Jewish?" one mop-haired tween asks another, seemingly unaware of any adult presence. "No way," the second kid replies. "I fucking hate them." Another blurts, "Kill Israel." A student laughingly attempts to start a chant of "KKK."

On a damp morning this winter, I joined about 40 kids assembled in a classroom at a public high school in the East Bay for a meeting of the Jewish Student Union. I promised that I wouldn't identify their school in the hopes that they might speak freely, without fear of retribution from teachers or peers. The first boy to raise his hand proudly announced that he supported a cease-fire. But as the conversation progressed, students began to recall how painful their school's walkout had felt. Their classmates had left them alone with teachers, who they suspected would think less of them for having stayed put. At every stop in their education in this progressive community, they had learned about a world divided between oppressors and the oppressed—and now they felt that they were being accused of being the bad guys, despite having nothing to do with events on the other side of the world, and despite the fact that Hamas had initiated the current war by invading Israeli communities and murdering an estimated 1,200 people.

At the end of the session a student in a kippah, puffer jacket, and T-shirt pulled me aside. He said he wanted to speak privately, because he didn't want to risk crying in front of his peers. After October 7, he said, his school life, as a visibly identifiable Jew, had become unbearable. Walking down the halls, kids would shout "Free Palestine" at him. They would make the sound of explosions, as if he were personally responsible for the bombardment of Gaza. They would tell him to pick up pennies. As he was walking into the gym to use one of its courts, a kid told him, "There goes the Jew, taking everyone's land." I asked if he'd ever told any of this to an administrator. "Nothing would change," he said. Based on how other local authorities had responded to anti-Semitism, I didn't doubt him.

Graffiti in Oakland, January 2024

Like many American Jews, I once considered anti-Semitism a threat largely emanating from the right. It was Donald Trump who attracted the allegiance of white supremacists and freely borrowed their tropes. A closing ad of his 2016 presidential campaign flashed images of prominent Jews—Lloyd Blankfein, Janet Yellen, and George Soros—as it decried global special interests bleeding the people dry.

Trump's victory inspired anti-Semitic hate groups, long consigned to the shadows, to strut with impunity. Less than two weeks after Trump's election, the white nationalist Richard Spencer came to Washington, D.C., and proclaimed, "Hail Trump! Hail our people!" as supporters responded with Nazi salutes. In August 2017, angry men carried tiki torches through Charlottesville, Virginia, chanting, "Jews will not replace us." In 2018, the consequences of violent anti-Semitic rhetoric became tangible: At the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 11 people were fatally shot. The following year, on the last day of Passover, at a synagogue in a San Diego suburb, a gunman killed one and wounded three others, including a rabbi.

After each incident, my anxiety about the safety of my own family and synagogue would spike, but I consoled myself with the thought that once Trump disappeared from the scene, the explosion of Jew hatred would recede. America would revert to its essential self: the most comfortable homeland in the Jewish diaspora.

That reassuring thought required downplaying the anti-Semitism that had begun to appear on the left well before October 7—on college campuses, among progressive activists, even on the fringes of the Democratic Party. It required minimizing Representative Ilhan Omar's insinuation about Jewish control of politics—"It's all about the Benjamins baby"—as an ignorant gaffe. And it meant dismissing intense outbreaks of anti-Zionist harassment by pro-Palestinian demonstrators, which coincided with tensions in the Middle East, as a passing storm.

Part of the reason I failed to appreciate the extent of the anti-Semitism on the left is that I assumed its criticisms of the Israeli government were, at bottom, a harsher version of my own. I opposed the proliferation of settlements in the West Bank, the callousness that military occupation required, and the religious zealotry that had begun to infuse the country's right wing, including its current ruling coalition.

Such criticisms were not those of a dissident—the majority of American Jews share them. The Palestinian leadership has a long record of abject obstructionism, historical denialism, and violent irredentism, but American Jews heap blame on recalcitrant right-wing Israeli governments, too. Polling by the Pew Research Center in 2020 found that only one in three American Jews said they felt that the Israeli government was "sincere" in its pursuit of peace. But whatever criticism American Jews leveled against Israel, the anger was born of love.

OPPOSITE PAGE: JANE TYSKA / DIGITAL FIRST MEDIA / *EAST BAY TIMES* / GETTY. THIS PAGE: FRANKLIN FOER.

Eight in 10 described Israel as either "essential" or "important" to their Jewish identity. And they still held out hope for peace. In that same poll, 63 percent of American Jews said they considered a two-state solution plausible. Jews were, in fact, more likely than the overall U.S. population to believe in the possibility of peaceful coexistence with an independent Palestine.

Among the brutal epiphanies of October 7 was this: A disconcertingly large number of Israel's critics on the left did not share that vision of peaceful coexistence, or believe Jews had a right to a nation of their own. After Hamas's rampage of rape, kidnapping, and murder, a history professor at Cornell named Russell Rickford said Palestinians were understandably "exhilarated by this challenge to the monopoly of violence." He added, "I was exhilarated." A student at the same university was arrested and charged with posting online threats about slitting the throats of Jewish males and strafing the kosher dining hall with gunfire. In Philadelphia, a mob descended on a falafel restaurant, chanting about the Israeli American co-owner's complicity in genocide. Over the three-month period following the Hamas attacks, the Anti-Defamation League recorded 56 episodes of physical violence targeting Jews and 1,347 incidents of harassment. That 13-week span contained more anti-Semitic incidents than the entirety of 2021—at the time the worst year since the ADL had begun keeping count, in 1979.

I don't want to dismiss the anger that the left feels about the terrible human cost of the Israeli counterinvasion of Gaza, or denounce criticism of Israel as inherently anti-Semitic—especially because I share some of those criticisms. Nor do I believe that *anti-Zionist* is a term that should be considered axiomatically interchangeable with *anti-Semite*. The elimination of Israel, in my opinion, would be a profound catastrophe for the Jewish people. But I have read idealistic critics of Israel, such as the late historian Tony Judt, who imagined that it could be replaced by a binational state, where Jews and Palestinians live side by side under one democratic government. That strikes me as naive in the extreme—especially after the Hamas pogrom of October 7—and very likely the end of Jewish existence in the Levant. But not everything that is terrible for the Jews is anti-Semitic.

In October 2018, a gunman killed 11 people and wounded six at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

BRENDAN SMIALOWSKI / AFP/ GETTY

Anti-Semitism is a mental habit, deeply embedded in Christian and Muslim thinking, stretching back at least as far as the accusation that the Jews murdered the son of God. It's a tendency to fixate on Jews, to place them at the center of the narrative, overstating their role in society and describing them as the root cause of any unwanted phenomena—a centrality that seems strange, given that Jews constitute about 0.2 percent of the global population. Though it shape-shifts over time, anti-Semitism returns to the same essential complaint: that Jews are cunning, bloodthirsty, and mad for power. Anti-Zionism often takes a similar form: the dehumanization, the unilateral casting of blame, and the fetishizing of Jewish villainy.

Liberal Jews once celebrated Israel as the lone democracy in a distinctly undemocratic region. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's coalition of theocrats and messianists seems bent on shredding the basis for that claim. But many governments in the world share these undesirable traits. Still, no one calls for the eradication of Hungary or El Salvador or India. No one defaces Chinese restaurants in San Francisco because Beijing imprisons Uyghurs in concentration camps and occupies Tibet.

The anti-Zionism that has flourished on the left in recent years doesn't stop with calls for an end to the occupation of the West Bank. It espouses a blithe desire to eliminate the world's only Jewish-majority nation, valorizes the homicidal campaign against its existence, and seeks to hold members of the Jewish diaspora to account for the sins of a country they don't live in and for a government they didn't elect. In so doing, this faction of the left places itself in the terrible lineage of attempts to erase Jewry—and, in turn, stirs ancient and not-so-ancient existential fears.

Nowhere is this more fully on display than in the Bay Area. After October 7, protesters flooded city-council meetings, demanding cease-fire resolutions and rejecting any attempt to include clauses condemning Hamas for the rape and murder of Jews. One viral video compiled enraged citizen comments at an Oakland city-council meeting. These citizens weren't just showing solidarity for the people of Gaza, but angrily amplifying wild conspiracy theories. One woman

declared, in the style of a 9/11 truther, that "Israel murdered their own people on October 7." Another, in the manner of a Holocaust denier, described the events of that day as a "fabricated narrative."

For months, the Berkeley city council resisted the pressure to pass a cease-fire resolution; the mayor regarded foreign policy as far beyond its jurisdiction. But the pressure grew so intense that the council could hardly conduct any other business. Protesters disrupted official meetings, forcing the mayor to keep adjourning deliberations to another room where the public was not allowed. Police offered to escort council members to their cars after meetings. The mayor's unwillingness to condemn Israel was anomalous, even in his own city. On December 4, the Berkeley Rent Stabilization Board voted to endorse a cease-fire.

Impassioned support for the Palestinian cause metastasized into the hatred of Jews. Anti-Semitism has become part of the landscape. In 2021, a community space in San Francisco's Mission neighborhood, owned by a progressive gay Jewish activist, was defaced with messages including ZIONIST PIGZ. After October 7, the windows of Smitten Ice Cream, owned by a Jewish woman, were smashed and spray-painted with the words OUT THE MISSION.

During Hanukkah, a menorah sponsored by Chabad Oakland and perched on the shore of Lake Merritt, in the center of the city, was torn apart by its branches and hurled into the water, replaced by graffiti reading YOUR ORG IS DYING, WE'RE GONNA FIND YOU, YOU'RE ON FUCKING ALERT. Oakland Public Works quickly painted over the message and other anti-Semitic graffiti. But when I walked the trail around the lake several weeks after Hanukkah, I found a weathered metal box, built to display a work of public art. On its side was a laminated message titled "The World We Wish to See." What followed was a lyrical vision of liberation that imagined a future in which "all beings are treated with dignity." But whatever display had once existed in the box had been removed. What was left were the etched words ZIONIST KILLER.

In the hatred that I witnessed in the Bay Area, and that has been evident on college campuses and in progressive activist circles nationwide, I've come to see left-wing anti-Semitism as characterized by many of the same violent delusions as the right-wing strain. This is not an accident of history. Though right- and left-wing anti-Semitism may have emerged in different ways, for different reasons, both are essentially attacks on an ideal that once dominated American politics, an ideal that American Jews championed and, in an important sense, co-authored. Over the course of the 20th century, Jews invested their faith in a distinct strain of liberalism that combined robust civil liberties, the protection of minority rights, and an ethos of cultural pluralism. They embraced this brand of liberalism because it was good for America—and good for the Jews. It was their fervent hope that liberalism would inoculate America against the world's oldest hatred.

For several generations, it worked. Liberalism helped unleash a Golden Age of American Jewry, an unprecedented period of safety, prosperity, and political influence. Jews, who had once been excluded from the American establishment, became full-fledged members of it. And remarkably, they achieved power by and large without having to abandon their identity. In faculty lounges and television writers' rooms, in small magazines and big publishing houses, they infused the wider culture with that identity. Their anxieties became American anxieties. Their dreams became American dreams.

But that era is drawing to a close. America's ascendant political movements—MAGA on one side, the illiberal left on the other—would demolish the last pillars of the consensus that Jews helped establish. They regard concepts such as tolerance, fairness, meritocracy, and cosmopolitanism as pernicious shams. The Golden Age of American Jewry has given way to a golden age of conspiracy, reckless hyperbole, and political violence, all tendencies inimical to the democratic temperament. Extremist thought and mob behavior have never been good for Jews. And what's bad for Jews, it can be argued, is bad for America.

I grew up at the apex of the Golden Age. The nation's sartorial aesthetic was the invention of Ralph Lifshitz, an alumnus of the Manhattan Talmudical Academy before he became the denim-clad Ralph Lauren. The national authority on sex was a diminutive bubbe, Dr. Ruth. Schoolkids in Indiana read Anne Frank's diary. The Holocaust memoirist Elie Wiesel appeared on the nightly news as an arbiter of public morality. The most-watched television show was *Seinfeld*. Even Gentiles knew the words to Adam Sandler's "The Chanukah Song," which earned a place in the canon of festive music annually played on FM radio. Jews accounted for roughly 2 percent of the nation's population at the time, but I'd estimate that my undergraduate class at Columbia University was one-third Jewish; soon, a third of the justices on the Supreme Court would be Jewish as well. In 2000, Joe Lieberman, a Shabbat-observant Jew with a wife named Hadassah, fell 537 votes short of becoming vice president. None of these occurrences sparked a backlash worthy of note.

By the mid-'90s, experts had declared the end of anti-Semitism. It persisted, of course, in the dark corners of American political culture—in the wacky cosmology of the Nation of Islam and in the malevolent rantings of David Duke, the ubiquitous ex-Klansman—but that proved the point. The only Jew haters to be found were hopelessly fringe; anti-Semitism disappeared from polite conversation. Leonard Dinnerstein, a historian who devoted his life's work to studying anti-Semitism, concluded his magnum opus, published in 1994, with the admission that his scholarly obsession was becoming a relic: "It has declined in potency and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future."

That last sentence was an expression of triumphalism, rendered in the spirit of the times. Like the end of history, the end of anti-Semitism was a post–Cold War reverie, a naive declaration of a golden age without end. American Jews now worried that they might become *too* accepted. The great anxiety of the fin de siècle was intermarriage.

The threat of assimilation had frightened the Orthodox Jews who came to the United States during the great wave of immigration in the last decades of the 19th century. Fathers who had fled the Pale of Settlement feared that their sons would trade ancestral traditions for the allure of American culture. (A quite popular, very American musical is energized by these anxieties.) One of those sons, however, made it his intellectual project to find a way for Jews to enjoy the bounties of American society without having to fully abandon their Jewishness.

Born in Silesia in 1882, the eldest of eight, Horace Kallen had a preordained calling: to become a rabbi like his father. But a Boston truant officer forced him, against his parents' wishes, to attend a secular grammar school. This set him on the path to Harvard, where he paid his way by reading meters for the Dorchester Gaslight Company. Kallen never felt at ease with patrician classmates like Franklin D. Roosevelt, though the philosopher William James embraced him as a protégé.

Jerry Seinfeld and Jason Alexander film the *Seinfeld* pilot, 1989.

Kallen's breakthrough came in the course of an argument with another Jew. In 1908, the British-born playwright Israel Zangwill had a hit called *The Melting-Pot*, a melodrama about a pogrom survivor who sets out to marry a Christian woman in the hopes that he will no longer be haunted by his identity. This vision of assimilation was a warmed-over version of the devil's bargain that Western Europeans had offered Jews ever since Napoleon: In exchange for the rights of citizenship, Jews would have to give up their distinctive identity.

Kallen didn't want to surrender his identity. He wasn't religious, but he had read Spinoza and devoured the works of the early Zionist thinkers. At Harvard, he co-founded the Menorah Society, a Jewish affinity group. His rebuttal to Zangwill took the form of unabashed patriotism. In essays that were intellectual bombshells at the time, Kallen extolled the mongrel nature of American society, the phenomenon known as hyphenation. Harvard's Brahmin elite believed that newcomers must assimilate in full, commit to what they called "100 percent Americanism." But to Kallen, the hyphen was the essence of democracy. He described America as a "symphony of civilization," an intermingling of cultures that resulted in a society far more dynamic than most of the countries back in the Old World. The genius of America was that it didn't coerce any minority group into abandoning its marks of difference.

That argument was idealistic, though also self-interested. Kallen's polemics implicitly targeted the Protestant monopoly controlling academia, politics, and every other corner of the establishment, which reverted to desperate measures to block the ascent of Jews, imposing quotas at universities and restrictive housing covenants in well-to-do neighborhoods. His ideas were emblematic of an emerging strain of Jewish political philosophy, a set of arguments that would define American Jewry for generations.

The sons and daughters of immigrants may have dabbled in socialism, but in the 1930s and '40s, liberalism became the house politics of the Jewish people. Walter Lippmann, a descendant of German Jews, first used the term *liberal* in the American context, to describe a new center-left vision of the state that was neither socialist nor laissez-faire. Louis Brandeis, the first Jewish justice on the Supreme Court, conceptualized a new, expansive vision of civil liberties. Lillian Wald and Henry Moskowitz co-founded the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, in the belief that all minorities deserved the same protections. Jews became enthusiastic supporters of the New Deal, which staved off radical movements on the left and the right that tended to hunt for Jewish scapegoats. As a Yiddish joke went, Jewish theology consisted of *die velt* ("this world"), *yene velt* ("the world to come"), and Roosevelt.

The historian Marc Dollinger titled his 2000 narrative of Jewish liberalism *Quest for Inclusion*. Jews set out to achieve that goal procedurally—opposing prayer in public school, knocking down discriminatory housing laws, establishing new fair-employment rules. But it was also a project of mythmaking and dream-casting. Widely read mid-century intellectuals such as Louis Hartz, Daniel Boorstin, and Max Lerner wrote books reimagining America as the home of a benevolent centrism—tolerant, cosmopolitan, unique in the history of nations.

Reality began to resemble the myth: In the years following World War II—and especially as the world began to

NBCU PHOTO BANK / NBCUNIVERSAL / GETTY

Horace Kallen, who encouraged American Jews to embrace their adopted country without sacrificing their Jewish identity

comprehend the extent of the Nazi genocide—a liberal consensus took hold, and anti-Semitism receded. After Auschwitz, even three-martini Jewish jokes at the country club felt tinged by the horrors. In 1937, the American edition of *Roget's Thesaurus* had listed *cunning*, *rich*, *extortioner*, and *heretic* as synonyms for *Jew*. At that time, nearly half of Americans said Jews were less honest in business than others. By 1964, only 28 percent agreed with that assessment. It became cliché to refer to America as a "Judeo-Christian nation." Quotas at universities fell to the side.

As anti-Semitism faded, American Jewish civilization exploded in a rush of creativity. For a time, the great Jewish novel—books by Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, Norman Mailer, Joseph Heller, and Bernard Malamud, inflected with Yiddish and references to pickled herring—was the great American novel. Under the influence of Lenny Bruce, Sid Caesar, Mel Brooks, Elaine May, Gilda Radner, Woody Allen, and many others, American comedy appropriated the Jewish joke, and the ironic sensibility contained within, as its own.

During the Golden Age, Jews created new genres of Americana, and in turn remade America's image of itself, through the idealized vision of the heartland found in Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!*; the folk revival popularized by Bob Dylan, Art Garfunkel, and Paul Simon; the movies mythologizing the decency of the American Everyman produced by David O. Selznick, Louis B. Mayer, and Jack Warner. (To say that "the Jews" run Hollywood is conspiratorial; to say that Jews founded it is factual.) Only in America could Jews—Irving Berlin, George Wyle, Sammy Cahn—write the Christmas songbook.

It wasn't just mass culture. The New York Intellectuals, a group with a name as euphemistic as it sounds, acquired a priestly authority in the realm of aesthetics and political ideas, and included the likes of Alfred Kazin, Clement Greenberg, Irving Howe, and Susan Sontag. Betty Friedan, Bella Abzug, and Ruth Bader Ginsburg ushered second-wave feminism into the world. Jews became the prophetic face of American science (J. Robert Oppenheimer) and the salvific one of American medicine (Jonas Salk). The intellectual rewards of Jewish liberation could be measured in medals: Approximately 15 percent of all Nobel Prize winners are American Jews.

In the Golden Age, Jews in America embraced Israel. Enjoying their political and cultural ascendance, they looked to the new Jewish state not as a necessary refuge—they were more than comfortable on the Upper West Side and in Squirrel Hill and Brentwood—but as a powerful rebuttal to the old stereotypes about Jewish weakness, especially after the Israeli military's victory in the Six-Day War of 1967. As *The New York Times*' Thomas Friedman has put it, American Jews "said to themselves, 'My God, look who we are! We have power! We do not fit the Shylock image, we are ace pilots; we are not the cowering timid Jews who get sand kicked in their faces, we are tank commanders.'"

A now-obscure cultural event captures, for me, this newfound sense of self and self-confidence. In 1978, ABC aired *The Stars Salute Israel at 30*, a kitschy prime-time variety show filmed in front of a full house at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, in Los Angeles, the same venue that hosted the Oscars. Like the Oscars, it featured an A-list slate: Barry Manilow in a white suit, surrounded by backup singers in sequins; Henry Winkler, the Fonz himself, playing a rough-hewn Israeli in a sketch; and, of course, Sammy Davis Jr. Near the conclusion, Barbra Streisand emerged in a white gown to talk via remote hookup with Golda Meir as a camera filmed the former prime minister in a book-filled room in Israel—the two most celebrated Jewish women of the century kibitzing on American TV.

In the early decades of Hollywood, Jewish stars had hidden behind stage names—Emanuel Goldenberg performed as Edward G. Robinson; Issur Danielovitch transformed himself into Kirk Douglas. Streisand had also changed her name, dropping the *a* from Barbara, but that was an instance of a diva's bravado, not a sop to the goyim. What made her stardom so emblematic of the Golden Age was that she never allowed herself to be bullied into suppressing her Jewish identity. Her crowning achievement was *Yentl*, an adaptation of an Isaac Bashevis Singer short story. For the grand finale of the ABC telecast, Streisand sang "Hatikvah," the Israeli national anthem, for 18.7 million viewers. "The good feelings and the love will always remain," she told them.

Barbra Streisand performs during *The Stars Salute Israel at 30* in 1978.

COURTESY OF THE JACOB RADER MARCUS CENTER OF THE AMERICAN JEWISH ARCHIVES, CINCINNATI, OHIO; WALLY FONG / AP

4

The Jewish vacation from history ended on September 11, 2001. It didn't seem that way at the time. But the terror attacks opened an era of perpetual crisis, which became fertile soil where the hatred of Jews took root. Though Osama bin Laden claimed credit for the plot, that didn't stop some people from trying to shift the blame. One theory explained in exquisitely absurd detail how Mossad, the Israeli intelligence service, had toppled the Twin Towers.

But there was also a more sophisticated version of this conspiracy theory, one that had a patina of academic respectability. On the left, it became commonplace to fulminate against the neoconservatives, warmongering intellectuals said to be whispering in the ear of the American establishment, urging the invasion of Iraq and war against Iran.

This wasn't fully untethered from reality: The neocons were a group of largely Jewish think-tank denizens and policy operatives, some of whom held top posts in President George W. Bush's administration. But the angry talk about neocons also trafficked in dangerous old tropes. It inflated their role in world events and ascribed the worst motives to them. Men like Paul Wolfowitz, the second-highest-ranking official in Bush's Pentagon, and William Kristol, the editor of *The Weekly Standard*, were portrayed by critics on the left as bamboozlers undermining the national interest in service of their stealth loyalty to Israel. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, for one, took exception to the idea that Jews were pulling the strings of the United States government. "I suppose the implication of that is that the president and the vice president and myself and Colin Powell just fell off a turnip truck to take these jobs," he said.

In 2007, Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer, professors at Harvard and the University of Chicago, respectively, spelled out what others implied in *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*, a book published by a venerable house, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, that soon arrived on the *New York Times* bestseller list. This was the opposite of the schmaltzy Streisand tribute—the Jewish state as not a friend but a villain surreptitiously manipulating American power to further its own ends.

One year later, Lehman Brothers, a bank founded in 1850 by the son of a Jewish cattle merchant from Bavaria, collapsed. That news was followed by the revelation that Bernie Madoff had masterminded the largest-known Ponzi scheme in history. Although politicians, on the whole, refrained from casting Jews as the primary culprits of the 2008 financial crisis—which was, in fact, systemic—a sizable portion of the public harbored this thought. Stanford University professors conducted a survey that found that nearly a quarter of the country blamed Jews for crashing the global economy. Another 38.4 percent ascribed at least some fault to "the Jews."

In the era of perpetual crisis, a version of this narrative kept recurring: a small elite—sometimes bankers, sometimes lobbyists—maliciously exploiting the people. Such narratives helped propel Occupy Wall Street on the left and the Tea Party on the right. This brand of populist revolt had long been the stuff of Jewish nightmares. A fear of the mob suffused masterworks of the Golden Age—Theodor Adorno's *The Authoritarian Personality*, Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Richard Hofstadter's *Anti-intellectualism in American Life*. Haunted by the Holocaust and inherited memories of pogroms, these writers warned how a society might fall prey to a demagogue who tapped into prejudice.

After 2008, a version of their prophecy came to pass. The right settled on a Jewish billionaire as their villain of choice: George Soros. An idea took hold, and not just on extremist blogs. The mainstream of the Republican Party seeded the image of Soros as the "shadow puppet master," in the words of the former Fox News host Bill O'Reilly. In elevating the figure of Soros and invoking him so frequently, Fox News and Republican politicians were also, intentionally or not, drawing on the deeply implanted imagery of the Jewish financier bankrolling the destruction of Christian civilization.

In 2018, Fox News began carrying images of migrant caravans headed from Central America toward Texas, a tide of humanity it described as an "invasion." Though they had no evidence to bolster the charge, Republican politicians insinuated that the caravans were paid for by Soros. Representative Matt Gaetz tweeted a video of two men handing out cash to a line of Honduran migrants, accompanied by the question "Soros?" When President Trump was asked about Soros's role in funding a caravan, a week after a pipe bomb was found in Soros's mailbox, and days after the Tree of Life shooting, he told reporters, "I wouldn't be surprised."

Soros was a central character in a new master narrative, much of it adapted from European sources. The spine of the story was borrowed from a French author named Renaud Camus, a socialist turned far-right reactionary who wrote a 2011 book called *The Great Replacement*, warning that elites intended to diminish the white Christian presence in Europe by flooding the continent with migrants. The Jews weren't a central feature of Camus' theory. But when elements of the American right embraced it, they inserted Soros and his fellow Jews as the masterminds of the elite plot. This became the basis for the chant "Jews will not replace us."

Jews were the antagonists of the conspiracy theory because they occupied a special place in the bizarre racial hierarchy of American ethno-nationalism. Eric Ward, an activist who is among the most rigorous students of white supremacy, has put it this way: "At the bedrock of the movement is an explicit claim that Jews are a race of their own, and that their ostensible position as White folks in the U.S. represents the greatest trick the devil

ever played." That is, Jews were able to pass as white people, but they were really stealth agents working for the other side of the race war, using immigration to subvert white Christian hegemony.

This notion planted itself in the mind of Robert Bowers, a loner who lived in a suburb of Pittsburgh. He became obsessed with the work of HIAS, originally the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society. It was formed in 1902 with the intention of easing the arrival of Jewish refugees fleeing pogroms. The group's evolution was emblematic of the trajectory of Jewish liberalism. As American Jews settled into a comfortable existence in their new land, HIAS's mission expanded. It has field offices in more than 20 countries, including a branch on a Greek island to tend to Syrian, Iraqi, and Afghan migrants. On October 19, 2018, the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh was participating in a National Refugee Shabbat, which was the brainchild of HIAS.

The event stoked Bowers's rage. "HIAS likes to bring invaders in that kill our people," he wrote on Gab, the Christian-nationalist social-media site. Just before he entered the synagogue's sanctuary, armed with three semiautomatic pistols and an AR-15 rifle, he posted, "Open you Eyes! It's the filthy EVIL jews Bringing the Filthy EVIL Muslims into the Country!!"

A faith in immigration—the idea of America as a sanctuary for the refugee, the belief that subsequent groups of arrivals would experience the same up-from-the-shtetl trajectory—was a core tenet of Jewish liberalism. A Jewish poet had written the lines about huddled masses inscribed at the base of the Statue of Liberty. If America was a nation of immigrants, that made Jews quintessential Americans. But now this ideal was the basis for Jews' vilification. At the Tree of Life synagogue, it was used to justify their slaughter.

BETTMANN / GETTY

A citizenship class conducted by the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, 1952

In the old Jewish theory of American politics, the best defense against the anti-Semitism of the right was a united left: minorities and liberal activists locking arms. When I was young, rabbis and elders reverently told us about the earnest young Jews in chunky glasses who had jumped aboard the Freedom Rides; about Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, in his unmissable kippah, marching right next to Martin Luther King Jr.; and about the martyrdom of Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner, two Jews who had been murdered alongside James Chaney, a Black Mississippian, for their work registering Black Americans to vote. A coalition of the tolerant pressed the country to live up to its ideals.

Later, I would learn that those memories were a bit gauzy. In the late 1960s, former comrades began to quietly, then brusquely, discard this spirit of common cause. Younger activists in the civil-rights movement took a hard turn toward Black Power and dismissed the old liberal theory of change as a melioristic ruse. Anti-war protesters embraced the decolonization struggles of the developing world. After Israel captured the Gaza Strip and the West Bank in 1967, many came to view the Jewish state as a vile oppressor. (This was well before right-wing Israeli governments saturated the occupied territories with Jewish settlers.) Even as Israel's shocking victory in the Six-Day War, 22 years after the liberation of Auschwitz, filled American Jews with pride and confidence, a meaningful portion of America's left turned on Israel.

The turmoil of the late '60s presaged the rupture that has occurred over the past decade or so. A new ideology has taken hold on the left, with a reordered hierarchy of concerns and an even greater skepticism of the old liberal ideals.

This rupture was propelled by the menace of Donald Trump. His election jolted his opponents to take emergency measures. The left began describing itself as the Resistance, which implied a more confrontational style than that of Nancy Pelosi floor speeches or Center for American Progress white papers.

Even before Trump took office, the Resistance announced a mass protest set to defiantly descend on the capital, what organizers called the Women's March on Washington. In an early planning meeting, at a New York restaurant, an activist named Vanessa Wruble explained that her Judaism was the motivating force in her political engagement. But Wruble's autobiographical statement of intent earned her a rebuke. According to Wruble, two members of the inner circle planning the march told her that Jews needed to confront their own history of exploiting Black and brown people. *Tablet* magazine later reported that Wruble was told that Jews needed to repent for their leading role in the slave trade—a fallacious charge long circulated by the Nation of Islam. (The two organizers denied making the reported statements.) That moment of tension never really subsided, either for Wruble or for the left.

When the march's organizers published their "unity principles," they emphasized the importance of intersectionality, a theory first introduced by the law professor Kimberlé W. Crenshaw. It would be insufficient, she argued, for courts to focus their efforts on one narrow target of discrimination when it takes so many forms—racism, sexism, homophobia—that tend to reinforce one another. Her analysis, incisive in the context of the law, was never intended to guide social movements. Transposed by activists to the gritty work of coalition-building, it became the basis for a new orthodoxy—one that was largely indifferent to Jews, and at times outwardly hostile.

When the Women's March listed the various injustices it hoped to conquer on its way to a better world, anti-Semitism was absent. It was a curious omission, given the central role that Jews played in the conspiracies promoted by the MAGA right, and a telling one. Soon after the march, organizers pushed Wruble out of leadership. She later said that anti-Semitism was the reason for her ouster. (The organizers denied this charge.)

The intersectional left self-consciously rebelled against the liberalism that had animated so much of institutional Judaism, which fought to install civil liberties and civil rights enforced by a disinterested state that would protect every minority equally. This new iteration of the left considered the idea of neutrality—whether objectivity in journalism or color blindness in the courts—as a guise for white supremacy. Tolerance, the old keyword of cultural pluralism, was a form of complicity. What the world actually needed was intolerance, a more active confrontation with hatred. In the historian Ibram X. Kendi's formulation, an individual could choose to be antiracist or racist, an activist or a collaborator. Or as Linda Sarsour, an activist of Palestinian descent and a co-chair of the Women's March, put it, "We are not here to be bystanders." To be a member of this new left in good moral standing, it was necessary to challenge oppression in all its incarnations. And Israel was now definitively an oppressor.

The American left hadn't always imposed such a litmus test. During the years of the Oslo peace process, groups such as Students for Justice in Palestine had no problem attending events with liberal Zionists. Back then, the debate was over the borders of Israel, not over the fact of its existence. But that peace process collapsed during the last days of the Clinton administration, and whatever good faith had existed in that brief era of summits and handshakes dissipated. Hamas unleashed a wave of suicide bombings in the Second Intifada. And in the aftermath of those deadly attacks, successive right-wing Israeli governments presided over repressive policies in the West Bank and an inhumane blockade of Gaza.

Palestinian activists and their allies began the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement, pushing universities to divest from Israel. The new goal was no longer coexistence between Arabs and Jews. It was to turn Israel into an

international pariah, to stop working with all Israeli institutions—not just the military, but also symphonies, theater groups, and universities. In that spirit, it became fashionable for critics of Israel to identify as "anti-Zionist."

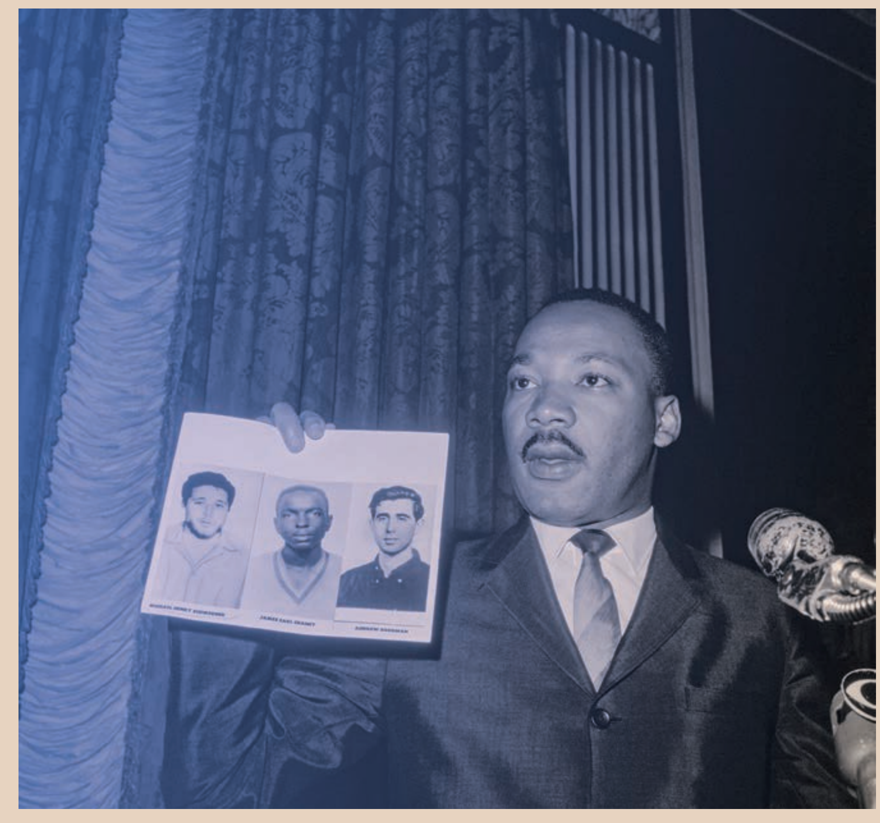
Within the Jewish establishment, there's a tendency to impute anti-Semitism to anyone who describes themselves that way. That has always struck me as intellectually imprecise and, occasionally, as a rhetorical gambit to close down debate. But there's a reason so many Jews bristle at the thought of anti-Zionism finding a home on the American left: *Zionist* can start to sound like a synonym for *Jew*. Zionists stand accused of the same crimes that anti-Semites have attached to Jews since the birth of Christianity; Jews are portrayed as omnipotent, bloodthirsty baby-killers. Knowing the historical echoes, it's hard not to worry that the anger might fixate on the Jewish target closest at hand—which, indeed, it has.

In 2014, dorms at NYU where religiously observant Jews lived received mock eviction notices—"We reserve the right to destroy all remaining belongings," read the flyer slipped under doors—as if intimidating college kids with unknown politics somehow represented a justifiable reprisal for Israeli-government action in the West Bank. The same notices appeared at Emory University, in Atlanta, in 2019. At the University of Vermont and SUNY New Paltz, groups that helped sexual-assault survivors were accused of purging pro-Israel students from their ranks. "If you don't support Palestinian liberation you don't support survivors," the Vermont group exclaimed. Years before October 7, students at Tufts University, outside Boston, and the University of Southern California moved to impeach elected Jews in student government over their support for Israel's existence. This wasn't normal politics. It was evidence of bigotry.

Among the primary targets of the activists were the Hillel centers present on most college campuses. These centers occasionally coordinate trips to Israel and, on some campuses, sponsor student groups supportive of Israel. Those facts led pro-Palestinian activists to describe Hillel as an arm of the "Israeli war machine." At SUNY Stony Brook, activists sought to expel Hillel from campus, arguing, "If there were Nazis, white nationalists, and KKK members on campus, would their identity have to be accepted and respected?" At Rice University, in Texas, an LGBTQ group severed ties with Hillel because it allegedly made students feel unsafe. What made this incident darkly comic is that Hillel couldn't be more progressive on issues of sexual freedom. What made it so worrying is that Hillel's practical purpose is not to defend Israel, but to provide Shabbat dinners and a space for ritual and prayer. To condemn Hillel is to condemn Jewish religious life on campus.

As exclusion of Jews became a more regular occurrence, the leadership of the left, and of universities for that matter, had little to say about the problem. To give the most generous explanation: Jews simply didn't fit the analytic framework of the new left.

At its core, the intersectional left wanted to smash power structures. In the American context, it would be hard to place Jews among the ranks of the oppressed; in the Israeli context, they can be cast as the oppressor. Nazi Germany definitively excluded Jews from a category we now call "whiteness." Today, Jews are treated in sectors of the left as the epitome of whiteness. But any analysis that focuses so relentlessly on the role of privilege, as the left's does, will be dangerously blind to anti-Semitism, because anti-Semitism itself entails an accusation of privilege. It's a theory that regards the Jew as an all-powerful figure in society, a position acquired by underhanded means. In the annals of Jewish history, accusations of privilege are the basis for hate, the kindling for pogroms. But universities too often ignored this lesson from the past. Instead, they acted, as the British comedian David Baddiel put it in the title of his prescient book about progressive anti-Semitism, as if "Jews don't count."



Martin Luther King Jr. holds the photos of three civil-rights workers murdered by the Ku Klux Klan in Philadelphia, Mississippi, during 1964's Freedom Summer. Two of them—Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman—were Jewish.

BETTMANN / GETTY

6

In the death spiral of liberalism, extremism on the right begets extremism on the left, which begets further extremism on the right. To protest the censoriousness of the new progressives, right-wing edgelords and trolls attempted to seize the mantle of liberty.

The most powerful of the edgelords was Elon Musk, who purchased Twitter ostensibly to save discourse from the woke mob. To make good on his noble aims, he reversed bans that the platform's previous regime had imposed on the most vile anti-Semites, including the white nationalist Patrick Howley, the comic Sam Hyde, and the Daily Stormer's founder, Andrew Anglin. By restoring them to the site, Musk was, in essence, conceding that their words shouldn't have been considered taboo in the first place. He legitimized their claims of victimhood, the sense that they had been excluded only because they'd offended the wrong people.

In fact, Musk hinted that he shared this conspiratorial view of censorship. In May 2023, he retweeted an aphorism that he attributed to Voltaire: "To learn who rules over you, simply find out who you are not allowed to criticize." Those words were actually uttered by a neo-Nazi named Kevin Alfred Strom, not the French philosopher. It shouldn't have been hard to imagine that the words had dubious origins, because they captured a view of the world in which shadowy forces furtively censor their enemies.

Nor was it hard to imagine that those shadowy forces might include the Anti-Defamation League, which relentlessly called attention to the proliferation of Jew hatred on Twitter under Musk's ownership. Musk threatened to sue the group, accusing it of trying to "kill this platform by falsely accusing it & me of being anti-Semitic." The Jews, he all but spelled out, were those who couldn't be criticized—which, by the logic of the Strom quote, made them society's secret masters.

Musk wasn't alone in this argument. In 2022, Dave Chappelle used the opening monologue of *Saturday Night Live* to muse about the cancellation of the hip-hop artist Ye (formerly Kanye West), who had lost a deal with Adidas after he promised, among other things, to go "death con 3 on JEWISH PEOPLE." Chappelle exuded empathy for Ye. "I don't want a sneaker deal, because the minute I say something that makes those people mad, they're going to take my sneakers away … I hope they don't take anything away from me," he said, adding with a smile and a conspiratorial whisper: "Whoever they are." There was no mystery about his use of pronouns: "I've been to Hollywood … It's a lot of Jews. Like, a lot." He went on, "You could maybe adopt the delusion that the Jews run show business."

Chappelle practices shock comedy as a form of shock therapy: The authoritarian impositions of the left justify offensive comments, which are a form of defiance. He has taken a genuine problem—antiliberalism on the left—and used it as a pretext for smuggling anti-Semitism into acceptable discourse.

That Chappelle and Musk see fit to indulge anti-Semitism in order to protect freedom of speech contains a dark irony. In the 20th century, starting with Louis Brandeis's dissents on the Supreme Court, Jews stood at the vanguard of the movement to protect "subversive advocacy," even when it came at their own expense. This could be understood as a defense of the Talmudic tradition of disagreement, what Rabbi David Wolpe calls the "Jewish sacrament" of debate. The movement culminated in Skokie, Illinois, in 1977, when the ACLU deployed the lawyer David Goldberger to sue to allow neo-Nazis to march through the Chicago suburb, which was filled with Holocaust survivors. The Jewish community was hardly unanimous on the Skokie question—unanimity would have been inconsistent with the tradition—but the ACLU position reflected a commitment to free speech officially espoused by major Jewish communal institutions in the postwar years.

In the Jewish vision of free speech, open interpretation and endless debate mark the path to knowledge; the proliferation of discourse is the antidote to bad ideas. But in the reality of social media, free speech also consists of Jew hatred that masquerades as comic entertainment, a way to capture the attention of young men eager to rebel against the strictures of what they decry as wokeness.

When I asked Oren Segal, who runs the ADL's Center on Extremism, to point me to a state-of-the-art anti-Semitic hate group, he cited the Goyim Defense League. The spitefully silly name reflects its methods, which include pranks and stunts broadcast on its website, Goyim TV. Its leader sometimes dresses as an ultra-Orthodox Jew, calling himself the "Honest Rabbi." In one demented piece of guerrilla theater, he apologizes on behalf of the Jewish people for fabricating stories about the Holocaust. The group has attempted to popularize the slogan "Kanye is right about the Jews," hanging a banner proclaiming it on a freeway overpass in Los Angeles and projecting it on the side of a football stadium in Jacksonville, Florida, as 75,000 fans filed out. GDL hecklers have stood in front of Florida synagogues and Holocaust museums, shouting, "Leave our country. Go back to Israel" and "Heil Hitler."

In a short span, as the edgelords successfully pushed the limits, American culture became permissive regarding what could be said about Jews. Anti-Semitism crept back into the realm of the acceptable.

For a brief moment, it felt as if the October 7 attacks might reverse the tide, because it should have been impossible not

to recoil at the footage of Hamas's pogrom. Israel had yet to launch its counterattack, so there was no war to condemn. Still, even in this moment of moral clarity, the campus left couldn't muster compassion. At Harvard, more than 30 student groups signed a letter on October 7, holding "the Israeli regime entirely responsible for all unfolding violence." Days later, the incoming head of NYU's new Center for Indigenous Studies described the attacks as "affirming." This sympathy for Hamas, when its crimes were freshest, was a glimpse of what was about to come.

On the afternoon of October 11, Rebecca Massel, a reporter at the *Columbia Daily Spectator*, received a tip. She was told that a woman, her face wrapped in a bandanna, had assaulted an Israeli student in front of Butler Library in a dispute over flyers depicting hostages held by Hamas. The woman's alleged weapon was a broomstick. Her battle cry was said to be "Fuck all of you prick crackers." After striking him with the broomstick, the man said, she attempted to punch him in the face. By the end of the fracas, she had bruised one of his hands and sprained a finger on the other.

Massel began to report out the story. She spoke with the victim, who told her, "Now, we have to handle the situation that campus is not a safe place for us anymore." She spoke with the NYPD, which confirmed that it had arrested the woman, who was charged with hate crimes and has pleaded not guilty. Massel and her editors curbed their impulse to quickly score a scoop, double-checking every sentence. They didn't publish the story until 3 a.m. on October 12.

Later that morning, Massel, a sophomore studying political science, was sitting in her Contemporary Civilization seminar when her phone lit up. It was her editor, calling her back. She had texted him to get his sense of the response her article had elicited, so she stepped out of class to hear what he had to say. She had already caught a glimpse of posts on social media, harping on her Jewishness and accusing her of having a "religious agenda." She'd worried that these weren't stray attacks. The editor told her the paper had been inundated. The messages it had received about the article were vitriolic, but he didn't give her any specifics. Before returning to class, she checked her own email. A message read, "I hope you fucking get what you deserve … you racist freak."

For as long as she could remember, Massel had wanted to be a journalist. She'd founded the newspaper at her elementary school. During high school, she'd read *She Said*, Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey's book about investigating Harvey Weinstein's sexual assaults. The *New York Times* reporters insisted that they were journalists, not feminist journalists. Massel vowed to take the same approach. The accusations of bias, therefore, didn't just feel anti-Semitic. They felt like an attack on the integrity that she hoped would define her work.

But anger was an emotion for another day. At that moment, she was overwhelmed by fear. She thought about what the Israeli student had told her the day before. A dean had apparently advised him to leave campus because the university couldn't guarantee his safety. Now Massel felt unsure of her own physical well-being. She decided that she would stay with her parents until she could get a better sense of the fury directed at her.

In her unnerved state, Massel threw herself into her journalism. She decided to interview Jewish students, from all corners of the university, to gauge their mood. After the office of public safety assured her that she could return to campus, she parked herself in the second-floor lounge of Columbia's Hillel center. When she overheard a student mention an incident, she would approach them and ask to talk.

Over the course of two weeks, Massel spoke with 54 students. What she amassed was a tally of fear. Thirteen told her that they had felt harassed or attacked, either virtually or in person. (One passerby had barked "Fuck the Jews" at a small group of students.) Thirty-four reported that they felt targeted or unsafe on campus. (At one precarious moment, the Hillel center went into lockdown, out of concern that protesters might descend on the building.) Twelve said that they had suppressed markers of their Jewish identity, wearing a baseball cap over a yarmulke or tucking a Star of David necklace into a sweatshirt. She learned that a group of students had created a group-chat system to arrange escorts, so that no Jew would have to walk across campus alone if they felt unsafe.

Perhaps even more ominously, Massel uncovered incidents in which teachers expressed hostility toward Jewish students. One Israeli student told Massel that a professor had once said to him, "It's such a shame that your people survived just in order to perpetuate another genocide." When I made my own calls to students and faculty, I heard similar

Dave Chappelle opens *Saturday Night Live*, November 2022.

WILL HEATH / NBC / GETTY

stories, especially instances of teaching assistants seizing their bully pulpit to sermonize. One TA wrote to their students, "We are watching genocide unfold in real time, after a systematic 75+ years of oppression of the Palestinian people … It feels ridiculous to hold section today, but I'll see you all on Zoom in a bit." One student left class in the middle of a professor's broadside against Israel in a required course in the Middle East–studies department. Afterward, he sent an email to the professor explaining his departure, to which the professor wrote back, saying they could discuss it in class later. When the student returned, the professor read his email aloud to the whole class, and invited everyone to discuss the exchange. It felt like an act of deliberate humiliation.

When I talked with Jewish students at Columbia, I was struck by how they, too, tended to speak in the language of the intersectional left. They described their "lived experience" and trauma: the pain they felt on October 7 as they learned of the attacks; the fear that consumed them when they heard protesters call for the annihilation of Israel. They sincerely expected their university to respond with unabashed empathy, because that's how it had responded in the past to other terrible events. Instead, Columbia greeted their pain with the soon-to-be-infamous concept of "context," including a panel discussion that explained the attacks as the product of a long struggle. This historicizing felt as if it not only discounted Jewish students' suffering but also regarded it as a moral failing. (In early November, in response to criticism, Columbia announced that it would create a task force on anti-Semitism.)

There are many reasons for the unusual intensity of events at Columbia, which is located in a city that is a traditional bastion of the American left; its campus is where the late Palestinian American literary critic Edward Said achieved legendary status. But Columbia is also a graphic example of the collapse of the liberalism that had insulated American Jews: It is a microcosm of a society that has lost its capacity to express disagreements without resorting to animus.

The events on campus that followed October 7 were a sad coda to the Golden Age. When I was a student at Columbia, in the '90s, the Ivy League was a primary plot point in a triumphalist tale. During the first half of the 20th century, Columbia had deployed extraordinary institutional energy to limit the presence of Jews. The modern college-application process was invented by Columbia President Nicholas Murray Butler to more effectively weed out Jews. In the late '20s, the university created an ersatz version of itself in Brooklyn, Seth Low Junior College, so that it could educate otherwise qualified Jewish applicants there, rather than having them mingle with the Gentiles in Morningside Heights. But once Columbia lifted its quotas after World War II, the Jewish presence swelled. By 1967, the student body was 40 percent Jewish. The institution that arguably had fought hardest to exclude them became a welcoming home.

But in the 21st century, the Jewish presence in the Ivy League has steadily receded. In the 2000s, Yale was 20 percent Jewish. The proportion is now about half that. The University of Pennsylvania went from being a third Jewish to about 16 percent. The reasons for that plummet aren't nefarious. There has been a deliberate institutional drive to reengineer the elite, to provide opportunities to first-generation college students and students of color. Some Jews have chafed at this reengineering. But the concept of meritocracy that Jews celebrated was far from a pure reward for test scores and grades. Jewish alumni came to benefit from the same dynastic system of preference that their Protestant predecessors had taken advantage of. Their children applied from prestigious high schools, which maintained a cozy relationship with university admissions offices. It was a system that desperately required reforming in the name of fairness.

The problem exposed in the limp university response to campus anti-Semitism after October 7—distilled to then–Harvard President Claudine Gay's phrase, "It depends on the context"—is that Jewish students aren't just a diminished presence but a diminished priority. Whereas Jews thought of themselves as a vulnerable minority—perhaps not the most vulnerable, but certainly worthy of official concern—their academic communities apparently considered them too privileged to merit that status. This wasn't just scary. It carried the sting of rejection.

There's a number that haunts me. In 2022, the Tufts political scientist Eitan Hersh conducted a comprehensive study of Jewish life on American college campuses, which surveyed both Jews and Gentiles. Hersh found that on campuses with a relatively high proportion of Jewish students, nearly one in five non-Jewish students said they "wouldn't want to be friends with someone who supports the existence of Israel as a Jewish state." They were saying, in essence, that they couldn't be friends with the majority of Jews.

8

Each spring, during the Passover seder, Jews recite this phrase from the Haggadah: "In every generation, our enemies rise up to destroy us." To participate in the most universally observed of all Jewish rituals, a celebration of liberation and survival, is to be reminded of the grim cycle of Jewish history, in which golden ages are moments of dramatic irony, the naive complacency just before the onset of doom. Some of these moments are within living memory.

In 1933, the Central Union of German Citizens of the Jewish Faith published a 1,060-page book meticulously enumerating the achievements of the community. It was quite a list. Weimar Germany is remembered as a period of instability, a time of beer-hall-putschists, louche cabarets, and rampant assassinations. But Weimar was also the pinnacle of Jewish power, a golden age in its

own right, especially if one considers the whole of German culture, which sprawled across borders on the map. During the first decades of the 20th century, Jewish contributors to German music included Gustav Mahler, Kurt Weill, and Arnold Schoenberg; to German literature, Franz Kafka, Stefan Zweig, and Walter Benjamin; to science, Albert Einstein. Jews presided over the Frankfurt School of social criticism and populated the Bauhaus school of art and architecture. The Central Union's compendium could be read as the immodest self-congratulation of a people who represented 0.8 percent of the total population—or as a desperate, futile plea for Germany to return the love that Jews felt for the country.

Americans maintain a favorable opinion of Jews. The community remains prosperous and politically powerful. But the memory of how quickly the best of times can turn dark has infused the Jewish reactions to events of the past decade. "When lights start flashing red, the Jewish impulse is to flee," Jonathan Greenblatt, the head of the Anti-Defamation League, told me.

Back in 2016, many liberals blustered about leaving the country if Donald Trump was elected president; after he won, many Jews actually hatched contingency plans. My mother tried, in vain, to get a passport from Poland, the country of her birth. An immigration lawyer I know in Cleveland told me that he had obtained a German passport, and suggested that I call the German embassy in Washington to learn how many other American Jews had done the same.

The German government, for understandable reasons, doesn't count Jews. But the embassy sent me a tally of passport applications submitted under laws that apply to victims of Nazi persecution and their descendants. In 2017, after Trump's election, the number of applications nearly doubled from the year before, to 1,685, and then kept growing. In 2022, it was 2,500. These aren't large numbers in absolute terms; still, it's extraordinary that so many American Jews, whose applications required documenting that their families once fled Germany, now consider the country a safer haven than the United States.

I also saw signs of flight in Oakland, where at least 30 Jewish families have been approved to transfer their children to neighboring school districts—and I heard similar stories in the surrounding area. Initial data collected by an organization representing Jewish day schools, which have long struggled for enrollment, show a spike in the number of admission inquiries from families contemplating pulling their kids from public school.

After 1967, the previous moment of profound political abandonment, the American Jewish community began to entertain thoughts of its own radical reinvention. A coterie of disillusioned intellectuals, clustered around a handful of small-circulation journals and think tanks, turned sharply rightward, creating the neoconservative movement. Among activists, the energy that had once been directed toward Freedom Rides was plowed into the cause of Soviet Jewry, which became a defining political obsession of many synagogues in the 1970s and '80s. Meanwhile, Jewish hippies turned inward, creating new spiritual movements centered on prayer and ritual.

Although not all of these movements proved equally fruitful, this history, in a way, is cause for optimism, an example of how conflict might provide the path to religious renewal and a fresh sense of solidarity. It's also a reminder that the Golden Age was not an uninterrupted rise.

The case for pessimism, however, is more convincing. The forces arrayed against Jews, on the right and the left, are far more powerful than they were 50 years ago. The surge of anti-Semitism is a symptom of the decay of democratic habits, a leading indicator of rising authoritarianism. When anti-Semitism takes hold, conspiracy theory hardens into conventional wisdom, embedding violence in thought and then in deadly action. A society that holds its Jews at arm's length is likely to be more intent on hunting down scapegoats than addressing underlying defects. Although it is hardly an iron law of history, such societies are prone to decline. England entered a long dark age after expelling its Jews in 1290. Czarist Russia limped toward revolution after the pogroms of the 1880s. If America persists on its current course, it would be the end of the Golden Age not just for the Jews, but for the country that nurtured them. *A*

ANDREW LICHTENSTEIN / CORBIS / GETTY

A Jewish Columbia student watches a pro-Palestine demonstration outside the gates of the university, November 2023.

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JODIE FOSTER'S LIFE ON-SCREEN

SINCE CHILDHOOD, SHE'S STRUGGLED WITH ONE QUESTION: HOW MUCH DOES SHE WANT THE PUBLIC TO KNOW HER?

BY JORDAN KISNER

PHOTOGRAPH BY DANIEL JACK LYONS

JODIE FOSTER HAS SPENT MUCH OF HER CAREER PLAYING THE LONELY WOMAN UNDER PRESSURE.

A young FBI agent-in-training having an underground tête-à-tête with a cannibalistic serial killer. A scientist launching into space, solo. A mild-mannered radio host who becomes a vigilante after strangers assault her and kill her boyfriend. A mother whose child vanishes in the middle of a transatlantic flight. A wife whose husband is having a suicidal psychotic break and will talk to her only through a hand puppet. It's not a relaxing oeuvre.

There are exceptions, of course; *Freaky Friday* (1976), which Foster made just after Martin Scorsese's grisly *Taxi Driver*, was a family-friendly romp. But her 58 years in film, which began during her preschool days, have been almost entirely devoted to outsider characters—women who are emotionally isolated, fighting to be believed, striking out perilously on their own. For a long time, this was how Foster liked it. She spent many years avoiding roles that involved too much entanglement with other actors. "I wanted to be the central person," she told me recently, as we sat in the quiet back room of a West Village restaurant. She cracked a smile. "I felt like other people were gonna mess up my stuff."

When I call her performances to mind, the image is always of her face, pale and serious, in the middle of an otherwise empty frame: Clarice Starling staring down the barrel of Hannibal Lecter's gaze, or Dr. Ellie Arroway braced inside her spacecraft in *Contact*. "I kill people off when I'm in the development process," Foster said. "I'm like, *Why does she have to have a dad? Why does she have to be married?*" She has a tendency, she said, to "whittle people away 'til it's a solitary journey. I keep finding myself wanting the elegance of that."

Foster's long stretch as a woman alone on camera has mirrored, in some sense, her own feeling of loneliness. As a child actor, she realized early on just how punishing celebrity could be. She's worked hard to protect her personal life. She doesn't do social media, and she isn't the face of any products. For decades, she refused to publicly acknowledge her sexuality, even as the media speculated about her relationships with women. "I am a solitary, internal person in an extroverted, external job," she told *The New York Times* in 2021. "I don't think I will ever not feel lonely. It's a theme in my life."

In the past year, however, she's taken on two projects that are not solitary journeys at all. In the latest season of HBO's *True Detective*, Foster is half of a twosome; she plays a police chief working a strange case with a younger officer. In development, Foster reversed her usual argument: She insisted to Issa López, the season's writer and director, that the younger character should have the main arc. In the movie *Nyad*—for which Foster has been nominated for an Academy Award—she plays Bonnie Stoll, coach and best friend to Annette Bening's Diana Nyad, the marathon swimmer who famously swam from Cuba to Florida.

Nyad is new territory for Foster in several ways. It's a total sidekick role: Stoll and Nyad are platonic life partners who were once, briefly, lovers. They are completely enmeshed, but Diana is clearly the sun—ambitious, reckless, prone to delusions of grandeur—and Bonnie the moon. Bonnie devotes her life to assisting, caring for, cajoling, and managing Diana. She's the first out lesbian Foster has ever played. Just as notably, the performance is perhaps the lightest in Foster's filmography. Her Bonnie is buoyant and loose, tanned and laughing. Where Foster's performances have so often been tightly held, full of strain, this role is full of ease and humor.

Foster told me that she took the role in *Nyad* because she wanted to learn something about how to sustain partnership and connection, as Bonnie had. It's a skill she doesn't think comes naturally to her, and she's eager to shake off some of the solitariness that has for so long been part of her self-conception. "For somebody who is interested in privacy," she told me, "I am obsessed with being understood." This, she said, has been a "lifetime struggle."

Foster was a precocious child, exceptionally good at sussing out how to perform in whatever way was desired. She started acting when she was 3 years old; her first role was as a shirtless toddler in a Coppertone commercial. She never had a real choice about it, she says now—she just did what she was asked. Foster was born after her parents divorced. They were living in Los Angeles, and her mother, Brandy, started taking her to auditions. By the time Jodie entered first grade, she was the primary breadwinner, supporting her mother and three older siblings. She told me that Brandy, who managed her acting career until she was in her 20s, would frequently panic about money, a panic directed mostly at Jodie. "I was it. There was no other income besides me," Foster said.

She was uniformly excellent: an excellent student, an excellent employee, excellent at taking direction. Her savvy, almost world-weary quality made her compelling, even unsettling, as a child actor. When she

was 9, Foster was mauled by a lion on set; afterward, she told the story coolly as an entertaining anecdote for the press. In 1975, when she was 12, Scorsese cast her in *Taxi Driver* as Iris, a runaway who takes up prostitution. Until then, she'd played earnest pip-squeaks in Crest toothpaste ads, husky-voiced prairie kids, philosophical tomboys. Her performance in *Taxi Driver* was shocking for its sophistication—not because of the movie's sexual material, which Foster claimed in interviews to be unruffled by (what she disliked was the hot pants and tall heels), but because it is so self-assured, canny, and nuanced. When the film came out, Foster spoke fluent French at foreign press events, though she had to ask for the French word for *prostitute*; she traded witticisms with Andy Warhol—who offered her a Bloody Mary—in *Interview* magazine. The role earned her an Academy Award nomination for Best Supporting Actress.

But she also learned to protect certain parts of herself. She told me about being followed around by a documentary crew when she was 13, which she hated but didn't protest, believing it to be an obligation to her career and family. When the cameramen proposed accompanying her and her friends to Disneyland, though, she went to her mother in tears. Being filmed at an amusement park with her friends seemed like too much—at Disneyland, she just wanted to be a child, unobserved.

Counterintuitively, acting itself felt like a space of privacy and control. Foster remembers being relieved that her mother would stay in the trailer reading magazines while she worked, because the set, and the acting she did there, felt like hers alone. "She couldn't get inside my body and take that experience from me. She could take a whole bunch of experiences from me, but she couldn't take one," Foster told me. "There's a deliciousness to loneliness … There is nothing like the loneliness of lying in a pool of fake blood at three in the morning in Prospect Park with 175 people around you moving things and whatever—and knowing they will never understand what you're going through."

In 1981, when Foster was a freshman at Yale, John Hinckley Jr. attempted to assassinate President Ronald Reagan and confessed that he'd done it to impress Foster, with whom he'd been obsessed since seeing *Taxi Driver*. The explosion of attention and speculation was traumatizing—death threats were dropped at her dorm-room door; paparazzi combed through her trash. She slipped on ice during a confrontation with a photographer and lay on the street sobbing, while the photographer yelled, "I got her! I got her!"

A year and a half later, Foster wrote an essay for *Esquire* titled "Why Me?" about the media spectacle that surrounded her. She wrote about desperately wishing to be treated like a normal college kid, and what it felt like to realize, after the assassination attempt, that this would never happen—that she was helpless in the face of strangers' projections. "Good actors are essentially good liars," she wrote. "I raise my eyebrows, you think I'm sexy. I dart my eyes, you think I'm smart." Her tone was both anguished and resigned; if she cared about having the public know her real self, she'd been trained to turn that impulse off. "Being understood is not the most essential thing in life," she concluded. She was 20.

In 1988, a few years after college, she starred as Sarah Tobias—a woman who is gang-raped and then fights for justice—in *The Accused*. Foster's version of Sarah was more defiant and rough-edged than the producers and the director, Jonathan Kaplan, wanted. She couldn't bring herself to soften the character; what felt truthful to her, she said, was to play Sarah as angry and tough as well as wounded. But after shooting, Foster began to worry that maybe she had done the film a disservice—that she had delivered a victim who was too strident and off-putting. When she saw an early screening, she was so convinced that audiences would hate her performance that she considered applying to graduate programs in African American literature, believing that her acting career was over. But her instincts had been right: Sarah's toughness, her rage, won Foster an Academy Award.

"FOR SOMEBODY WHO IS INTERESTED IN PRIVACY," FOSTER SAYS, "I AM OBSESSED WITH BEING UNDERSTOOD."

Then, in 1991, came *The Silence of the Lambs*. Her mother couldn't understand why Foster would do a horror movie right after an Oscar win, much less one in which she played second fiddle to the film's villain, Hannibal Lecter. But Foster was compelled by the role. She saw the story as a gender-flipped version of the mythological hero's journey, where a young man's crusade to slay a monster proves his mettle and ultimately transforms him. Clarice Starling became a kind of blueprint for Foster's future characters in movies such as *Contact*, *Panic Room*, and *Inside Man*: intelligent, alone, duty bound, vulnerable but resolute. In the final scene of *The Silence of the Lambs*, Clarice pursues a murderer through a dark house and we see her hand, holding a gun, shaking. That touch was Foster's idea. Clarice's fear, she thought, needed to be as visible as her grit.

During these years, Foster cultivated a reputation for being aloof and self-protective. For a long time, she declined to

Above: *Foster (*center*) at age 12 in* Taxi Driver *(1976).*
Below: *Foster as Clarice Starling in* The Silence of the Lambs *(1991).*

COLLECTION CHRISTOPHEL / ALAMY; FLIXPIX / ALAMY

talk at all about her family or her relationships. She dated women—and raised two sons with her former partner of 15 years, Cydney Bernard—without ever acknowledging Bernard in the press or discussing the question of her sexuality.

Her experience could make her feel defensive of younger actors. In 2012, when Kristen Stewart was in the *Twilight* franchise and dating her co-star Robert Pattinson, Foster wrote an essay in *The Daily Beast* condemning the media frenzy around Stewart, who, at 12 years old, had played Foster's daughter in *Panic Room*. We "lift up beautiful young people like gods and then pull them down to earth to gaze at their seams," Foster wrote. "If I were a young actor today," she continued, "I would quit before I started." Stewart told me that she was grateful for Foster's essay. "She saw that I was going through something that needed more words, and I didn't have them," Stewart said.

From her late 40s through her 50s, Foster barely did any acting. Partly, she said, this was because she felt she was in an awkward stretch of middle age where she was competing with the audience's memories of a younger, smoother-skinned version of herself. She'd been swearing off acting intermittently her whole career, insisting that she doesn't have the right temperament for it: She's cerebral and introverted, not naturally expressive or emotional. But the 10 years between 2010 and 2020 were the closest she's come to actual retirement.

Her most significant project during that time was *The Beaver*, a 2011 film she directed starring Mel Gibson as Walter Black, a man who, despite once having a good job, a nice house, and a loving family, grows so depressed and disgusted with his life that he decides to kill himself. After a failed attempt, he starts living vicariously through a beaver hand puppet, which he animates with an alternate personality: Where Walter is affectless and despondent, the beaver is warm, charming, and driven. Walter is revived and rejoins his life, but he won't interact as himself—instead, he talks via the beaver, which he refuses to take off his hand.

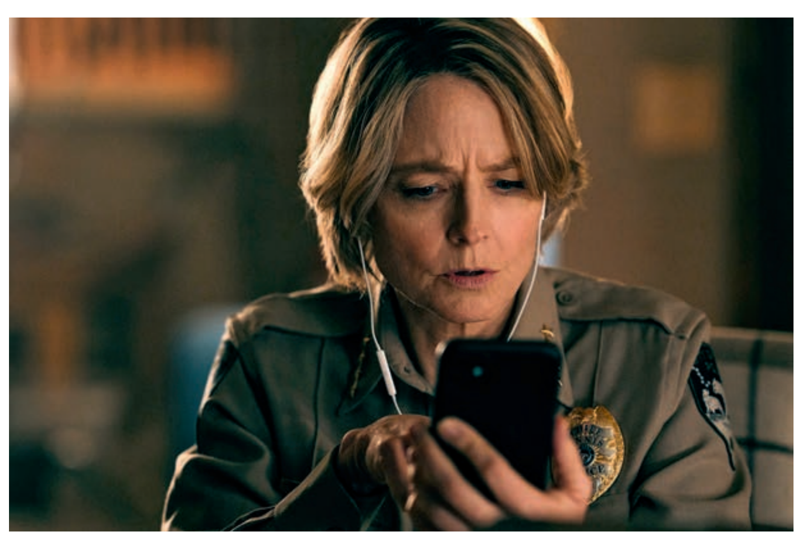
The film sounds like it might be a broad comedy, but Foster shot it like the bleakest tragedy. The beaver, Foster told me, is "the only way that he can survive when he has to choose between a life sentence or a death sentence. The life sentence is living the horrible life of depression every single day. The death sentence is taking his own life." The beaver arrives as a survival mechanism that will allow him a way forward, though one he can't live with forever.

The Beaver bombed in theaters. Shortly before its release, the public learned that Gibson had been accused of physically assaulting his girlfriend—he pleaded guilty to a charge of misdemeanor battery—and had made racist and sexist statements. (Gibson had also been in the news a few years earlier, after making anti-Semitic remarks during an arrest for driving while intoxicated.) Foster refused to renounce him as a friend, insisting that people were more than their worst actions and that she still appreciated the raw and complex performance he'd given in the film. Gibson told me over the phone that he knows that he and Foster are "nothing alike, ideologically and in every other way." "She's a mixture of things, and, I mean, I don't pretend to know exactly what she is," he said. "She's an enigma." Yet he feels unusually close to her. "If she was a novelist, she'd be John Steinbeck," he added. "She doesn't waste a word or a thought, and she doesn't waste time."

Regardless of its box-office failure, *The Beaver* meant a lot to Foster. She saw the movie as nearly autobiographical, an allegory of a spiritual crisis she herself had experienced. In the years before *The Beaver*, she'd found herself in her own deep depression. Her 15-year partnership with Bernard ended; her sons no longer needed as much attention; she was no longer in the spotlight for her work in the same way. A few directing projects she'd fought hard to get started had fallen apart. "I thought I was meant to do great things. And what happens if I don't do any more great things? Like, do I matter? And what am I supposed to do on Earth? What happens if I'm not great?"

She related to Walter Black—to the despair and self-loathing that led him to

Above: *Foster and Annette Bening with the directors Jimmy Chin and Elizabeth Chai Vasarhelyi during the filming of* Nyad *(2023).*
Below: *Foster as Liz Danvers in* True Detective *(2024).*



KIMBERLEY FRENCH / NETFLIX; MICHELE K. SHORT / HBO

seize upon the alternate self the puppet offers, to his unwillingness to relinquish that puppet no matter how much his loved ones beg him to.

"At a certain point, the survival tool, which has kept you safe and just kept you warm, which has kept you with your family, it's allowed you to exist in the world—you gotta cut that fucking thing off," she told me, then broke out laughing. "You gotta cut that thing off, because it's killing you." The way she spit her consonants here, the hardness of her laugh, surprised me.

I asked what that meant for her. "I assume you weren't walking around with a puppet—"

"My whole life I've had a puppet!" she interrupted.

I asked what she meant.

"I think it's this *persona*. And doing the right thing," she said—getting good grades, taking care of her family, positioning herself to win awards. "And then you get to a certain point and you're like, *This is killing me. This is killing me. I don't know why it's killing me now, but I can't live one minute longer*." For a moment, I wasn't sure whether she was talking about herself or Walter. "And, you know, I have two terrible choices: I either live a life that I hate every single day of my life, or I die. That's it. I only have two choices. But then there's a choice in the middle, which is to change. You have the choice to change."

For Foster, the change happened gradually, over years. She realized that so much of her persona was a coping mechanism: the bravado of the child who told jokes about being mauled by a lion; the false swagger that led her to tell reporters that she'd been less disturbed by *The Accused*'s rape scene than the men on set were. "You start realizing things like, *Wow, I'm a real blowhard*," she said. "I just talk and talk and talk and talk. Have I been a blowhard this whole time? All these years I've been a blowhard, and nobody told me." She decided that she needed to quit drinking, and joined a 12-step program, which demanded the previously unimaginable practice of exposing herself emotionally (not as a character; as herself) in front of complete strangers. She wondered what it would look like to be a less defended, more honest, weirder version of herself. What would that look like in her close relationships? What would it look like with people she didn't even know?

"It's amazing how …" she trailed off, looking momentarily nauseous. "Vulnerability …" She grimaced. "My least favorite word!"

"*Vulnerability*," she told me, "is code for 'women.' And it's code for what you're supposed to bring to screen that's nice and girly, that everybody wants you to be." She hates when reviews accuse her of "showing no vulnerability." "Yeah, I know what that means," she said, shaking her head. It means, she said, that some women's vulnerability "just doesn't look the way you're used to seeing it."

In 2013, Foster received the Cecil B. DeMille lifetime-achievement award at the Golden Globes and gave a speech that thrust her into the public eye in a new way. "I just have a sudden urge to say something that I've never really been able to air in public," she said onstage, smiling big but looking nervous. "So, a declaration … Loud and proud, right? So I'm gonna need your support on this. I am … single." She paused for an audience laugh that only half-arrived. She went on:

> I hope that you're not disappointed that there won't be a big coming-out speech tonight, because I already did my coming out about a thousand years ago, back in the Stone Age. In those very quaint days when a fragile young girl would open up to trusted friends and family and co-workers, and then gradually, proudly to everyone who knew her, to everyone she actually met.

It was a perfectly Fosterian speech: in its coyness and strange humor, in the way she had prewritten fake ad-libs to satisfy her eternal itch for overpreparedness, in the contrarian way she conceded her sexuality while asserting her right *not* to have come out in public previously. The response from the LGBTQ community was accordingly confused. Some writers congratulated her; some expressed disappointment that Foster had refused to break her silence about her sexuality until she was old enough to be accepting lifetime-achievement awards; some wondered if she had even broken her silence at all.

Lost in the debate about what she had, or hadn't, said about her sexuality was a revealing moment that came at the speech's end. It was a plea for connection, a seemingly complete turnaround for the jaded author of that 1982 *Esquire* essay, who'd resigned herself to never being fully known. "Jodie Foster was here," she said onstage. "I still am, and I want to be seen, to be understood, deeply, and to be not so very lonely."

When I asked Foster about what she'd hoped to convey when accepting the Cecil B. DeMille Award, she seemed amused that her speech had been criticized as a failed coming-out—"that I didn't do whatever it was that other people wanted me to do for them." It wasn't a coming-out speech, she said. Even in this moment of apparent self-exposure, she insisted, her message was about privacy, about the importance of allowing some parts of yourself to be exclusively yours. There, in that speech, lay the central contradiction of Foster's life—her desire to be seen, but on her own terms; her dueling impulses to connect and be left alone. "From the time I was 3, I've given everything on-screen," she said. "Everything I have to give is up there."

One sunny December morning, Foster picked me up from a friend's house in Santa Monica. She told me that she wanted to go get boba tea and buy a new pair of sneakers. I hopped in the passenger

> "THERE'S A KIND OF FREEDOM ABOUT HER NOW," ANNETTE BENING SAYS.

seat as she was removing a pair of cloth tubes from her forearms. She laughed and confessed that they were her younger son's socks; her wife, Alexandra Hedison, whom she married in 2014, had cut holes in them so that Foster could protect her arms from the sun while driving. Her younger son studies chemistry in college; the socks were printed with molecules.

Foster, 61, is slight but emphatic, quick with her hands when she talks. She has refused all forms of plastic surgery or other cosmetic alteration (she told me she'd rather have people say "Man, she looks like 20 miles of bad road" than "She hated her face, so she got plastic surgery"); for her role in *True Detective*, though, Foster agreed to laser the sunspots off her face and arms. She has spent her whole life in Southern California, but her character, Liz Danvers, lives in Alaska. No sunspots for Danvers.

True Detective is Foster's first foray into prestige television—and her first time back on TV at all in decades. Danvers is a police chief in a remote Alaskan town named Ennis who is investigating the disappearance of eight scientists from a nearby research station. The entire season unfolds in the dark: In Ennis, the sun sets on December 17 and doesn't rise again for almost two weeks. Danvers is a familiar type for Foster. She's widowed and angry, half-estranged from her teenage stepdaughter and almost compulsively caustic to the people around her. But as she read the pilot script, Foster found herself more interested in the arc of Danvers's partner on the case, an Iñupiaq woman named Evangeline Navarro played by Kali Reis. The two are adversaries after falling out over an old case that still haunts Navarro.

In the original script, López, the director, had envisioned Danvers as a softer, more sympathetic main character. Foster fought to make her an unpleasant foil to Navarro. She read the script and thought, "*This really needs to be Kali. It really needs to be her journey*," Foster said. Her Danvers is skeptical, brutal, somewhat racist, frequently an obstacle to Navarro's desire to seek justice for Indigenous women. Foster is the bigger star, but Reis's character is the hero.

After a lifetime of being solo in the frame, the lonely woman lying in a pool of fake blood, Foster found great satisfaction in playing a supporting role. López told me that Foster turned out to be very adept at it. "If what the other actor needs is for her to look down and disappear," López said, "she will do that. It's all about allowing the other one the space they need, because she needs so little."

Between takes on *True Detective*, Foster wouldn't go back to her trailer, opting instead to pop over to a couch on set and check in on her fantasy-football team. This is a passion for her; she spent several minutes enthusiastically explaining her draft picks to me. (Her team had been held back by persistent injuries to the Cincinnati Bengals quarterback Joe Burrow, to whom Foster remained devoted.) She read me jokes from the text chain of the group she plays with—"a bunch of lesbians over 60"—and offered a detailed narrative of the previous 12 months of Aaron Rodgers's career.

Despite the existential quality of our conversations—the frequency with which doubt, despair, and the threat of meaninglessness came up—Foster is consistently described by the people who work with her as lively and exuberant. "There's a kind of freedom about her now," Annette Bening told me. Kristen Stewart mentioned to me that she'd recently seen *Nyad* and found quite a bit of Foster in her portrayal of Bonnie. "Her energy is so stunning in that movie, and it really is very much like her in real life … That beautiful, comforting, warm quality of, like, 'We're just gonna laugh about it' is something she's so good at."

In one of the most memorable scenes in *Nyad*, Diana is faltering on the brutal swim from Cuba to Florida; she doesn't know where she is, and she's stopped moving forward. Bonnie jumps off the support boat into the water and urges Diana forward one stroke at a time, knowing that even if Diana is disoriented and in pain, she'll swim for her friend. This scene didn't actually happen. It was written into the film because Foster insisted on capturing the lifelong partnership between the two women. And yet it feels remarkably real—even to Bonnie Stoll herself. "I promise you, I thought it was me. I thought I was watching myself up there," Stoll told me. "I learned things about myself that I didn't know from watching her on the screen."

Bonnie's arc in *Nyad* has some of the intensity that is characteristic of Foster's roles: As she accompanies her best friend through multiple attempts to accomplish something that's probably impossible, she has to reckon with the fact that helping Diana pursue this dream might mean watching Diana die in the process. Diana is at peace with this; Bonnie is not. Bonnie also wonders whether she's given herself up too completely to her friend's quest. "What about *my* dreams?" she cries at one point. But there's a breeziness to Foster's rendition of Bonnie, too—she's funny, gruff, comfortable with who she is. She loves Diana without reservation. She's a person with a soulmate. She's arguably the only person with a soulmate Foster has ever played.

On our way to the sneaker store, Foster told me that, the previous night, she and Hedison had attended an event celebrating *Elle*'s Women in Hollywood honorees for 2023, of which Foster was one. She'd been looking around the room at the meticulously diverse group of women *Elle* had chosen to honor, and wondering to herself why she'd been included. "Finally I realized, like, halfway through; I leaned over to Alex and was like"—her voice dropped to a whisper—"I'm the old queer one!"

"How does that feel?" I asked.

Her eyes were bright. "Feels good! I think it feels good."

A few years ago, a segment of a TV interview Foster did when she was 17 started making the rounds on social media. She was at the time a famous "tomboy," with a low voice and a habit of wearing suits on the red carpet. For this interview, she's slouched in a chair wearing an oxford shirt and boot-cut jeans, an ankle crossed over one knee. The interviewer asks her if she has a steady boyfriend. Foster laughs uneasily and says, no, she doesn't have time and doesn't think about it much, but the woman presses her: "What kind of fella would you like, really?" There's a disquiet to the way the teenage Foster grins slightly, cocks one eyebrow, swallows hard. A beat passes as she considers the question, looking down. "Huh," she says. "I don't know. I suppose I would like somebody who understood my business."

When that clip resurfaced, young queer people on social media turned it into a meme. The term they coined was *gay silence*—the choice queer people make to let straight people continue believing that you're like them, that heterosexuality is the default. Gay silence is awkward and freighted. Gay silence can have an amusement about it. (It looks, for a moment, like Foster is ready to laugh in the interviewer's face.) It can indicate circumstances of tremendous pain. In all cases, it reveals a protective gap maintained between one's true self and the persona constructed for public consumption.

The meme-ification of that old clip is a type of hyper-scrutiny that Foster has been subject to her whole life. Ever since she was a kid, people have projected their own narratives onto her, their own beliefs and anxieties and desires. Who knows what Foster actually understood about her sexuality when she was 17? Maybe what we're seeing in that interview is gay silence, or maybe we're just seeing a smart kid aware of the ways that an adult is trying to manipulate her into divulging details of her underage romantic life, about which the masses can gossip, speculate, and fantasize. In a sense, it doesn't matter—the queer people posting about gay silence have chosen to hold up this clip of Foster as proof of forebears, proof that queer kids were artfully ducking questions about their presumed heterosexual future lives back in the '70s. Foster's teenage face, hesitating and deflecting, is read as affirmation of their own experience in the world and in history.

When I watched that clip again after our conversations about her thwarted lifelong desire to be understood, I thought I saw Foster struggling to represent herself in a way that was both honest and circumspect. For a person who wants to be connected to other people, and who cares about truthfully communicating the human experience, maintaining a gap between one's private and public selves can feel uncomfortable at best and excruciating at worst. Throughout our conversations, even when she was refusing to answer a question, or refusing to answer it on the record, she'd reach out and touch my arm briefly, look me in the eyes, and smile as if to reestablish that, despite the completely unnatural circumstances and the boundaries they required, we could still just be two people, talking.

Her overarching desire, she explained while hunting for a parking spot near the sneaker store, has been to push for rounded, complicated representations of women who get to be the main character of the story. "For the most part, sexuality was really either minor in the characters that I played, or demonstrated how women's sexuality was weaponized against them." She let out a little noise, spying what looked like a parking space, and swung the car to the left. "Was it all intentional on my part, picking the way that I picked?" she said. "I'm not sure. But I also knew that I just didn't want to be reduced to that"—to her identity as a woman, to her sexuality.

Unspoken here was the fact that life for out lesbians in '90s Hollywood was difficult, often impossible. Lesbians did not get to continue careers as top-earning stars of movies that were about ferocious—and straight—women who emerge victorious. They did not get to have a private life that remained off-limits. "I played the lady who got in the spaceship, and I played the lady who fought back in her court case. And I played the lady who raised the kid on her own who was a genius and who survived the attack and kicked all the asses," she said. "And I didn't play 'the wife of,' 'sister of.'"

By this point, we were in the sneaker store, which she'd been coming to for years. The salesclerk said hello and told her he remembered seeing her there shopping for her sons when they were little. She chatted with him congenially for a bit, then we wandered around taking stock. All the best sneaker designs, she told me, were in the men's section. "See? Girls have lame colors," she said, taking a sip of boba tea. I looked around for a bright-red colorway we'd just admired.

"Wait, but where are the red ones?"

She gestured over her shoulder, indignant. "There, in the boys'. The boys have bright red. Girls don't have anything good." In the end, she bought a pair of black Hokas.

Later that day, as she drove back toward Santa Monica to drop me off, I asked her what being understood means to her. What would it feel like? What would it look like? "Umm," she said, and then paused to curse herself quietly for having taken Wilshire Boulevard, which is always a mistake. She let a moment pass. "I guess being acknowledged as nuanced and complex. I was A, but I was also B. I was not just one thing." 𝒜

Jordan Kisner is a contributing writer at The Atlantic *and the author of* Thin Places: Essays From In Between.

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Cystic fibrosis once guaranteed an early death—but a medical breakthrough has given many patients a chance to live decades longer than expected.

What do they do now?

Photographs by Fumi Nagasaka

Before she started taking Trikafta, in 2019, Jenny Livingston hoped more than anything to survive long enough to see her daughter graduate from high school.

AFTER THE MIRACLE

By Sarah Zhang

They call it the Purge.

You have experienced, in a modest way, something like it in the waning days of a bad cold, when your lungs finally expel their accumulated gunk. The rattle in your chest quiets. Your sinuses clear. You smell again: the animal sweetness of your children's hair, the metallic breeze stirring a late-summer night. Your body, which oozed and groaned under the yoke of illness, is now a perfectly humming machine. Living is easy—everything is easy. How wonderful it is to breathe, simply breathe.

Imagine, though, that you had never been able to simply breathe. Imagine that mucus—thick, copious, dark—had been accumulating since the moment you were born, thwarting air and trapping microbes to fester inside your lungs. That you spent an hour each day physically pounding the mucus out of your airways, but even then, your lung function would spiral only downward, in what amounted to a long, slow asphyxiation. This was what it once meant to be born with cystic fibrosis.

Then, in the fall of 2019, a new triple combination of drugs began making its way into the hands of people with the genetic disease. Trikafta corrects the misshapen protein that causes cystic fibrosis; this molecular tweak thins mucus in the lungs so it can be coughed up easily. In a matter of hours, patients who took it began to cough—and cough and cough and cough in what they later started calling the Purge. They hacked up at work, at home, in their car, in bed at night. It's not that they were sick; if anything, it was the opposite: They were becoming well. In the days that followed, their lungs were cleansed of a tarlike mucus, and the small tasks of daily life that had been so difficult became unthinkingly easy. They ran up the stairs. They ran after their kids. They ran 10Ks. They ran marathons.

Cystic fibrosis once all but guaranteed an early death. When the disease was first identified, in the 1930s, most babies born with CF died in infancy. The next decades were a grind of incremental medical progress: A child born with CF in the '50s could expect to live until age 5. In the '70s, age 10. In the early 2000s, age 35. With Trikafta came a quantum leap. Today, those who begin taking the drug in early adolescence, a recent study projected, can expect to survive to age 82.5—an essentially normal life span.

CF was one of the first diseases to be traced to a specific gene, and Trikafta is one of the first drugs designed for a specific, inherited mutation. It is not a cure, and it doesn't work for all patients. But a substantial majority of the 40,000 Americans with CF have now lived through a miracle—a thrilling but disorienting miracle. Where they once prepared for death, they now have to prepare for life. "It's like the opposite of a terminal diagnosis," Jenny Livingston told me.

Jenny spent her 20s in and out of the hospital for CF-related lung infections. During her frequent weeks-long stays, she made some of her best friends in the CF ward, only to watch them succumb, one by one, to the disease that she knew would eventually kill her too. More than anything, she hoped to live long enough to see her daughter graduate from high school.

Today, Jenny is 36. Four years into taking Trikafta, she's the healthiest she's been in her adult life. Her daughter is 14, a lanky high-school freshman. They're both obsessed with Harry Styles, and after Jenny started on Trikafta, they flew together to see him live—twice. They learned to hunt deer with Jenny's partner, Randy. They often go up into the aspen- and fir-topped mountains that overlook their little town in central Utah. Jenny's last hospitalization—four years ago, just before she started Trikafta—is now more distant in time than her daughter's future graduation.

Having lived one life defined by cystic fibrosis, Jenny wonders: What is she going to do with her second life?

JENNY WAS BORN in 1987, the youngest of her parents' five children together and the third to have cystic fibrosis. Given the family history, the doctors knew to test her as an infant, wrapping her forearm in plastic until a sheen of sweat appeared on her skin: the classic "sweat test" for cystic fibrosis. The faulty protein in CF cannot control the balance of salt and water in the body, which results in mucus that is unusually thick and sweat that is unusually salty. In medieval Europe, centuries before anyone understood why, a proverb foretold the fate of children with salt on their skin: "Woe to the child who tastes salty from a kiss on the brow, for he is cursed and soon will die."

The 1980s, suffice it to say, were not the Middle Ages. By the time Jenny was born, her two older sisters with cystic fibrosis—Shannan, 8, and Teresa, 7—were on a strict schedule of mucus-clearing chest therapy and medications that had kept them alive past toddlerhood. Shannan wasn't diagnosed until she was 13 months old. "I knew when she was born that there was something wrong," their mother, Lisa, told me. As a newborn, Shannan projectile vomited and blew out her diapers constantly. When she got older, she was often so insatiably hungry that she would cry when a spoon scraped the bottom of a near-empty food jar. She scarfed down five pancakes at a time. In the baby photos in Lisa's scrapbook, she is all skinny legs and big, swollen belly—a classic sign of malnutrition.

Shannan *was* starving, it turned out. Food was passing through her body undigested because her pancreas had been damaged as a result of thick mucus blocking the ducts that release digestive enzymes. Cystic fibrosis was originally named, in fact, for the fibrous cysts that a 1930s pathologist saw in the pancreases of babies who had died. An early epiphany helped doctors overcome the malfunctioning pancreas, though: The missing enzymes could be replaced with pills. By the time of Shannan's diagnosis, CF was known as a disease of the lungs, in which sticky mucus made fertile ground for bacteria, and the cycle of infection and scarring, infection and scarring would eventually cause the lungs to fail.

Lisa relayed the news of Shannan's diagnosis over the phone to her husband, Tom, who was at work. As she repeated the doctor's words, their awful meaning sank in. Their daughter would not live long. They would watch her die. In that moment, the two of

them broke down on the phone, the physical distance between them collapsed by grief.

Shannan died when she was 14. "I remember the sound of her oxygen machine more than her voice," Jenny told me. The rumble and puff of the machine had run in the background of their home, punctuated by chronic coughs from all three girls with CF. But neither Teresa nor Jenny was ever as sick as Shannan was in childhood—due perhaps to chance or to being diagnosed and starting treatments earlier in life. Even when they were newborns, their mother coaxed applesauce sprinkled with enzymes into their mouth, so they could absorb nutrients from their milk.

Not long after Shannan died, Lisa and Tom divorced—their marriage had been strained even before the loss of their daughter—and they both eventually remarried. Despite the upheavals in her family, Jenny remembers her childhood as quite normal. Yes, she had to take the enzymes with every meal, and she had to clear her lungs of mucus every day—first by having her parents pound on her chest and back and later by using an oscillating vest that shook her body. As inhaled CF drugs were developed, they were added to her daily regimen. She went to the hospital for annual preventive "tune-ups," but she was never sick enough to need emergency hospitalizations, and CF did not seem to hold her back.

Lisa thinks of Jenny as her sassy daughter. Her youngest was always stubborn, always a go-getter. Through the Make-A-Wish Foundation, she was able to get a horse, which she entered in local shows and rode through the foothills just outside town. In the summer, the salt from the dried sweat on her arms became crystals that glimmered in the sun, a subtle reminder of the disease still inside her. The invincibility of youth, however, made her think she had perhaps escaped her oldest sister's fate.

At 19, Jenny married a local boy she had fallen in love with, and at 21, she was shocked to find herself pregnant: "A very, very happy surprise." She had always longed to be a mother. As a young girl, she once drew a picture proclaiming that she would grow up to have six children. The drawing "broke my heart," says her stepmother, Candy. Even if Jenny lived long enough, cystic fibrosis often causes fertility issues—in many women, thickened cervical mucus is thought to prevent pregnancy, and in almost all men, sperm ducts never develop because of blockages that occur in utero. And at the time, doctors often recommended against pregnancy for health reasons.

But Jenny pushed the worries out of her mind. She was simply happy. She set up a crib and painted the nursery. In retrospect, the fevers and shortness of breath she began to feel were not just the normal discomforts of pregnancy, but she didn't clock it then. She had an uneventful labor, and gave birth to a healthy baby girl. They named her Morgan.

The trouble started in the following months. Six weeks after giving birth, Jenny went back to work. Between nursing and soothing and diapering a newborn, she could no longer keep up her treatment routine. She sometimes also skipped medications when she couldn't afford them with the pay from her job as a bank teller and her husband's as a welder.

Then she caught a bug. It was 2009, the year of swine flu, so it could have been that or a more mundane cold, but either way, it triggered something deep in her lungs. She started feeling short of breath. By the time she got to a CF specialist at a hospital two hours away, in Salt Lake City, she could not walk from the car to the front door. She was too weak to stand for her lung-function test. She collapsed into her hospital bed, and for the next several days, she was unable to use the toilet or shower on her own. Convinced that she would die 100 miles from her three-month-old daughter, she had a terrible revelation: "This is why they said 'Don't have kids.'"

> In the hospital, 100 miles from her three-month-old daughter, Jenny had a terrible revelation: "This is why they said 'Don't have kids.'"

This was Jenny's first CF pulmonary exacerbation, when lung function plummets from an acute infection. Doctors inserted her first PICC line, a catheter that runs from the upper arm to the heart, delivers antibiotics, and stays in place longer than an IV. She recovered, but just months later, she was back in the hospital with another exacerbation. Then another and another, and on this went for the next several years. Jenny counted for me the PICC-line scars still visible as white dots on each arm—at least 10 on the left, 16 on the right. When the veins in her arms started to reject PICC lines, doctors placed a port under her right collarbone for easy access to her central vein.

Each infection scarred her lungs; each exacerbation eroded her lung function. The disease that had been a minor plot point in her life became one of its major storylines, and the people in the hospital became recurring characters. At the University of Utah's CF center, she met Warren, one of her best friends, whom she came to know so well, she could identify his cough through the hospital walls. He was "so dang funny," Jenny said, unafraid of joking about the death that would befall them both. Where she was a rule follower, he was a troublemaker. Once, he commandeered a hospital floor scrubber, waving at patients in their rooms as he drove past. Another time, he managed to procure a bootleg copy of *The Avengers*. Stuck in the hospital over the film's opening weekend, he and the other CF patients organized a movie night. James brought his Xbox to play the bootleg DVD. Heather ("the biggest Swiftie") and Angie ("gorgeous, tall blonde") joined too. They found a waiting room with a TV, and the nurses passed around microwave popcorn.

Jenny and her friends made sure to sit several feet apart. People with cystic fibrosis have had to practice social distancing

Top: *As a child, during one of her preventive "tune-ups," Jenny* (center) *passed the time in the hospital doing avocado face masks with her sister Teresa and Kara Hansen, another CF patient.* Bottom: *Jenny's daughter, Morgan, visiting her at the hospital in 2011.*

COURTESY OF JENNY LIVINGSTON

since long before COVID, because they are considered a danger to one another. Their lungs harbor destructive and often antibiotic-resistant bacteria that can become impossible to uproot once established. Certain names are spoken with an air of doom: *Burkholderia cepacia*, *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*. When doctors in the 1990s realized that people with CF were infecting and killing one another by simply gathering, they stopped allowing patients to go within several feet of one another unmasked. Camps for children with cystic fibrosis, which Jenny still remembers fondly, were all shut down. In the hospital, she once again found a community in the disease that was taking over her life. But many of those friendships ended too soon: Of the five people at the *Avengers* movie night, Jenny is the only one alive today. Warren, James, Heather, and Angie have all died.

As Jenny struggled with her health, the new reality of chronic illness took a toll on her marriage. She and her husband eventually divorced. After a particularly harrowing hospitalization in 2012, her doctors encouraged her to stop working and go on disability. Something in her life had to give, they told her, or it would be her body. Her disease and her daughter became her whole world.

Even as a young child, Morgan could sense when her mom was heading toward another exacerbation. If she noticed that Jenny was more tired than usual or coughing more than usual, she began to dread their coming separation. When she was 3 years old, she asked, "Do all mommies live in the hospital sometimes?" When she was 6, after Warren's death, she asked, "Can you die from CF?" She understood that their existence together was fragile.

Jenny answered truthfully: Yes. But she assured her daughter that she was taking care of herself as best she could. Still, she made plans for what was probably inevitable. If she died, her daughter would live with her aunt and uncle. If she died, she wanted a funeral just like Warren's, with music, candy, and an open mic for everyone to share their favorite memories.

A CURE FOR cystic fibrosis had supposedly been imminent since 1989, when Jenny turned 2. That year, scientists identified the recessive gene behind cystic fibrosis, which encodes a protein called CFTR that controls the flow of salt and water. The discovery seemed so explosive that a Reuters reporter rushed to publish the scoop more than two weeks before the scientific papers were due to come out; two press conferences followed.

In the decades after, however, researchers came to understand the wide gulf between identifying a genetic problem and knowing how to solve it. Early attempts in the '90s at using gene therapy to fix mutations failed again and again, both for CF and for other genetic conditions that once seemed tantalizingly close to a cure.

Then, CF researchers changed tack: Instead of correcting the gene, why not correct the mutated protein itself with small fixer molecules? This had never been done before—with any disease—but the nonprofit Cystic Fibrosis Foundation deemed the strategy promising enough to strike an unusual venture-philanthropy agreement with a company that would attempt it, which was eventually bought by Vertex Pharmaceuticals. The foundation funded the research in return for a share of the revenue.

The move paid off. In 2012, Vertex released a drug called Kalydeco that worked stunningly well—improving lung function

and erasing many symptoms in the small group of CF patients who could take it. That was the catch: The FDA approved Kalydeco only for the roughly 4 percent of people with CF who carried a rare and specific mutation. Still, it provided a jolt of optimism. Kalydeco was the first drug ever tailored to a person's inherited genetic mutation, and the breakthrough portended a new age of "personalized medicine." It also inspired other patient-advocacy groups to copy the venture-philanthropy model. In 2014, the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation sold the rights to royalties from Kalydeco and future Vertex CF drugs for $3.3 billion, which it could invest in new research.

After Kalydeco, the next CF mutation to target was obvious. About 1,700 unique mutations have been found in people with CF, but some 90 percent of patients—including Jenny—carry at least one copy of a mutation, known as F508del, that leaves their protein channels too seriously distorted for Kalydeco alone to correct. Fixing this shape would be a much bigger task. In 2013, Jenny joined the clinical trial for a two-drug combination from Vertex, made up of Kalydeco plus a second fixer molecule. It failed to especially improve her symptoms, though it did work enough to stabilize her falling lung function. "It seemed to push pause," she said. She stopped getting sicker, but she was still sick. The research went on.

A few years later, word began spreading of a forthcoming three-drug combination from Vertex. In clinical trials, neither patients nor doctors are told who is on the placebo and who is on the experimental drug. But in this trial, everyone could tell. The triple combo made patients' lung function jump by a shocking 10 percentage points. Overnight, they woke up smelling for the first time the distinctive scent of their home. They could even taste their sweat becoming less salty. This was Trikafta.

In the fall of 2019, Trikafta was approved by the FDA just 10 days before a large annual gathering of CF experts in Nashville. Doctors who attended told me the atmosphere was electric. Jenny happened to be there to speak on an unrelated panel, and she remembers seeing the geneticist Francis Collins walk onstage with a guitar. Collins is best known as the longtime director of the National Institutes of Health, where he oversaw the sequencing of the human genome in the '90s (he has since retired from the NIH). But he had made his name in 1989 as one of the scientists who discovered the gene for cystic fibrosis.

In those long years when progress was halting, Collins, who is also an amateur musician, wrote a song to inspire a gathering of CF researchers. He sang "Dare to Dream" again that day in Nashville, his baritone raspier with age. When he got to the verse that he had rewritten for this occasion—"That triple treatment has taken 30 years"—cheers broke out in the convention center. In the crowd were people who had waited their whole career, even their whole life, for this moment. *We dare to dream, dare to dream.* As they swayed to the music, perhaps no one quite understood the magnitude and velocity of the change to come.

JENNY RECEIVED HER first box of Trikafta on November 17, 2019, at the end of yet another two-week hospital stay. She had gotten sick again in Nashville. Actually, she had been fighting off a cold before she left, and despite assiduously staying in her hotel room to keep up her treatment routine, she felt an infection settling into her lungs. At the conference, she heard a lot about Trikafta, but she didn't expect to get it so quickly. CF centers were being inundated with calls from patients asking for the new drug.

In the hospital in Utah, she recorded a video that she sent to her sister with CF, Teresa, who now lived in Ohio. She is sitting on her hospital bed. "My Trikafta is here," she says, her voice shaking and her eyes tearing up. The miracle drug she had been promised her whole life was now in her hands.

Teresa was also able to start the drug not long after. For her, Trikafta's impact was immediate and unmistakable. The Purge started on the drive back from the doctor's visit where she took the first dose. The mucus coming up was so thin that she was confused; it was nothing like the sticky gunk she'd had to work so hard to cough up. A month later, she went back for a sweat test, and her salt level was normal. Based on the results, you would not know she had cystic fibrosis.

"I think of it like, 'Oh, back when I used to have CF,'" Teresa said on a recent call with Jenny and me. "I don't feel like I have CF. I feel completely normal." She has been able to stop using her vest and inhaled medications, freeing up that time for her adopted children and the farm where she lives with her family. Before Trikafta, every small exertion was a negotiation with her lungs. Should she go upstairs? How many breaths would that take? Now she's running around milking the goats, trimming their hooves, throwing 30 bales of hay into the barn.

On that same call, the sisters got to talking about an upcoming trip to see their grandmother, and Teresa asked Jenny a question that would have been inconceivable before Trikafta: Could they stay in the same hotel room? To avoid infecting each other with the bacteria in their lungs, the two had not shared a room since Teresa left Utah 15 years earlier. At family gatherings, they kept their distance. They didn't even touch the same serving utensils, sending their partners to get their food. Now, Jenny told her sister, "I would totally stay in the same hotel room."

When Jenny started Trikafta, it took her longer than it took Teresa to notice much change. She didn't have the dramatic capital-*P* Purge because, she thinks, the hospitalization had already temporarily cleared her lungs. But two months after she started the drug, when a snowstorm blanketed their town, her family drove out to their favorite sledding hill. Jenny had never liked sledding; she would stand in the cold while everyone else ran around having fun, their easy breaths turning into white puffs in the air. This time, her nephew called out and she jogged over.

It wasn't until she got to him that she realized she had jogged *up*—all the way to the top of the hill. "I don't run, and I don't climb hills. And I just ran up a hill and felt super fine," she says in a video she took right after. "I'm going to see if I can do it again. Ready?"

"Yes," her daughter, Morgan, answers next to her. They take off. "Mom!" Morgan shouts a few seconds later, as the distance between them grows larger. "You're beating me, Mom!" At the top of the hill, Jenny looks back to see Morgan still catching up.

Jenny went down the hill and ran back up again, simply to prove that she could. "At one point, I just plopped up here on my bum and cried," she told me during my visit in October, pointing

to the spot on the hill where it had all hit her. In front of us, big gray mountains jutted into the blue sky. The sledding hill, she admitted, did not look that impressive. But for all of Morgan's life, Jenny had been on the sidelines. She'd watch as Morgan swam in the lake or rode her bike, her low-grade fever making her too tired to join. That day on the hill, they finally ran together.

From there, Jenny began noticing changes in her body, big and small. The tips of her fingers, which had always been slightly swollen and round—a sign of low oxygen—thinned out as her lungs improved. She didn't need as many enzyme pills to digest her meals. Her chronic cough disappeared. She hadn't realized how much she had always suppressed her laughter to avoid triggering her cough. Now she can laugh—big belly laughs that match the warmth of her personality. "Oh my gosh, my laugh drives her crazy," she told me in the car, laughing, after picking up Morgan from school. "That's because you laugh at stuff that's not funny," her daughter shot back. Jenny laughed again.

TRIKAFTA HAD EFFECTS that even doctors did not anticipate. In the months after the drugs became widely available, some patients unexpectedly got pregnant; the drug that thins lung mucus, it turns out, also thins cervical mucus. Then, patients started *trying* to get pregnant. The drug made many people with CF feel so healthy that they no longer worried about the physical toll of pregnancy and parenthood or the agony of leaving behind young children. Doctors began speaking of a Trikafta baby boom.

Doors opened to other once-impossible futures. A 22-year-old told me he decided to train as an aircraft mechanic, a job that would have been far too physically demanding when he was being hospitalized multiple times a year. One woman started dating. "I don't want to fall in love with somebody, knowing that I'm not going to be around very long," she had thought. Now she and her boyfriend have been together for four years. A father who was being evaluated for a lung transplant before Trikafta felt healthy enough to spend the summer of 2020 tearing down and rebuilding his family's deck, and now expects his CF lungs to see him through graduations and grandkids.

Trikafta is a lifelong medication, and it is not meant to undo organ damage that has already occurred. But the earlier treatment begins, the healthier one stays. A handful of pregnant women have now used Trikafta to treat their unborn children with cystic fibrosis. Last fall, I corresponded with one such expecting mother, who does not have CF but whose son was diagnosed by genetic testing. She started Trikafta at 26 weeks. When her son was born in October, his lungs and pancreas were perfectly healthy.

Cystic-fibrosis patients who start taking Trikafta as babies may never experience the physical ravages of the disease.

Officially, Trikafta is approved in the U.S. for patients as young as 2. Unofficially, some parents give their newborns Trikafta, either indirectly through breast milk or directly by grinding up the pills into tiny doses. So long as they stay on the medication, these children may never experience any of the physical ravages of the disease. Recently, Make-A-Wish announced that children with CF would no longer automatically be eligible for the program, because "life-changing advances" had radically improved the outlook for them.

CF centers these days are unusually quiet. Fewer patients need once-routine weeks-long hospitalizations. Instead of thinking about lung function, more and more are worrying about the maladies that come with middle and old age—colon cancer, high cholesterol, heart disease. Obesity has been a confounding new issue. Before Trikafta, patients were usually underweight, and they were told to cram as many calories in as possible, by whatever means possible. Every additional pound was a small victory. One patient described microwaving pints of Ben & Jerry's to drink mixed with heavy cream; when even that failed to make her gain weight, she got a feeding tube. Now people on Trikafta worry about getting too many calories.

In February, Vertex announced the results of a clinical trial for a next-generation triple-combination therapy, which may be even more effective than Trikafta. All of these changes have made for an existential moment for doctors, too: The disease they were trained to treat is no longer the disease most of their patients have.

DOCTORS TOLD ME they could think of only one other comparable breakthrough in recent memory: the arrival of powerful HIV drugs in the 1990s. Like Trikafta, those drugs were not a cure, but they transformed AIDS from a terminal illness into a manageable chronic one. Young men got up from their deathbed, newly strong and hale. AIDS hospices emptied—and then went bankrupt.

This was a remarkable turn of events. But it elicited a complicated mix of emotions, not all of them joyful. Some patients who were no longer dying grew depressed, anxious, and even suicidal at the thought of living. This phenomenon became known as "Lazarus syndrome."

Death is an end, after all. Life comes with problems: Patients who spent lavishly during what were supposed to be their last days now had no money to live on. Those who stayed with a lover in sickness found that they could not actually stand them in health. They fretted about insurance and paperwork and chores, everyday annoyances that would no longer be obliterated by imminent death. In 1996, the writer Andrew Sullivan, who is HIV-positive, described life after the advent of the HIV drugs in his essay "When Plagues End":

FUMI NAGASAKA FOR *THE ATLANTIC*

Though Trikafta has dramatically improved Jenny's CF symptoms, she still uses a vest and inhaled treatments to prevent lung infections and other complications from the disease.

> When you have spent several years girding yourself for the possibility of death, it is not so easy to gird yourself instead for the possibility of life. What you expect to greet with the euphoria of victory comes instead like the slow withdrawal of an excuse. And you resist it.
>
> The intensity with which you had learned to approach each day turns into a banality, a banality that refuses to understand or even appreciate the experience you have just gone through.

Jenny and Morgan often go up into the aspen- and fir-topped mountains that overlook their town in central Utah. Two months after Jenny began taking Trikafta, she found that she was able to run up a local sledding hill for the first time.

FUMI NAGASAKA FOR *THE ATLANTIC*

For some HIV patients, their reversal of fortune seemed unreal. "He doesn't trust what's happening to him," one doctor said about a patient who had made a dramatic recovery, yet found himself in psychological distress.

Doubts like these crept into the minds of many people on Trikafta, too. What if the new drug stopped working? Or had horrible side effects? Or stopped being covered by insurance? Trikafta's sticker price is more than $300,000 a year. Insurance typically covers most of that cost—minus what can be significant co-pays and deductibles—and Vertex offers co-pay assistance. But patients' lives ultimately depend on decisions made by nameless bureaucrats in rooms far away: Insurance plans can suddenly change what they cover, and in 2022, Vertex announced that it would substantially reduce its financial assistance.

A 43-year-old woman I interviewed asked not to be named, because she feared that speaking about her improved health would cause her to lose disability benefits, which would also get her kicked off the government insurance that pays for Trikafta. Her health has not improved as dramatically as others' has, and she still has frequent infections and occasional bleeding in her lungs. If she returns to work but her health declines, it could take a long time to get back on disability—time she would have to go without Trikafta. She would also need a job with health insurance good enough to cover the expensive drug—but could she even get one as a 40-something with no recent employment history?

For other patients, new health granted new independence, which could be scary too. As a child, Patrick Allen Brown was sick enough to miss long stretches of school. His parents didn't expect him to do chores, let alone support himself with a job one day. So much of his life was spent in the hospital that movies became his way of understanding the outside world. In his teens and 20s, he drank heavily.

After Trikafta restored Brown's physical health, he was no longer a chronically ill adult who lived with his parents. He was a pretty healthy adult who still lived with his parents. He was 32, and hadn't finished college. Now he had to budget, commit to a career. He decided to get sober. When one of his parents needed back surgery recently, their roles flipped: He became the caretaker. Brown has now graduated from culinary school and found work as a chef, but he feels as if he is still catching up to his peers.

The great blossoming of possibilities on Trikafta also dredged up regret about decisions too late to undo. Kara Hansen, 41, has a daughter who was adopted, and she had always wanted another child. But in 2016, she had to be repeatedly hospitalized: in April, then again in May, July, and August. She gave up on having a second child—how could she, if she couldn't even guarantee living for the daughter she already had? Then, in 2018, she joined the original trial for Trikafta, becoming one of the first people in the world to experience its miraculous effects. If she had known her health would improve so dramatically and hold steady six years on, she would have tried to get pregnant, but she feels like it's too late now. To plan for such a miracle would have been foolish, but to live in its unexpected aftermath can still be painful.

AFTER A YEAR on Trikafta, Jenny told Teresa something that she acknowledged sounded "insane" but that her sister understood immediately: "To no longer be actively dying kind of sucks," she said. The certainty of dying young, she realized, had been a security blanket. She'd never worried about retirement, menopause, or the loneliness of outliving a parent or a partner.

Cystic fibrosis had defined her adult life. Now what? For so long, she'd just been trying to see her daughter graduate from high school. Now she faced seeing Morgan go off and live her own life. What then? Jenny had become active in patient advocacy, and soon after the start of the pandemic, she volunteered to moderate an online patient forum on mental health for her CF center in Utah. It went so well that her longtime social worker at the center felt compelled to give some career advice: Try social work.

Jenny enrolled in an online master's program in 2022, and this past fall she chose a practicum with a hospice agency. Having watched the death of so many friends and contemplated her own, she felt prepared to shepherd people through the sadness and awkwardness and even humor that accompany the end of life. She understood, too, the small dignities that mean the world when your body is no longer up to the task of living. One hospice patient, she noticed, often had trouble understanding conversations because his hearing aids were never charged correctly. She got the situation fixed, and on a recent visit, he wanted to listen to music, playing for her the favorite songs of his youth. On another man's shelf, she recognized a birding book, and she made plans for a window feeder to bring birds to him.

Jenny doesn't share the details of her life with patients, but in their experiences with death, she has seen her own refracted. One hospice patient, a devout elderly woman, was estranged from her adult son, who no longer believed. Jenny herself grew up religious—Mormon, in her case—but she is not anymore. Her family is still Mormon, as is virtually everyone in the town she has lived in since childhood, which has 3,500 people, several Mormon churches, and a Mormon temple. She is liberal, whereas most of her relatives voted for Donald Trump.

Still, Jenny has made a point of staying close to her large, tight-knit family. Knowing she would die young had long ago clarified that she wanted to leave with no regrets, no grudges, and no words left unsaid to the people she loved. In the foothills outside town one day, she pointed in the direction of her house, her brother's house, her mom's house, her dad and stepmom's house, all minutes away from one another.

ALTHOUGH TRIKAFTA LOOKS to be a very safe drug for most people, it does have side effects. It can cause cataracts as well as liver injury. More perplexing, Trikafta may affect the brain.

For Jenny, starting Trikafta coincided with a wave of intense insomnia, brain fog, and anxiety. For months, she could sleep only two or three hours a night. She'd lose her phone and find it in the freezer. Her lungs were so much healthier, but her brain was going haywire. Soon, she realized that other CF patients had begun sharing stories online of depression, anger, or suicidal thoughts that emerged at the same time they started taking Trikafta.

Doctors sometimes chalked up these symptoms to the existential unease of no longer dying, or the fear and isolation everyone felt in the early days of the pandemic. But Jenny's doctor took the side effects she reported seriously enough to suggest that she halve her Trikafta dose, and soon after, they subsided. (Some of her CF symptoms did return, but they were muted enough that she could pare down her regimen of treatments.)

The link between Trikafta and these symptoms in the brain is still not fully proven or understood. "We've done an in-depth analysis of the preclinical data, clinical data, and real-world-evidence data, and we don't find any causal relationship," Fred Van Goor, a vice president and the head of CF research at Vertex, told me in January. And an analysis co-authored by the company's scientists last year found similar rates of depression and suicidality in CF patients with or without Trikafta. But in November, a group of scientists published a review arguing that the possible neuropsychiatric effects of Trikafta deserved a "serious research effort." The protein behind CF is found in cells throughout the body, including the brain. Trikafta could be acting on the brain directly, the authors hypothesized, or it could be acting indirectly via changes to inflammation throughout the body or specifically in the gut. The drug may affect different subsets of patients differently, says Anna Georgiopoulos, a psychiatrist at Massachusetts General Hospital who co-authored the review. She believes that neuropsychiatric side effects afflict only a "small minority" of people on Trikafta, but says that studies are needed to know exactly how many.

In the meantime, some patients have quit Trikafta altogether, their neuropsychiatric symptoms too debilitating even on a lower dose. "Physically I was feeling the best I've ever felt," says Aimee Lecointre of her time on the drug, but mentally, "I felt on the verge of a panic attack almost every day." The contradiction confused her: How could she be so anxious and depressed when her health was getting so much better? When she finally decided to try stopping Trikafta, the nervous energy that had filled her body all day long

dissipated. But her CF symptoms came back. During our phone conversation, she paused every few minutes to cough.

She and Jenny have known each other for years, going back to their mutual hospitalizations. The three of us were supposed to meet over apple-cider floats when I was in Utah, but Lecointre had health issues come up at the last minute, the kind of disruption that happens all the time for people with a chronic illness. For a while, her Instagram feed filled with people on Trikafta whose lives were transforming while hers stayed the same; she had to delete social media from her phone. She still feels sad, sometimes, that Trikafta didn't work out for her. But she was able to go back to one of Vertex's two-drug combos, and although it is less effective than Trikafta, she feels so much better. There is more to cope with, but the coping is easier.

FOR ANOTHER GROUP of CF patients, Trikafta simply does not work. About 10 percent lack the F508del mutation that the triple combination was specifically designed to fix. Over time, though, scientists have found that some less common mutations are similar enough to F508del that those who carry them still benefit from Trikafta. And in late 2020, word got out that the FDA would soon approve the drug for additional mutations.

Gina Ruiz remembers waiting and waiting for the list of new mutations that fall. She had spent the past year watching her peers on Trikafta be handed what she thought of as a "reverse Uno card"—reverse weight loss, reverse lung decline, reverse CF—while her own health continued to worsen. She was sitting in a car when she saw the list, and she scrolled through the 177 new mutations hoping to find hers. She was crushed when she did not. Ruiz and most people in the 10 percent have mutations that leave their CFTR protein too garbled or incomplete to correct with any combination of fixer molecules. Treating these mutations will require a different strategy altogether.

The Cystic Fibrosis Foundation continues to fund research into a cure for all, and scientists, including those at Vertex, are once again exploring genetic therapies, applying the lessons of past failures. But a genetic-therapy breakthrough specific to CF is still years, if not decades, away. After Vertex created that first drug for the 4 percent, the path toward Trikafta was clear. After Trikafta, terra incognita.

Ruiz is wary of getting her hopes up again. At age 29, she can no longer work. She lives with her parents. Her lung function has fallen to 30 percent. And in December, her weight reached a new low of 89 pounds. "I went to Target last night and I was beyond exhausted," she told me the following month. Her knees hurt too, another complication of CF. As she's watched her peers on Trikafta get married and chase after toddlers, her own world has shrunk. Halfway through the store, she got so tired that she had to rest in a chair in the home-goods section before she could go on.

Other patients with rare mutations told me the CF communities they once relied on for support have become quiet, as the 90 percent have gotten on with their lives. "It's extremely isolating," says Steph Hansen, who was steeling herself for another hospitalization when we spoke in January. She describes it as a one-two punch: Her health is no better, yet she has lost the community that once buoyed her. She's connected with a handful of other patients who can't take Trikafta, but CF is already a rare disease, and they are the rarest of the rare.

The F508del mutation is most common in people of European ancestry, so people with mutations ineligible for Trikafta in the U.S. are disproportionately Black or Latino. Globally, the proportion of people ineligible is higher in Latin America, Asia, and Africa, where diagnosis and treatment for CF also lag. In most developing countries, even eligible patients cannot get Trikafta—because Vertex currently does not sell its expensive drug outside a few dozen countries, concentrated in Europe and the English-speaking world. (Vertex says it has a pilot program that "provides Trikafta at no cost to people with CF in certain lower income countries.") Its patents also block other companies from making a cheaper generic version. In early 2023, activists asked four countries to revoke or suspend patents for Trikafta in a coordinated campaign. One of the countries was India, where *The New York Times* wrote about a father named Seshagiri Buddana. His son would have been able to take Trikafta if he lived in the U.S., but he died in December 2022 one day before he would have turned 9.

All of this weighs on Jenny. What makes her different from those who have died, other than the luck of being born at the right time, in the right place, with the right mutations?

TWO DAYS AFTER my visit to Utah, Jenny's father, Tom, had a heart attack while chopping firewood. He felt short of breath, and a trip to the hospital revealed that his major arteries were 90 percent blocked.

When Jenny texted me the news, she said she had been replaying our recent conversations about life and death. She was glad to feel, upon learning her father might die, that nothing between the two of them was left unsaid or unresolved. I thought of what Tom had told me in his living room. Before we had gone over to his house that day, Jenny had warned me that her dad was a jokester, not a man prone to earnest reflection. But when the conversation shifted to the impact of Trikafta, he turned to me, completely serious. "I was going to bury my kids. And I'm not. They get to bury me, which is the way it's supposed to be."

Jenny has made a point of staying close to her large, tight-knit family; knowing she would die young clarified that she wanted to leave without any grudges.

FUMI NAGASAKA FOR *THE ATLANTIC*

We all fell silent for a moment, as we felt the weight he had been carrying all those years. After burying his eldest daughter at 14, Tom could no longer watch movies in which children die. In Jenny's years of sickness, he had often driven her two hours to the hospital in Salt Lake City, but he rarely set foot inside. Hospitals are places where people go to be born or to die, he'd say, and all my children have already been born.

After his heart attack, Tom needed an emergency quintuple-bypass surgery. He did well, and came home to recover. He spent the time rethinking his priorities. Just before falling ill, he had skipped a family outing to an amusement park to work. Now he regretted it. He's become more open about his emotions; still a jokester, he's taken to saying that his heart has been opened in more ways than one since the surgery.

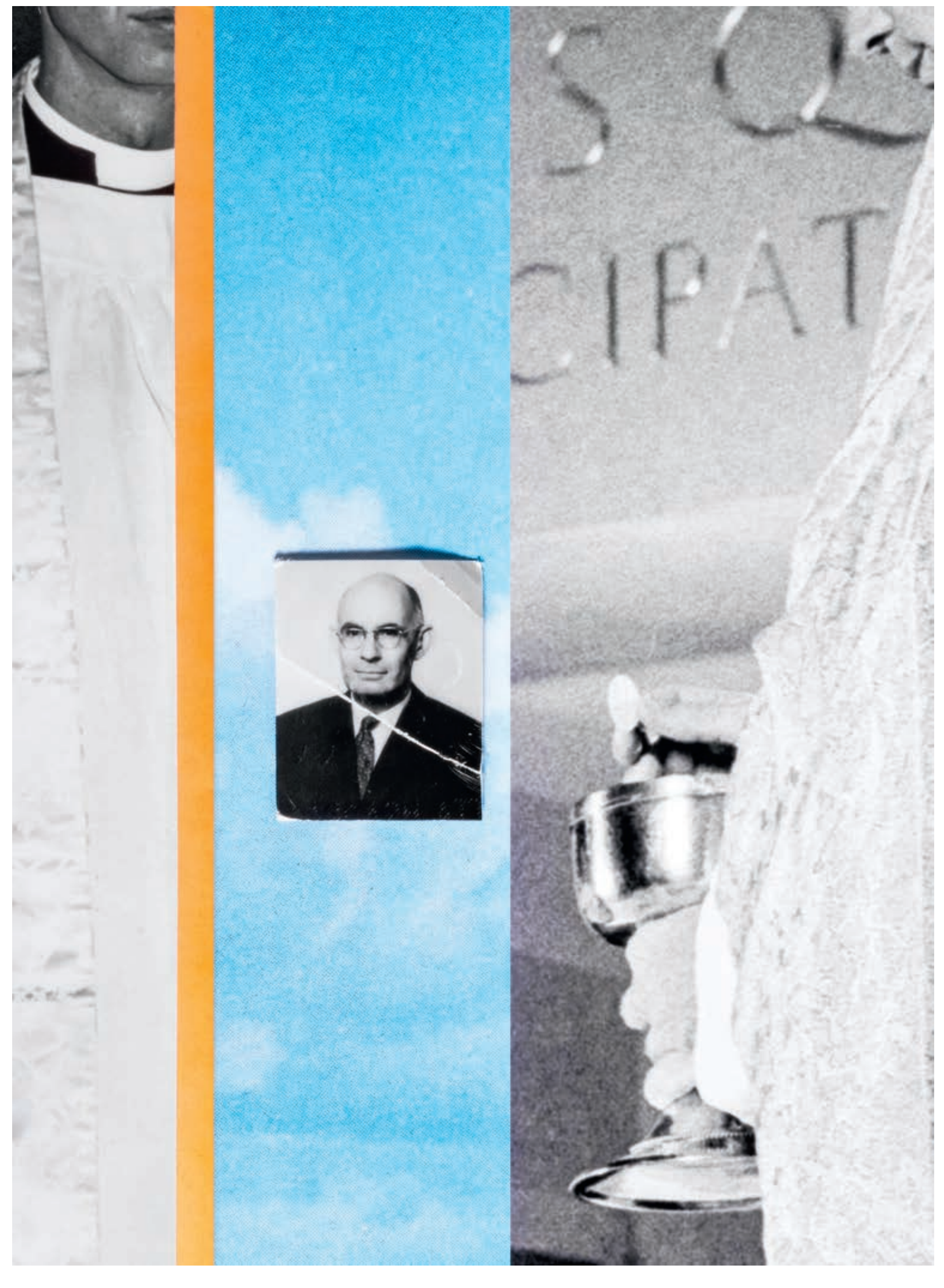
It's interesting, Jenny says. Her father has lived a longer and very different life from her own, but she recognizes what he is going through. People die from this, he started saying. *I* could have died from this. He got close enough to see death's shadow, only to be pulled back to a life whose familiarity suddenly felt unfamiliar. What would he do with his unexpected life? "Hey," Jenny told her dad. "I get it." *A*

Sarah Zhang is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

THE SECRET GOSPEL

A Columbia history professor claimed that he discovered a sacred text with shocking details about the life of Jesus. Was it real?

BY ARIEL SABAR



Morton Smith was a professor at Columbia when he found what he said was a lost gospel in a monastery outside Jerusalem.

PHOTO-ILLUSTRATIONS BY PACIFICO SILANO

I

In the summer of 1958, Morton Smith, a newly hired Columbia University historian, traveled to an ancient monastery outside Jerusalem. In its library, he found what he said was a lost gospel. His announcement made international headlines. Scholars of the Bible would spend years debating the discovery's significance for the history of Christianity. But in 1975, one of Smith's colleagues went public with an extraordinary suggestion: The gospel was a fake. Its forger, the colleague believed, was Smith himself.

The manuscript, in handwritten Greek, ran two and a half pages, but one passage drew outsize attention. It depicted Jesus spending the night with a young man he'd raised from the dead. "The youth, looking upon [Jesus], loved him and began to beseech him that he might be with him," it read. "And after six days Jesus told him what to do and in the evening the youth comes to him, wearing a linen cloth over his naked body. And he remained with him that night, for Jesus taught him the mystery of the kingdom of God."

To devout Christians, the homoerotic subtext was obvious blasphemy. But Smith argued the opposite: His discovery, he believed, was part of an unknown, longer version of the Gospel of Mark, containing lost stories from about 50 C.E., making them the oldest known account of Jesus's life—and, in Smith's view, the truest.

Smith theorized that "Secret Mark," as the text came to be called, portrayed a private baptism that Jesus reserved for his closest disciples: One by one and at night, he contended, Jesus hypnotized male followers into believing they'd risen to heaven and been freed from the laws of Moses. Smith argued that Jesus and his initiates may have concluded this liberation with a sexual act—a "completion of the spiritual union by physical union."

Smith knew that orthodox believers would wholly reject his claims. To suggest that the central figure of Christianity—by tradition celibate—used gay sex as a path to God was an outrage. His academic colleagues were only slightly less aghast, but they couldn't fully dismiss him. By the time Smith published his find—in a 454-page volume from Harvard University Press, with deeply erudite footnotes and appendixes, and in a popular book called *The Secret Gospel*—he'd been tenured by Columbia and Secret Mark had made the front page of *The New York Times*. Several major scholars had accepted the text as genuine.

None, however, bought Smith's intimations of a gay Jesus, and almost none thought the text originated in the first century. They called his exegesis "science fiction," "awash in speculation," and "simply absurd."

But a theologian named Quentin Quesnell went further: He believed that Smith had fabricated Secret Mark, as a "game," to expose his field's enormous blind spots. So little is known about the historical Jesus that one could paint "bizarre and scandalous" portraits of him, Quesnell wrote, without contradicting any of the established facts.

Peter Jeffery, a Princeton professor emeritus and MacArthur-genius-grant recipient, called Smith's alleged forgery of Secret Mark "the most grandiose and reticulated 'Fuck You' ever perpetrated in the long and vituperative history of scholarship."

Still, the debate over whether the manuscript is a fake—and Smith its forger—remains unsettled, and one of the bitterest in biblical studies. Over the past 50 years, it has inspired at least two conferences, seven scholarly books, and dozens of academic articles. Experts have scrutinized the manuscript's language and the handwriting. They've compared it with authentic variants of Mark. They've puzzled over why no one before Smith—not even the early bishops who made exhaustive lists of heretical texts—had ever mentioned Secret Mark.

One subject, however, has gone almost completely unexamined: Smith's life outside the university. In the summer of 1991, several weeks after turning 76, Smith got a call from his friend Lee Avdoyan, an academic librarian whose Ph.D. Smith had supervised. Avdoyan was planning a trip to New York. He'd just finished writing a book and was eager for Smith's feedback on some new research ideas. He also wanted Smith to meet his partner, Jim.

But Smith, whose health was declining, said he wasn't up for a visit. He urged Avdoyan to forget research and to go into the world, have fun, live his life with Jim. "I have so many regrets," Smith said.

Avdoyan, who'd come out years earlier, had long suspected that Smith was gay too. Had Smith realized only now how much of life he'd missed? He didn't say, and Avdoyan didn't press.

A week later, on July 11, 1991, two Columbia colleagues entered Smith's Upper West Side apartment and found him dead. Beside Smith's body were a bottle of vodka and a glass flecked with the powdery residue of what appeared to be pills. A plastic bag covered his head, its opening cinched around his neck; the New York City medical examiner's office told me it ruled Smith's death a suicide by asphyxiation. Smith's will ordered his personal papers destroyed—"at once without being read."

OUTWARDLY, MORTON SMITH had been a proper, almost Victorian gentleman. Trim and prematurely bald, he spoke with a patrician accent, had a stiff gait, and wore three-piece suits, a Phi Beta Kappa key glinting from his vest pocket. His politics were similarly conservative. Yet when it came to religion, Smith was, in a colleague's description, like "a little boy whose goal in life is to write curse words all over the altar in church, and then get caught."

Smith had denied the forgery allegations but had relished—and stoked—the controversy. A provocateur who saw himself as an intellectual giant in a field of pious fools, he had for years sought opportunities to humiliate colleagues who promoted faith under the cover of scholarship. His caustic takedowns of their work, in prestigious journals and in face-to-face bullying at conferences, made him especially intimidating. He was "the kind of critic," the Princeton professor Anthony Grafton once noted, "who makes grown

PREVIOUS PAGE: GENERAL SYNOD ARCHIVES, ANGLICAN CHURCH OF CANADA; THOMAS ALWOOD; THREE LIONS / GETTY

scholars tear off their own heads for fear of reading his reviews."

Smith cast the forgery claims as one more symptom of his field's parochialism. "One should not suppose a text spurious," he wrote, "simply because one dislikes what it says." But Smith's zealotry for his own reading of Secret Mark made colleagues wonder whether *his* stakes might also be more than academic.

Smith struck most people as a wry atheist. But before becoming a professor, at age 35, he had spent four years as a parish priest. Before turning the full force of his intellect against the dupes who believed in God, that is, Smith had, in a sense, been one of them.

Scholars who knew him well suspect that whatever triggered his break with the Church was the key to understanding his life and work, even if—perhaps especially if—Smith never spoke of it. The historian Albert Baumgarten, who was one of Smith's first doctoral students at Columbia, believes that "something took place in Smith's life that shook his certainty."

Smith's literary executor, the Harvard religion scholar Shaye Cohen, told me that he'd never ruled out the possibility of a "secret Morton," a part of his past he'd hidden from even his closest colleagues.

Was there a secret Morton? I began my search with a visit to a pair of Texas scholars who had a new theory about Secret Mark. Not because their theory was fully convincing—it wasn't—but because their analysis of the text pointed to why Secret Mark might be something other than early Christian scripture.

BRENT LANDAU WAS teaching a religion seminar at the University of Texas at Austin in 2019 when he invited his colleague Geoffrey Smith to the class's discussion of Secret Mark. The conversation inspired them to reexamine the evidence, a project that culminated in their 2023 book, *The Secret Gospel of Mark*.

Both men felt that the debate over the manuscript's authenticity had become unmoored, an emotional proxy for broader fights among historians of Christianity. On one side were conservatives who saw the Church-authorized collection of Christian books—the New Testament—as divinely inspired. On the other were generally liberal scholars, who gave equal—or greater—historical weight to early Christian texts outside the New Testament canon.

As if to sell Secret Mark to their conservative colleagues—and help prove it authentic—liberals tended to deny the text's sensuality. Its homoeroticism, many claimed, was nothing more than Morton Smith's misreading. But to Landau and Geoffrey Smith, there was no escaping it: The text depicts Jesus spending the night with a desperate, lovestruck young man.

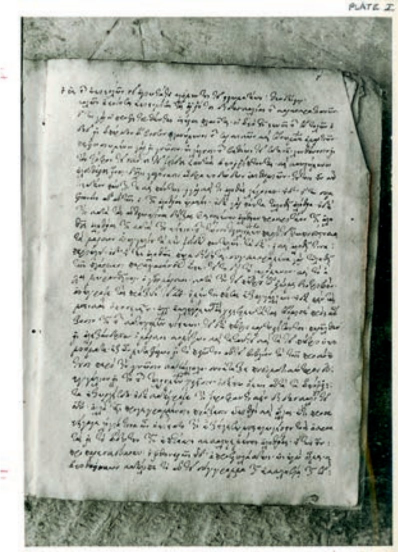
The circumstances of the discovery were admittedly complicated. What Morton Smith claimed to find at the monastery wasn't some first edition of Secret Mark on papyrus. It was a copy of a letter that *quotes* Secret Mark. The letter's author appeared to be the second-century Church father Clement of Alexandria. It had been transcribed, in an 18th-century Greek hand, onto the end pages of a printed 17th-century book. Smith had discovered those end pages, he said, while cataloging books in the monastery's library.

Addressed to an unknown man named Theodore, the letter calls out Secret Mark's sexual innuendo. Some early Christians may have seen the gospel as portraying "naked man with naked man," Clement writes, but Clement condemns such views as false and "utterly shameless."

Morton Smith gave them more credit. In a baffling passage in the Christian Bible's Gospel of Mark, he noted, a nameless young man drops his linen garment and "flees naked" when Jesus is arrested at night in Gethsemane. If you spliced Secret Mark into canonical Mark, Morton Smith thought, you had an explanation: Jesus and his young follower had been caught in the act.

Brent Landau and Geoffrey Smith, the Texas scholars, immersed themselves in

Smith claimed to have found a copy of a letter from Clement of Alexandria that quotes a "secret" version of the Gospel of Mark. The manuscript was handwritten in Greek.



JEWISH THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY ARCHIVE LIBRARY

Mar Saba, the Greek Orthodox monastery where Smith said he found Secret Mark

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early Christian literature—looking at word choices, storylines, theological debates—to see where Secret Mark might fit. They concluded that it didn't. It appeared, Landau told me, "as if somebody had gone through the Gospels and found all these instances where Jesus seemed to be in some sort of intimate or erotic relationship," then "meshed them all together."

A possibly larger problem was that the letter of "Clement" appeared to crib distinctive language from a Church history composed a century *after* Clement's death. "Anyone who has ever caught a clever student cheating on an essay or during an exam will find the pattern familiar," Smith and Landau write.

But who was this clever student? The answer, they suspected, might lie in the Greek Orthodox monastery where Smith claimed to find the manuscript, the only place ever known to possess it.

Mar Saba clings to a cliff in a desolate valley between Jerusalem and the Dead Sea. It was founded in 483 C.E. by a man named Sabas, who as a boy had fled an unhappy family in Cappadocia, in what is now Turkey. According to a sixth-century biography, the young Sabas "begged with tears" to join a small community of monks in Palestine, but an abbot sent him away. Monastic leaders worried that boys' "feminine" faces would lead older monks astray. Sabas evidently came to agree. When he opened Mar Saba a few years later, he forbade admission to any adolescent "who had not yet covered his chin with a beard, because of the snares of the evil one."

But communities of holy men faced other earthly temptations. Byzantine scholars, Landau discovered, had begun finding evidence, from as early as the fourth century, of same-sex couples: monks who shared a cell, traveled as a pair, and supported each other's lifelong quest for spiritual perfection.

Hagiographies depict these relationships as a form of chaste, virtuous romance. When an Egyptian abbot praised the partnership of the fourth-century monks Cassian and Germanus, Cassian reports in one work, it "incited in us an even more ardent desire to preserve the perpetual love of our union." Faced with separation, the sixth-century monks Symeon the Fool and John "kissed each other's breast and drenched them with their tears," according to a medieval text. Even Sabas's own mentors, Euthymius and Theoctistus, an ancient biographer writes,

were "so united … in spiritual affection that the two became indistinguishable."

Whether these unions had a physical dimension is hard to know. But scholars suspect that at least some did, in part because of human nature, and in part because abbots took pains to separate and punish monks who they feared might cross a line. Horsiesios, a fourth-century head of Egypt's Pachomian monasteries, warned the men in his charge against "evil friendship." "You anxiously glance this way and that … then you give him what is (hidden) under the hem of your garment," he wrote, in his "Instructions" to monks. "God himself, and his Christ Jesus, will pour out the wrath of his anger on you and on him."

Horsiesios, like Sabas and other abbots, seemed to be drawing a boundary between holy and unholy unions among men of faith. And that got Landau and Smith thinking: Wasn't whoever wrote the Clement letter doing the same thing, by urging readers not to mistake Jesus's night with the young man for anything so "blasphemous and carnal" as "naked man with naked man"?

According to Sabas's ancient biographer, 60 of his own monks once revolted against him, filled with such "fierce rage" that they used axes and shovels to destroy the tower he lived in. Their grievances are left vague; the monks had grown "bold in wickedness" and "shamelessness, not bearing to walk in the humble path of Christ but alleging excuses for their sins and inventing reasons to justify their passions."

Was same-sex love—or lust—one of those sins? Ancient sources don't say. But Landau and Smith theorize that the Clement letter was written by a Mar Saba monk during some "in-house" debate over the propriety of such unions.

If Sabas or his successors had enforced too hard a line on same-sex unions, might some monks have pushed back? Might one of them have faked a letter from two unimpeachable authorities—Clement and God—that presented Jesus himself as the model for intimate but still-sacred unions between men?

The text, Landau and Smith suspect, was composed between the fifth century, when the monastery opened, and the eighth century, when the Greek Orthodox Church adopted prayers for *adelphopoiesis*, or "brother making," which blessed committed friendships between men. These new blessings, they argue, gave a kind of license to monastic couples, ending the need for subterfuge or protest.

After meeting Landau and Smith, I called Derek Krueger, a professor at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and an expert on sexuality in Byzantine monasticism. "It's plausible," he said, with some hesitation, when I asked about Smith and Landau's theory. In monasteries, which isolate men from the world, the line between spiritual and erotic love could certainly blur: As Krueger put it in a 2011 article, "One monk's *agape* might be another monk's *eros*." Still, no ancient stories defending the virtue of monk couples—none he knew of, anyway—took the guise of a lost gospel.

The Texas scholars grant the roughness of their theory. They have no evidence of any such debate at Mar Saba, and no explanation for why a monk there would have felt compelled to copy such a letter in the 18th century. Nor can they rule out the text being a better fit for later eras, in which they have less expertise.

The one person their book seems determined to exonerate is Morton Smith. Their case for ending all discussion of him as a possible forger—a case that leans heavily on ad hominem attacks against his critics and on reflexively charitable interpretations of his motives—is their least convincing. Their eagerness to clear Smith also conflicts with what they acknowledge is a giant evidentiary hole: No one, to public knowledge, has ever scientifically tested the physical manuscript. (The manuscript is thought to remain in the archives of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem, a notoriously cloistered institution that rarely admits scholars for any reason and did not respond to Smith and Landau's—or my—requests for comment. No one has reported seeing the manuscript since the early 1980s.)

Another source of potentially significant evidence, scholars suspect, is the part of Smith's life he kept from the world. Over three months, in visits to the churches where Smith had once sought a home, I pieced together the story of a priest whose crises of faith and identity prefigure his discovery of a secretly gay Jesus.

ROBERT MORTON SMITH (he went by his middle name) was born in 1915, the only child of an older, well-to-do couple

BYZANTINE SCHOLARS HAD BEGUN FINDING EVIDENCE, FROM AS EARLY AS THE FOURTH CENTURY, OF SAME-SEX COUPLES: MONKS WHO SHARED A CELL, TRAVELED AS A PAIR, AND SUPPORTED EACH OTHER'S LIFELONG QUEST FOR SPIRITUAL PERFECTION.

in the Philadelphia suburb of Bryn Athyn. The town is the American headquarters of the conservative branch of the New Church, a Christian movement inspired by the 18th-century mystic Emanuel Swedenborg. Smith's mother was a fervent follower. His father manufactured stained glass for churches across the mid-Atlantic.

Smith was a star student at a New Church high school, and he internalized a view of men and women as incomplete—each "a divided or half person," as Swedenborg put it—until perfected by marriage. Swedenborg's invocations of "foul liaisons," "unmentionable sexual unions," and "a foulness that is contrary to the order of nature" have been read as explicit condemnations of homosexuality.

The world beyond the Church was nearly as unforgiving. Doctors deemed homosexuality a mental illness, and state laws criminalized sodomy. In 1920, Harvard University formed a "secret court" to investigate—and expel—students suspected of homosexual conduct. Two of the men convicted by the court would take their own life.

Smith eventually left his family's Church, but he was not yet ready to abandon Christianity. In 1938, after graduating from Harvard College and entering Harvard Divinity School, he abruptly joined the Episcopal Church. The Christian leader who set Smith on a path to the Episcopal priesthood, I discovered, was a gay Marxist revolutionary.

Frederic Hastings Smyth was a successful, MIT-trained chemist when he decided, in his mid-30s, to give up his career. He became an Anglican priest and developed a complex theology that saw communism as a precondition for the kingdom of heaven on Earth. (He believed that Marxists could be talked out of their atheism after the revolution.)

In 1936, Hastings Smyth opened a kind of monastery steps from Harvard's campus, calling it the Oratory of St. Mary and St. Michael. He hoped to recruit brilliant students as leaders of a proletarian overthrow of capitalism. The oratory, where he lived with a few young male disciples, was decorated with Baroque Italian furniture and scented with liturgical candles, incense, and the gourmet meals he cooked for students who dropped in for political discussion and Mass. Smith was a committed traditionalist, but something about Hastings Smyth must have so compelled him that he was willing to overlook the priest's insurrectionary politics. In December 1938, six days after Hastings Smyth baptized him, Morton Smith was admitted to Holy Communion at the oratory.

Hastings Smyth didn't live with a boyfriend in Cambridge, as he'd done as a layman in Europe. But the oratory was nonetheless stigmatized as "homosexual"—and surveilled by J. Edgar Hoover's FBI. Within a few years, Hastings Smyth began to worry that some students weren't coming for Marxist revolution, as he'd hoped, but to work out their sexuality. "It is dangerous for us," he wrote to a friend, in a letter I found in a Toronto archive. "We are too exciting for them."

Harvard Divinity School came to see the renegade priest as a menace to students, having "done none of these men any good" and "one or two of them some harm," Willard Sperry, the school's dean, wrote in an April 1940 letter. Sperry was particularly concerned about one divinity student, "a rather unstable fellow emotionally, who has given us all a good deal of anxiety for fear he will have some kind of nervous break-down. I have the Hygiene Dept. watching him." Sperry doesn't name the student, but in hundreds of pages of archival records I could find no Harvard divinity student more closely associated with Hastings Smyth in the late 1930s than Morton Smith.

Just five months after his baptism, Smith took his first step toward ordination, applying in the Episcopal Diocese of Pennsylvania. I asked Paul Corby Finney—an art historian who maintained a long correspondence with Smith and spent late nights drinking with him in the 1980s—what had initially attracted Smith to the priesthood. "He said he was very much in love with the idea of a community of men worshipping God."

Smith sought contacts in the Episcopal Church's Anglo-Catholic, or "high church," wing, with which Hastings Smyth had identified. Though free of the doctrinal strictures and hierarchies of the Roman Catholic Church, it retained much of Catholicism's drama: its elaborate ceremonies; its vestments, bells, and candles—and its veneration of celibacy.

Scholars of sexuality have portrayed Anglo-Catholicism as a pre-1950s refuge for highly educated queer clergy, a "stained-glass closet" that permitted coded displays of femininity and homoeroticism among male priests "as long as they remained chastely celibate or at least avoided scandal," the historian Timothy W. Jones has written. According to the scholar David Hilliard, Anglo-Catholicism, as a fringe of the Episcopal Church, was "both elitist and nonconformist, combining a sense of superiority with a rebellion against existing

SMITH TRAVELED TO THE MONASTERY BY DONKEY IN 1942 AND LIVED WITH ITS MONKS FOR A MONTH.

authority … It provided an environment in which homosexual men could express in a socially acceptable way their dissent from heterosexual orthodoxy."

In 1940, Smith traveled to Jerusalem on a two-year research fellowship. He ended up staying until 1944, unable to recross the Atlantic during the world war. In Jerusalem's Old City, he befriended a Greek Orthodox clergyman, who invited him to Mar Saba. Smith traveled to the monastery by donkey in 1942 and lived with its monks for a month. (It was on a later visit, in 1958, that he'd say he found Secret Mark.)

In the candlelit darkness of its church, where the brothers prayed for six hours each night, Smith gained a "new understanding of worship as a means of disorientation," he recalled in his book *The Secret Gospel*, "dazzling the mind and destroying its sense of reality."

"I knew what was happening," he wrote, "but I relaxed and enjoyed it."

WHEN SMITH RETURNED to America in 1944, his quest for ordination was in trouble.

Pennsylvania's Episcopal bishop wanted Smith to enroll at the Episcopal Divinity School, but its dean told the bishop that Smith had a reputation as "cynical, skeptical, lacking in convictions, highly cantankerous." The faculty's unanimous opinion was that "for all his brilliant academic qualifications," Smith was "not otherwise fitted to serve in the ministry."

The bishop got no more assuring a report from Father David Norton Jr., the rector of a working-class Boston church where Smith had run a boys' club. "He's interested in such questions as: 'What other basis is there for deciding the morality of an action than the ultimate pleasure or pain it will bring to the doer?'" Norton wrote. "I often feel that he takes a line of argument and follows it as an intellectual game rather than for the purpose of coming at the truth."

But in March 1946, for reasons the record doesn't reflect, the Pennsylvania bishop ordained Smith anyway, then quickly transferred him out of state. After 18 months at a Baltimore church, Smith moved back to Massachusetts, where he saw firsthand what became of people who tried to hide their true self in the Church.

*Father Frederic Hastings Smyth (*top left*) set Morton Smith on the path to the Episcopal priesthood. Once Smith was ordained, the Right Reverend Raymond Heron was his only backer in the Massachusetts diocese. One of Heron's former chore boys, Frederick Pike (*center*), was convicted of first-degree murder after killing another Heron "protégé" in 1948.*

PACIFICO SILANO. GENERAL SYNOD ARCHIVES, ANGLICAN CHURCH OF CANADA; BETTMANN ARCHIVE / GETTY; THREE LIONS / GETTY; FOUND IMAGE HOLDINGS / GETTY.

In September 1948, while serving at St. Luke's Church, in blue-collar Boston, Smith officiated the marriage of a restaurant hostess and a bartender. A month later, headlines appeared in the Boston newspapers: The hostess was still married to another man. A judge convicted her of polygamy and gave her a suspended six-month prison sentence and a year's probation.

Her lawyer told the court that she'd married the bartender "only to protect the baby she had thought was coming," a pregnancy that apparently ended in miscarriage. The woman, a relative told me, was no believer. But she'd entered a church—and lied—to give her forbidden relationship and baby the appearance of respectability.

News articles name Smith as the priest who sanctified the marriage, but don't say how much he knew of the woman's past. The episode can't have helped his already precarious standing in the Massachusetts diocese, where one church had declined to make him vicar, despite desperately

needing one, and where the bishop, Norman Nash, never licensed him to minister, making his 17 months in pulpits there a possible canonical violation.

Church archives show that Smith had exactly one backer in Massachusetts: the Right Reverend Raymond Heron, who as suffragan bishop was second in command to Nash.

Around the time Smith performed the polygamous marriage, Heron began appearing in a horrifying string of front-page stories. The 62-year-old priest, who'd never married, had for years befriended troubled boys and invited them to live with him, on his farm, as paid "chore boys." On August 5, 1948, one of Heron's former chore boys, Frederick Pike, 19, returned, intending to rob Heron. When Pike entered the farmhouse and found one of his successors—a 17-year-old who'd lived with Heron since he was 10—Pike shot the boy twice in the head, went to a shed for an axe, and then bludgeoned the boy's body with its blunt end, taking a 15-minute break between drubbings.

When Heron came home, Pike fired wild shots at him but missed. He briefly held the bishop hostage, stole his wallet, and escaped in Heron's car before police captured him in Providence, Rhode Island. A jury convicted Pike of first-degree murder, and a judge sentenced him to death. (The penalty was later commuted, and Pike was released from prison in the 1970s.)

The Living Church, a prominent Episcopal magazine, regretted the death of Heron's 17-year-old "protégé" but praised Heron's farm as "a means of healthy life and wage earning for boys in whom the Bishop has taken an interest." With Pike's appeals keeping the story in the news, Heron married his new, Church-appointed secretary. The Boston papers prominently covered the "private" and "surprise morning ceremony."

A few months later, in the spring of 1949, Smith published a bristling journal article. Titled "Psychiatric Practice and Christian Dogma," it cast Christianity as incompatible with mental health. All of Smith's examples were sexual: a girl who compulsively masturbates; a young "homosexual" who as an adolescent had "helpful" friendships with older men; a divorcée who wants a new husband "tied down before the progress of her infirmity … becomes obvious."

Unlike a good psychiatrist, who guides such people to self-acceptance, Smith wrote, the good pastor has to condemn them as sinners. The Church, that is, requires a man to sacrifice this world for the next, regardless of "his happiness or his health or his very life." In Smith's view, there was no midpoint between sin and salvation. Which meant one thing: "Ecclesiastics who do not believe the teachings of their Church should have the decency to leave it."

On September 18, 1949, Smith led his last service as an active priest.

OVER THE NEXT few years, Smith tried to figure out, as a scholar, how faith seduces and deludes. He had earned a Ph.D. from Hebrew University in Jerusalem and was working on a second doctorate, from Harvard Divinity School, when Brown University hired him in 1950 as an instructor in biblical literature.

One of his first research ideas there was for a "psychiatric study" of what spiritual training does to the minds of monks. Next he began an obsessive hunt for pagan sources for the canonical Gospel of Mark. But neither of these projects bore out: A mentor cautioned against "psychoanalytical fantasies," and scholars found his arguments about Mark's paganism unconvincing, derailing a book he'd been close to finishing.

These intellectual rejections were compounded by professional ones. Near the start of 1954, Brown told Smith that it wasn't renewing his contract. And despite recommendations from renowned scholars, he was passed over for jobs at Yale, Cornell, and the University of Chicago.

No less painful, perhaps, was that Smith's washout at Brown separated him from his best friend. Atanas Todor Madjoucoff was a handsome Arabic interpreter, born in Palestine to Greek Orthodox parents. He and Smith had met in Jerusalem, apparently in the 1940s, and reunited in 1951, when Smith took a year's research leave from Brown. Madjoucoff accompanied Smith to monastery libraries around Greece, and in August 1952, according to passenger manifests, they boarded the SS Excambion together, in Piraeus, for an 18-day voyage to Boston.

In Providence, Smith found Madjoucoff an apartment around the corner from his. But shortly after Brown told Smith that his time there was up, Madjoucoff changed his last name, married a woman he'd met through his church, and moved to the suburbs.

In the 1950s, nothing was going the way Smith wanted it to. He'd failed at the priesthood, and now he was failing at academia. Off campus, gay and lesbian people faced a brutal new wave of persecution, with President Dwight Eisenhower effectively banning them from government employment and a U.S. Senate subcommittee calling "homosexuals and other sex perverts" security risks who "must be treated as transgressors and dealt with accordingly."

Smith floundered for three years before a job offer came from Columbia. It wasn't in religion—the field he'd long aspired to join—but in ancient history. Smith accepted, and used his very first summer there, in 1958, to return to Mar Saba. He waited more than two years—until Columbia gave him tenure—to announce his "accidental discovery," as he called it, of a surreptitiously gay Jesus.

AFTER SETTLING in New York, Smith paid regular visits to Rhode Island to see Madjoucoff. Their relationship was filled with private outings, personal confidences, and gifts to Madjoucoff's children from a man they called "Uncle Morton."

"There were secrets they kept among themselves," Madjoucoff's daughter told me, secrets her father didn't even share with her mother. ("No one really knows" whether the men were lovers, she said; she and her eldest brother told me they had no evidence that their father was anything but straight.) Madjoucoff's obituary (he died in 2019) called Smith his "lifelong friend."

In the late 1970s, Smith had a brief relationship with an openly gay Columbia student. But not until after retirement did Smith attempt to come out.

In February 1989, an NYU dean published a screed against student protesters who had demanded classes on "gay, lesbian and bisexual issues." The dean lamented that any campus would treat homosexuality as "an acceptable form of normative behavior."

THE PARALLELS BETWEEN SMITH'S DISILLUSIONING YEARS IN THE CHURCH AND THE PECULIAR JESUS HE FOUND AT MAR SABA ARE HARD TO MISS.

The article appeared in an obscure journal published by a group of conservative professors opposed to campus activism. Smith had long supported the group, but the dean's words got to him. "Homosexuality is a way of life followed by millions of adult Americans," Smith typed, in a letter to the journal's editors. "Attempts to require adherence to a norm from which figures so various as King David, Socrates, Michael Angelo, Shakespeare, and Frederick the Great happily deviated, should disturb a Dean with even a rudimentary knowledge of cultural history.

"The most shameful thing," Smith continued, was that students had to protest "to get an honest and complete course on a subject of legitimate concern to many students, faculty members, and administrators." Equally worrisome, Smith wrote, was that the dean, as an administrator, had the power to discriminate against gay job seekers.

"I must ask that you publish this letter," he wrote.

Smith didn't identify his own sexual orientation, but he'd stood up for himself in a public way. On a copy of the letter he mailed to Lee Avdoyan, his friend and former student, Smith wrote, "Herewith my 'coming-out' article. I never expected to write one, but I'm getting old and irritable, and [the dean's article] was just too much." The journal never published the letter.

After Smith's suicide, associates opened his briefcase and found an incongruous, plastic-cased ID among the workaday address books and pocket calendars. "This is to certify," it said, "that The Reverend Robert M. Smith is a priest." He'd held on to it until his dying day.

Smith left Madjoucoff nearly $320,000, a sum many times greater than every other beneficiary's. His will also left something more personal: any three belongings Madjoucoff desired.

As they walked through Smith's apartment, Madjoucoff's wife noticed a photograph of her husband. Something about its intimacy surprised her, their eldest son told me. It wasn't the sort of portrait that men she knew kept of other men.

"You can take that," she told her husband.

But Madjoucoff choked up. He couldn't bring himself to do it.

IF SMITH SAW Christianity as threatening his health, happiness, and "very life," as he'd suggested in that 1949 essay, how far might he have gone to discredit the faith?

In an era of rampant homophobia, Christian leaders such as Frederic Hastings Smyth and Raymond Heron had inspired dreams of liberty—of new life—in vulnerable boys and young men. But they could no sooner save others than save themselves. The celibate priesthood was less a sanctuary for gay men than a treacherous hiding place.

The parallels between Smith's disillusioning years in the Church and the peculiar Jesus he found at Mar Saba are hard to miss: Smith's Jesus is a manipulator whose baptisms foster the illusion of sexual freedom among psychologically fragile men. But Jesus is arrested at Gethsemane, and the young man who flees naked—a seeker of "the mystery of the kingdom of God"—winds up exposed and alone.

Smith had more than enough motive to forge Secret Mark. As a polymath scholar with contacts across the Mediterranean, he almost certainly had the means. For as long as he'd been a professor, he had taken a childlike, at times sadistic, glee in making the world of religion squirm. A hoax on the Church that betrayed him would have surpassed anything else he had done, but it wouldn't have been out of character.

Nor would it have been his only work of fiction. Smith's personal papers were destroyed, as he'd instructed, but his professional ones were donated to the Jewish Theological Seminary. Among them I found an unpublished short story, undated but bearing his New York address.

If Secret Mark was a youthful fantasy of salvation through forbidden sex, this other tale was, in a sense, the reality Smith found.

"Once upon a time," in a "golden age," the story begins, a young man carried on a "clandestine affair" with a lover he visited "by way of the back stairs." But the relationship was doomed: Not only was the "young lady" betrothed to someone else; her mother shunned the man because of his "total inacceptability."

When one day the mother nearly caught them in the act, the man grabbed his fallen clothes and "took refuge in the closet," only to have the mother cluelessly pull it shut.

"The latch clicked," Smith wrote. "There was no knob on the inside."

The story stops mid-sentence, in the middle of its second page. The man is trapped and alone, and outside it's beautiful and radiant, and then nothing. The story's title—"The Skeleton in the Closet"—is the only clue Smith leaves to the part he's left unwritten. *A*

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Culture & Critics

In April 1948, the 32-year-old playwright Arthur Miller set out to build a 10-by-12-foot studio—two windows, clapboard walls, a desk fashioned from an old door—on land he'd bought in rural Connecticut. Once it was done, he sat down and began to write. By the next morning, he had completed the first act of what would become his most famous work; he'd known only its opening lines, he said, and that it would end in the calamity presaged by its title, *Death of a Salesman*. The play was finished in six weeks, and it debuted 75 years ago, on February 10, 1949. *Death of a Salesman* was the first play to sweep all three major drama awards—the Pulitzer Prize, the New York Drama Critics' Circle, and the Tony.

Eight months into the play's Broadway run, Miller answered a letter from Barbara Beattie, a junior at the University of Richmond who had reached out as part of an assignment for a journalism class. Beattie's daughter discovered Miller's letter while helping her mother, now 94, move out of her home. Miller was diligent about his correspondence, according to Julia Bolus, the director of the Arthur Miller Trust and the playwright's former assistant, but a reply of this length was exceptional. Beattie received an A in the class.

— *Andrew Aoyama*

OMNIVORE

Sincerely Yours, Arthur Miller

In a newly discovered letter, the playwright explains how he adapted Shakespearean tragedy to a society defined by its unbridled optimism.

Oct 5, 1949

Dear Miss Beattie;

If there is a formal genesis of Death of a Salesman it certainly is in the Elizabethan drama, particularly Shakespeare. From the point of view of form I have long felt that the spaciousness of his plays had been forfeited for a physical concentration which contradicts life itself. I have learned from

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PHOTO-ILLUSTRATION BY ELIZABETH HART

him, if you will, that words themselves are the best scene setting; that it is not necessary to devise elaborate plot machinery in order to "set" a scene which itself can explain itself—in short, to proceed to the meat of a scene at once and to make it happen where and when it logically would happen, and not where a stationary setting forces it to happen.

As well, my form is one which permits time for what in effect are soliloquies. As I see it, the force of the Elizabethan form lay in its ability to follow the mental processes of its protagonists wherever they might lead. The same may be said of mine. This cannot be said of the "realistic" form, called Ibsen's, which itself imposes upon the story and the characters instead of following them, making way for them. In such plays incredible ingenuity, and much time, is wasted in the mere effort to justify the simple meeting of two characters. One may fairly say that in our day this form has come to be a word game in which the confrontation of characters is made to seem "natural" or "real". Of course it is actually a severe form of stylization whose utter unreality and unnaturalness is shrouded by sets with windows that work, rugs on the floors, and so forth. Thus the means employed actually stand as an obstruction between the vision of the playwright and the emotional receptivity of the audience. For we do not dream or inwardly think in such terms but otherwise. We dream in scenes, don't we. But the preparation for these scenes is direct, immediate, and contained in the scenes themselves. There is no maid who enters and talks to a butler who between them inform us that our father is about to return home after a year's absence. We suddenly see our father, and in what he does and says lies all relevant information about his situation. Plays written in this fashion therefore proceed with true naturalness, from relevancy to relevancy, without sparring about.

Concerning the idea of Elizabethan tragedy and my own, I could speak for many hours. Central to Shakespeare's tragedy is the idea of the Fall, which implies social stature of a royal level. I too see the Fall as a critical aspect of tragedy, but our world has changed, and it is no longer possible to think of the Fall as that of a socially elevated person exclusively. But social status, to my mind, was and is only a superficial expression of a deeper Fall, so to speak, namely, the destruction of a man's idea of what he is by forces opposing him. Any class is thereby given entrance to the precincts of the tragic, and so it is in a democratic society. Under Elizabethan feudalism this notion was unthinkable if only because none but the royal had the alternatives of seemingly absolute choice, the liberties of the masses being hedged about by all sorts of rigid proscriptions. Today we are all "free" to aspire to any height, we have the hero's necessary alternatives. My moral object, therefore, is to attempt to direct the efforts of men toward the clear appreciation of reality, exposing the illusory in order that man may realize his creative potentialities. In another context, Shakespeare was attempting the same thing, as in the history plays where the catastrophe derives from the impossible ambitions of the monarch or those of the subjects against the monarch. A certain ideal order is therefore implied as having been violated in his work, and in mine. His ideal was feudal; it supposed that life would be good when men behaved in accordance with their social position and neither lapsed into a lower level, (Prince Hal), nor created havoc by attempting to crash into one above them, (The King in Hamlet). My ideal order is less easy to formulate if only because it does not yet exist, while he was writing within a society whose theory was sufficient for him. I see man's happiness frustrated until the time arrives when he is judged, given social honor and respect, not by what he has accumulated but by what he has given to his society. This ideal is posited not for itself, but because I know that the frustration of the creative act is the cause of our hatred for each other, and hatred is the cause of our fears. We reward our dealers, our accumulators, our speculators; we penalize with anonymity and low pay our teachers, our scientists, our workers who make and do and build and create. And so the urge that is in all of us to give and to make is turned in upon itself, and we accept the upside-down idea that to take and to accumulate is the great good. And whether we succeed in that or not, we are sooner or later left with the awareness of our emptiness, our inner poverty, and our isolation from mankind. When a man reaches that knowledge and has the sensitivity to feel the loss of his true self deeply, he is a tragic figure; but not unless he tries to find himself despite the world can he raise up in us the actual feeling that something fine and great and precious has been discovered too late. The history of man is his blundering attempt to form a society in which it pays to be good. The tragic figure now, and always, is the man who insists, past even death, that the stultifying combinations of evil give way before the outpouring of humanity and love that is bursting from his heart. This is why tragedy endures, and this is why it has really never changed excepting in its superficial aspects of rank etc.

The history of man is his blundering attempt to form a society in which it pays to be good.

I hope some of this has been clear. I write at such length because there are not many who have taken the trouble to examine the matter at all.

Sincerely yours,
Arthur Miller

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BOOKS

A Bloody Retelling of *Huckleberry Finn*

Percival Everett transforms Mark Twain's classic.

By Tyler Austin Harper

Percival Everett's new novel imagines *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* from the perspective of Huck's enslaved sidekick, Jim. But to call *James* a retelling would be an injustice. Everett sends Mark Twain's classic through the looking glass. What emerges is no longer a children's book, but a blood-soaked historical novel stripped of all ornament. *James* conjures a vision of the antebellum South as a scene of pervasive terror. Everett recognizes that American slavery's true history is not revealed in the movements of great armies or the speeches of politicians. Its realities lie in the details of life lived under conditions of unceasing brutality—the omnipresent whip, the daily interplay of dread and panic, the rage that can find no outlet.

ILLUSTRATION BY JUSTIN JENKINS

James, in other words, is anything but a straight-ahead homage to a literary classic. Instead, Everett has a cultural homicide in view. He wishes to kill the Black stock character, entrenched in American fiction and film, whom the philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah called "the Saint" in 1993 and, several years later, the director Spike Lee christened "the magical, mystical Negro." *James* is best understood as a systematic dismantling of that shopworn staple, the Black man or woman who exists to rescue and morally enlighten a fallen but basically redeemable white protagonist. And Everett's quarrel is not with this archetype alone. He takes aim at the ethics embodied by the magical Negro: the idea that oppression exalts, that suffering purifies the spirit. Everett's counter-thesis is that oppression hardens; suffering sharpens. *James* cuts.

The trope of "the noble good-hearted black man or woman, friendly to whites," in Appiah's words, isn't hard to recognize in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Its secondary hero is ennobled by a folksy wisdom and probity so unalloyed as to border on the supernatural. Jim is downtrodden but morally upright and ever ready to help. Published in the United States in 1885, Twain's novel is a tale of boyish exploits, rich with comedy, that doubles as a tutorial against anti-Black racism. A quick refresher, given that high-school English (where *Huckleberry Finn* remains one of the most assigned novels in America) may be a dim memory: The plot features the plight of semi-orphaned Huck—who flees home to escape an abusive, whiskey-wet father—and Jim, who has run away from his owner, Miss Watson, after learning that she plans to sell him to slavers in New Orleans. Because the pair disappear at the same time, many assume that Jim has killed the boy; he becomes not merely a runaway slave but also a Black man who has murdered a white child. When Huck and Jim are forced to hide out on Jackson's Island, they throw in their lot together, developing a father-son relationship as they head off, their raft precarious, down the Mississippi River. Along the way, Huck has a necessary moral awakening as his Black companion teaches him, directly and indirectly, about the evils of prejudice. As for Jim, the "happy slave" gets his happy ending—freedom.

Everett wishes to kill the Black stock character, entrenched in American fiction and film, whom the director Spike Lee christened "the magical, mystical Negro."

The kindly, obliging, superstitious Jim of *Huckleberry Finn*, the ur–magical Negro, carries with him an enchanted hair ball (allegedly from the stomach of an ox) that he believes holds prophetic powers. Everett's updated character is *James*'s first-person narrator, and his predecessor's alter ego in salient ways: He is a writer and storyteller, compassionate but also calculating, by turns reasonable and ruthless. Most notable, James has a head full of books. When he is bitten by a rattlesnake in an early scene on the island, he is visited by a ghost of the Enlightenment. Voltaire comes to him in a fever to quarrel about equality and the perfect human form. The setting for this febrile dream is the local judge's library, the same study where James once read in secret. "What would they do to a slave who knew what a hypotenuse was, what *irony* meant, how *retribution* was spelled?" he wonders in his delirium.

Over the course of the novel, this hypothetical is reconstituted on new terms: What would *a slave* do who knew what *irony* meant and how *retribution* is spelled? That question could not be posed to Twain's Jim, because he doesn't possess knowledge of this sort, and because the defining feature of the magical Negro is his inability to think in terms of his self-interest. The answer that Everett's James arrives at, by contrast, is righteous and terrible. We are introduced to a character whose fear and repressed anger are buoyed by a kind of comedic detachment. Yet this black humor is pared away, page by page, as James suffers indignity after indignity. With each twist of the Mississippi, his rage grows until it threatens to flood its banks. The novel never loses its sense of humor, but the laughs become manic.

"Where does a slave put anger?" Everett's protagonist muses near the beginning of the novel. Confronted with the torn families, the rapes, the whippings, the intractable obstacles to freedom, the routine humiliations both major and minor, James reflects on the wrath of those in bondage: "The real source of our rage had to go without address, swallowed, repressed." The magic of Twain's Jim is his ability to sanitize this repression, not to simply hide it but to turn it into virtue. The dark magic of James is his discovery that he can refuse to do either.

EVERETT'S INTEREST in the magical Negro should come as no surprise, given his well-established obsession with racial pigeonholing, with the ways that race is rehearsed for white eyes. Earlier novels such as *Erasure*—recently made into the feature film *American Fiction*—explore how American Blackness is as much a media-generated caricature as it is a coherent identity. Thelonious "Monk" Ellison, *Erasure*'s protagonist, is an Ivy League–educated writer who must pantomime a "ghetto" persona to make himself legible to publishers. Everett's James also performs a kind of racial burlesque: He wears Twain's Jim like a mask.

Whereas Jim speaks in the demotic dialect of an illiterate slave, James code-switches. When he talks to white folks, he adopts the heavy southern lilt of Twain's character. When he talks to fellow enslaved people, he and they speak in the refined English of the educated elite. This linguistic skulduggery is an inspired gag, the kind of farce at which Everett excels: Huck, whose own English is hardly polished, catches James out in occasional slipups, for

example, and the effect is deftly comic. The first time it happens—they're watching a small cannon on a boat firing balls into the river—rattles them both, and James scrambles to recover:

> "Why they doin' that, Jim?"
> "Dey's tryin' to get yo dead body to float up to the top o' da water."
> "Be funny if some other body float up," he said.
> "Hilarious," I said.
> "What?" He looked at me.
> "I say da 'he harry us.'"
> "What's that mean?"
> "What? Looky naw," I said.

At the same time, the fluency and philosophical bent that James conceals is an uncomfortable reminder that nothing is feared so much as an educated Black man.

This unease about Black learning is embedded in Twain's original. Before the slaver-dodging trip down the Mississippi, Huck is tormented by his cruel sot of a father, a man prone to slurred invectives against the "govment." During one particularly bad bender, "Pap" Finn rages against the recent appearance of a freed Black man. "There was a free nigger there, from Ohio; a mulatter, most as white as a white man," he seethes. "They said he was a p'fessor in a college, and could talk all kinds of languages, and knowed everything." The elder Finn is portrayed as a racist and an irredeemable scoundrel, yet the novel quietly echoes Pap's anxiety about "uppity" Black people: Jim's virtuousness is bound up with the aw-shucks sagacity of the illiterate, a patient wisdom that inspires sacrifice in the magical Negro rather than ambition. Jim's selfless impulses—not his reflective powers—are what prove crucial to his ultimate fate. Everett's diagnosis in *James* is that this gentleness is the deadly guarantee of servitude. Freedom can be won only through books, and blood.

ULTIMATELY, TWAIN'S JIM is like a half-finished sculpture of a Black man: On the river with Huck, he's often vibrantly human, and at other times he's crudely hewn, reduced to stereotype—the popular white culture's notion of the "Negro." The genius of *James* is to take this submerged tension in *Huckleberry Finn* and force it to the surface. Everett does this by dramatizing what scholars have noted are minstrel-show elements that Twain, an avowed minstrel enthusiast, tacitly drew on for the novel's structure and for some of the Huck-Jim routines. A kind of minstrel logic—a caricatured performance of Blackness that obscures both the violence of slavery and the moral deformation it invites—is revealed at the core of the magical-Negro archetype.

JAMES

Percival Everett

DOUBLEDAY

Almost exactly midway through *James*, Everett diverges from Twain's plot in a telling fashion. After he is separated from the "king" and "duke"—the pair of aspirationally royal confidence men who are the primary antagonists of *Huckleberry Finn*—James finds himself embedded with a minstrel troupe. The scene is pure Everett, and features a series of mind-bending and darkly comic riffs on racial performativity: At one point, James wears both blackface and whiteface to disguise himself as a white man playing a Black man so that he is not lynched by a racist mob.

The bit brilliantly reprises Everett's enduring fixation on the way that Black Americans—whether modern-day novelists or 19th-century slaves—are compelled to perform not racial authenticity (whatever that may mean), but rather racial authenticity as filtered through the coarsely caricatured expectations of white people. But these scenes, in which James temporarily becomes the magical Negro in bootblack makeup, don't simply lampoon the strange doubling of identity that the "art form" of minstrelsy rests on. They also mark a firm and final departure from Twain's original text. From here on out, the two novels go their separate ways, down very different branches of the muddy Mississippi.

THE FINAL SECTIONS of *Huckleberry Finn* concern the efforts of Huck, now joined by his friend Tom Sawyer, to free Jim from bondage. The plan is bumbling, of course, and in the escape, Tom is wounded. Rather than seek his freedom, and knowing that the cost of this choice may be his life, Jim attends to Tom. He is recaptured, only to be freed in the end by the smiling fates—namely, the will of the recently departed Miss Watson. True to type, the magical Negro is cosmically rewarded for selfless devotion to the nice (or in the case of Tom, actually not quite so nice) white person. This resolution reestablishes the ethical premise of the magical-Negro trope: that saintly Black sacrifice, inspired by Black suffering, will be rewarded in the end.

Everett's version drives toward no such cozy ending. As the chapters unfold, James is transformed into neither a Black saint nor a Black sinner. He claims some higher ground. If Twain's Jim is a Christlike figure, James belongs to the Jewish Bible: He is not so much morally ambiguous as morally opaque. And as his rage builds, his ethics become inscrutable, not least to himself. After temporarily losing Huck to the king and duke, James encounters a succession of other slaves in his odyssey to reunite with his wife and child—a runaway in the minstrel troupe passing as white; a teenager who has been molested by her owner since childhood; a tragicomic man who tends a steamship's boiler and never leaves the hull. They are

evocative and well drawn, but they're also chess pieces that advance Everett's rejection of the magical Negro.

Perhaps none more so than Brock, the boiler man, whose brief but remarkable appearance is the kindling that finally sets the novel ablaze. In the course of James's encounter with the steamship attendant, James realizes that the master Brock keeps evoking is long since dead and that the faithful slave persists in his servitude because he enjoys it. Everett's boiler man is a magical Negro shorn of the magic. Exhibiting the mindless desire to please, he lacks the capacity to turn his subjugation into compassion or earthy acuity. Instead, Brock has been seized by the delusion that his role gives him agency and ownership—"It's my engine. I keep it going." The presence of James, a runaway hunting his freedom, throws him into a fit of agitation. When we last see Brock, he is feverishly loading coal into the hopper as the boiler, soon screaming and shaking, grows ever hotter. And as his furious labor reaches its inevitable finale, the novel accelerates along with him.

Some readers may be troubled by *James*'s pacing—indeed, the book does not so much end as explode—but the frantic momentum isn't a narrative failure; it's crucial to the novel's imaginative enterprise. Everett does not invert the magical Negro, giving us a lazy mirror image: James the indignant rationalist versus Brock and his irrational drudgery. Nor is James merely a repudiation of Jim and his spiritually attuned generosity. Rather, the novel dispenses with these terms entirely. Reason is nowhere to be found within the plantation or outside it. Slavery has exiled logic from the world. At last, amid the plot's violent crescendo, James makes no claim to any higher principle or enlightened strategy: "I knew that the best thing would be to wait and watch and to be patient, to strike when everything was right. However, I was not patient. And I knew that things would never be right."

When Appiah says that the saintlike characters in white films are, "to varying degrees, on the side of the angels," he certainly means the better angels. Everett has a different angel in mind. In the throes of the novel's bitter conclusion, James has a message for the slaver standing in front of him: "I am the angel of death, come to offer sweet justice in the night." (To which the slaver responds, a signature Everett touch, "What in tarnation?") The magical Negro who ceaselessly transmutes humiliation into honor and wretchedness into down-home wisdom does not survive the encounter. The price of the novel's final moments is James's goodness. The prize is his dignity. *A*

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Tomato & Lettuce

By Monica Rico

Then, everything was garnish,
two kids and a house,
a wife who kept the

beds made, shirts ironed,
secrets hidden like dust

on the canned goods.
What can't be washed
with vinegar—

scum of the coffee pot—or
set out in the sun with
fresh linen

my mother swears
had to be ironed
and I believe men

made work for women,
invented tile,

starch, matrimony,
and *ama de casa*
to chop the tomato

and lettuce sometimes
in bowls, often on the side
as adornment. What
is the relationship

between mother and
daughter, tree and limb?

The moment I say my
memory is not of her
sadness but of her laughter

I've gotten it all wrong.
The bright split of my
birth was to a woman

who wanted me
to wear my decoration—
a tree cleaned of its bark

after a cool winter doesn't
forget its leaves.

Monica Rico is the author of the poetry collection Pinion.

JEROD HARRIS / GETTY; GETTY; YURI PARMENOV / GETTY; NITAT TERMMEE / GETTY

PHOTO-ILLUSTRATION BY CHANTAL JAHCHAN

BOOKS

The Insider

Is Kara Swisher tearing down tech billionaires—or burnishing their legends?

By Helen Lewis

Few journalists and their sources have fallen out as completely as Kara Swisher and Elon Musk. The reporter met the future billionaire in the late 1990s, when she was a tech correspondent for *The Wall Street Journal* and he was just another Silicon Valley boy wonder. Over more than two decades, they developed a spiky but mutually useful relationship, conducted through informal emails and texts as well as public interviews.

Their frenemy shtick was on display, for example, when Swisher interviewed Musk for *Vox* on Halloween in 2018. He deadpanned that he loved her "costume." She was wearing her signature look—black leather jacket, black jeans, aviator sunglasses presumably just out of view. "Thank you! I'm dressed as a lesbian from the Castro in San Francisco," she replied. The pair posed together for a photograph: him seated and her standing, one arm casually resting on his shoulder, an image that signaled she was more than a mere stenographer or grateful supplicant. She was a Silicon Valley player in her own right.

That image illustrates the pact that Swisher has developed with so many masters of the tech universe ever since she began to cover (and champion) the industry. She would be tough and inquisitive, asking the types of blunt questions about screwups and misfires that these supposed visionaries rarely faced in their heavily gatekept existence. They would parry her blows with charm, self-deprecating humor, and—occasionally—unwise honesty or unwitting self-exposure. Both would derive some benefit. At a minimum, the tech overlords would get credit for stepping into the gladiatorial arena. The audience benefited, too, from Swisher acting as our eyes and ears inside an industry that was changing our lives.

For a time, Musk was Swisher's dream subject, hanging in the sweet spot of the arc that bends from "unknown visionary" through "eccentric millionaire" onward to "compulsive poster of cringe memes and conspiracy theories." In 2016, at her Code Conference, he made headlines by predicting that SpaceX would be sending people to Mars within a decade. Another 2018 interview for *Vox* generated headlines as Musk endorsed Donald Trump's idea of a Space Force. In 2020, he and Swisher discussed AI doomerism for *The New York Times*.

Then Musk took over Twitter and started treating it as his own digital fiefdom, replacing a flawed content-moderation system with one that could fairly be summarized as "whatever Elon feels like today." Elite opinion turned against him, and with somewhat less alacrity, so did Swisher: She decided that the quirky entrepreneur had become an isolated dictator surrounded by yes-men—and by then he'd stopped taking her calls. The pair's souring relationship played out on Musk's own platform, now rebranded as X, and elsewhere. She tweeted out a defense official's quote criticizing Musk's threat to cut off funding for Starlink, his satellite system, in Ukraine. For that, Musk sent her an email calling her an "asshole." She later called him a "petty jerk." He subsequently said she should "take it easy on the Adderall—foaming at the mouth is just not a good look."

Swisher blames the fallout on his descent into "adult toddler mode" and more dangerous territory beyond that. (In November, Musk replied to a post on X pushing an anti-Semitic conspiracy theory with "You have said the actual truth.") Most journalists would mourn their loss of access to a key source, but Swisher has used the incident to freshen her signature image as a journalistic pit bull. Her new memoir, *Burn Book: A Tech Love Story*, is part of that project. It opens with two pages titled "Praise for Kara Swisher," which she has peppered with insults from her enemies. Musk is the only person to get two entries: "Kara Swisher's heart is filled with seething hate" and "Kara has become so shrill at this point that only dogs can hear her."

Is the drama between Musk and Swisher entirely real, a reflection of her wider disenchantment with the tech industry? Or is it as mutually beneficial as their previous coziness? Good luck working that out. On Musk's side, you have volatility, self-regard, and neurodivergence (he used his *Saturday Night Live* monologue in 2021 to talk about his autism). On Swisher's side, you have ego and professional pride, as well as brand maintenance: After Musk made a bid for Twitter, she took heat as an "apologist" for his ever more erratic behavior. As late as April 2022, she said in an interview that he was "quite complex" and that people underestimated him. "I really have been very supportive of Elon, even when he's acted badly sometimes," she said during her podcast *On With Kara Swisher* in November of that year. "I get dragged a lot for that." Now that they are no longer on speaking terms, she denounces him with the zeal of a convert.

The uneasy symbiosis between writer and subject is a thread that runs through *Burn Book*, elevating it above a gossipy romp (which it also is). Silicon Valley has posed a coverage challenge since the beginning. Its denizens have expected tech journalists to be advocates of an emerging industry against an older generation of Luddite unbelievers. The story has been about boy geniuses who must be excused from following normal rules of behavior, or sometimes even the law, because they need to be free to "disrupt." In reporting on this scene, Swisher, as a woman born in the early '60s, found herself cast in a quasi-maternal role that has sharpened her eventual disappointment with the hollowness of its idealism. "While my actual son filled me with pride," she writes, "an increasing number of these once fresh-faced wunderkinds I had mostly rooted for now made me feel like a parent whose progeny had turned into, *well*, assholes."

BURN BOOK: A TECH LOVE STORY

Kara Swisher

SIMON & SCHUSTER

SWISHER DIDN'T ALWAYS want to be a journalist. She'd hoped to join the U.S. military, but as a lesbian, she couldn't, because of its ban on openly gay personnel. She graduated from college in 1984, a decade before even the pathetic Clinton-era compromise of Don't Ask, Don't Tell. Swisher never wanted to be in the closet: "I wanted them to ask, and I was compelled to tell."

Becoming an intelligence analyst would have allowed her to follow in her father's military footsteps. Louis Bush Swisher rose to be a lieutenant commander in the Navy before dying suddenly of a brain aneurysm at 34, when Kara was 5. In place of the gentle, smiling man she remembers only through photographs, she got a rich stepfather whom she "came to think of as a villain," ready with "casual cruelties." This kind of childhood ordeal is common among people with extraordinary drive later in life; Swisher shares the experience of a terrifying paternal figure with Musk, who says his father, Errol, was emotionally abusive (Errol has denied the accusation).

Her start in journalism set the tone for her career. As a student at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service, she called *The Washington Post* to complain that an article about a speech on campus was full of inaccuracies. She bickered with the editor involved, who dared her to come argue in person (she did), and then hired her as a campus stringer. She went to journalism school, but found it a waste of time, was turned down for multiple jobs, and lasted less than a year at the *Washington City Paper* before being fired. In her breakout role ghostwriting John McLaughlin's *National Review* column, she refused to run errands for him, mocked him openly in a meeting, and later went on the record alleging that he had sexually harassed a co-worker. His response to that brave act also makes the "Praise for Kara Swisher" section at the front of *Burn Book*: "Most people in this town stab you in the back, but [Kara] stabbed me in the front, and I appreciate that."

By the '90s, she had landed at the *Post*, where she records being the only one interested in the newsroom's recently acquired cellphone. At 34, she went west to San Francisco. The man-childishness of Silicon Valley is by now a well-rehearsed theme, but Swisher's vignettes of juvenile weirdness are still astonishing. At a baby shower in 2008 for the Google co-founder Sergey Brin, guests were invited to dress as infants, with costumes supplied at the door: "Wendi Deng, then the wife of News Corp titan Rupert Murdoch (whom I had taken to referring to as 'Uncle Satan'), had chosen a diaper and sucker combo." That's the kind of sentence that demands to be read twice.

A BEAT REPORTER to her core, Swisher doesn't cover the Valley's arrested development as an anthropologist would—and anyway, she isn't sure the "man-boys" who "felt half-formed and opaque to me with no discernible edge or interesting bits" merit such attention. (In 2019, Musk brought a stuffed monkey to a "serious discussion" about the future of the media with the publisher of *The New York Times*, A. G. Sulzberger, and chatted to it during the meeting.) She does observe, though, that perpetual adolescence explains what she calls "the grievance industrial complex." Again and again, her subjects project the air of a teenager slamming the door to their room, protesting that it's all so unfair. "Tech is littered with men whose parents—typically fathers—were either cruel or absent," she writes. "By the time they grew to be adults, many were unhappy and often had some disgruntled tale of being misunderstood before they were proved triumphantly right."

Swisher is the perfect journalist to chronicle these men. She clearly relishes jousting with arrogant

males, and she shares the inner drive that propels and torments them. She is also, like them, fiercely entrepreneurial—a rule-breaker and a risk-taker. After the dot-com crash, she lost patience with her employer's lack of interest in the digital future, and went into business with her friend Walt Mossberg, whose pioneering "Personal Technology" column for *The Wall Street Journal* began in 1991. They persuaded Dow Jones to back an enterprise called D: All Things Digital. She and Mossberg would combine their reporting with an events business, trying to skirt the dangers of such undertakings—that they're "fanboy gatherings (complicit) or sponsor-driven pitches (conflicted)," in Swisher's words; either way, they're boring. Tech speakers at All Things Digital, which debuted in 2003, would get no fees or even travel expenses, and they wouldn't be shown interview questions in advance. "No one could hide on our stage, including us."

Swisher boasts that her career was built on a single insight she adopted early: *Everything that can be digitized will be digitized.* The one thing that cannot be, she and others understood, is IRL proximity to greatness—or, at least, to wealth and influence. This is at once smart and ethically challenging. How do you attract rich, powerful interviewees when all you have to offer is questions they might get in trouble for answering—and when you're dealing with a club whose members, though they "like to gather and swagger," are not used to being contradicted? If you're Swisher, you get cozy with the stars.

Swisher clearly relishes jousting with arrogant males, and she shares the inner drive that propels and torments them.

In *Burn Book*, she openly acknowledges this criticism, in an attempt to defuse it. Swisher wants to be the best-connected of the tough reporters, and the toughest of the insiders. She argues that All Things Digital made news that hardly flattered her speakers: Mark Zuckerberg's appearance in 2010, when her co-host, Mossberg, grilled him about privacy, was largely memorable for his "increasing moistness" under the stage lights. She urged him to remove his Facebook hoodie; he declined. Finally he gave in, at which point she threw him a lifeline by shifting attention from his damp armpits to the mission statement—"Making the world more open and connected"—printed inside the hoodie. "Omigod. It's like a secret cult," she joked. The fact that, despite the terrible headlines, Zuckerberg sent her a thank-you note afterward—and that Swisher makes sure to mention this in her memoir—neatly demonstrates the ambiguity of her position.

In a similar spirit, *Burn Book* is full of moments when Swisher describes finding herself in the role of unpaid adviser to people she's also reporting on—showing both her influence and her attempts to set boundaries. Murdoch, apparently unbothered by her nicknaming him Uncle Satan, calls her to fish for dirt on his rivals and solicit her thoughts on ventures such as investing in Vice Media. "(Please don't, I advised; he did it anyway.)" She phones Yahoo's co-founder Jerry Yang in the early 2000s to warn him about keeping a Google search box on his homepage: "'You need to get them off your platform,' I said regarding the dangerous licensing deal. 'They look harmless, but they'll kill you.'" (He didn't listen.) Google's Larry Page asks her for help writing an essay about the company's mission. (She declines.) Writing about the private female-focused networking events that Sheryl Sandberg hosted for a time, she calls attention—consciously or not—to the impotence that a supposedly independent Valley reporter can feel. Sandberg often made a point of conscripting Swisher to deliver hardballs to the other attendees to break the ice, only to follow up with an "'oh-that's-Kara-what-can-I-do' shrug" when the interviewees got flustered. This vignette leaves Swisher looking less like a pit bull and more like a Chihuahua.

The message that the time has come for some distance from Silicon Valley hasn't been lost on Swisher, who has established a base in Washington, D.C., where she bought a home several years ago. A quarter century after the dot-com boom, she notes, democracy still hasn't caught up with digital technology: "I have spent an increasing amount of time talking to government officials and legislators in recent years, since no significant U.S. laws have been passed to rein in tech … ever." Podcasts have become her primary journalistic outlet, and she hosts a punishing four episodes every week. The tech industry certainly generates enough big questions to justify this diligence: Should AI companies be allowed to plunder copyrighted works to train their large language models? Has the U.S. allowed too much power to become concentrated in the hands of a small cadre of men in hoodies? How should crypto be regulated?

Swisher's tech boosterism once distinguished her from other journalists. Her newfound disillusionment puts her squarely in the middle of the consensus—try finding a commentator who doesn't think that Silicon Valley "disrupters" need to be given firmer boundaries. But old habits die hard. In March 2021, she suggested that making fun of the non-fungible-token craze was a mistake because "there is underlying value to owning the tweet that Jack Dorsey started Twitter with." Funny story: A year later, the Dorsey-tweet NFT—which had sold for $2.9 million in 2021—went on sale again. After a week, the top bid was … $277. It didn't have much "underlying value" at all. Swisher might have gone sour on the tech bros, but like them, she is sometimes too starry-eyed about anything that calls itself progress. *A*

Helen Lewis is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

BOOKS

Why Do Animals Play?

Scientists want an evolutionary explanation. But maybe the answer is simply: It's fun.

By Sallie Tisdale

Orcas sank another yacht near the Iberian Peninsula in November. Members of a pod had been ramming and shaking boats in the area for more than three years, and had now sunk four. Many observers believed the orcas were attacking their boats, perhaps taking revenge on fishermen. But both boaters and scientists wondered if the orcas were playing, and the marine biologists who study this group think it may be a fad. "The consensus is that they're doing this to show off," the director of science at an ocean-conservation group said. (As fads do, this one may have spread; a yacht had been rammed near Scotland in June.) This is no consolation to sailors, some of whom have tried to take their own revenge on the orcas, shooting at them, lighting firecrackers, and playing heavy-metal music underwater to drive them away.

We project a great deal onto animals. They are elevated into ideals of love and fidelity (dogs, horses), and often they are reduced to objects and tools (cattle, pigs, horses again). Much of humanity's history with animals has been made possible only by refusing to grant them inner lives anything like our own. We can be amused by a parrot's speech and intrigued by macaques that use human hair as dental floss, but many animals live in ways we can hardly imagine. Whales and frogs and frigate birds exist in realms we cannot enter, walled off by complex sensory differences and disparate desires. We deny them the individual worth so precisely known as "personhood." This denial doesn't just constrict our imagination; it has also constricted research in ethology, or animal behavior.

Animal play has come into focus as a subject of study only in the past century, and the field is still developing even basic principles. What is play? How do we define it in species as different from

ILLUSTRATION BY LOU BENESCH

us and from each other as octopuses and crows? The most careful observer may find it hard to avoid biases about what play looks like and means. In humans, many forms of play imitate serious behavior: hunting, courtship, exploration, building, fighting. We recognize play in other species if it looks like our own games, yet what looks like play from one perspective may be something else altogether. We may miss play entirely if it doesn't have a human equivalent—or if it appears in an animal we don't believe to be like us at all.

In *Kingdom of Play: What Ball-Bouncing Octopuses, Belly-Flopping Monkeys, and Mud-Sliding Elephants Reveal About Life Itself*, David Toomey, who teaches English at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and writes about science, explores the research into this elusive subject. Toomey has written books about organisms living in extreme environments and about the physics of time travel, and he has a solid handle on the science here. At least 30 hypotheses of animal play are being investigated, though Toomey notes that "some are little more than notions." He finds a definition by Gordon Burghardt, an ethologist and evolutionary biologist, particularly helpful: Play is "behavior that is nonfunctional, voluntary, characterized by repeated but varied movements, and occurring only when the animal is healthy, safe, and well-fed."

TOOMEY'S OWN BENT is toward the broader context of evolutionary biology and how play may have evolved. Clearly play provides novelty, excitement, sensation. Research suggests that human children deprived of play can develop serious difficulties. Some believe the repetitive behaviors seen in isolated zoo animals, such as pacing and rocking, may be the result of an environment barren of stimulation. Although humans tend to combine novelty, excitement, and sensation into something called "fun," many ethologists have found the idea of "nonfunctional" behavior a serious challenge to their perspective on other species. Play promotes physical strength and group bonding, teaches social skills, and relieves stress: Therefore, in their view, play is an adaptation. They are prone to consider play as a neurological drive, an instinct, or a social response.

Play-fighting, one of the most common forms of social play in the world, is a good example. Humans do it, of course; it explains everything from the brutal red-rover games of my childhood to *Call of Duty*. Magpies play-fight too. So do capuchins, gorillas, meerkats, voles, and gerbils. Kangaroos engage in formal boxing matches, their bouts beginning only after one has accepted an invitation from another. Rats spar in a series of gentle attacks, escapes, and counterattacks; most of the time, nobody gets hurt. We can see a dozen different skills at work.

Songbirds sometimes sing when they are alone; they seem to be singing simply for the sake of it.

But many animals also engage in behaviors with no obvious benefit—which doesn't deter the scientific quest to find one, Toomey observes. Piglets often run around and occasionally perform a kind of flip. Researchers have been inclined to see this as skill-building. "We hypothesize," as one group put it, "that a major ancestral function of play is to rehearse behavioral sequences in which animals lose full control of their locomotion, position, or sensory/spatial input and need to repair those faculties quickly," a routine that the group called "training for the unexpected." In other words, Toomey writes, "the piglet undertakes the flop-over not for its own sake, but in anticipation of the moment immediately *after* the flop-over when it recovers and regains control." Bemused, he adds that most observers recognize that a somersault appears "*thrilling*" to piglets—and that falling down seems to be the point.

The search for utility sometimes fails, which can frustrate ethologists intent on discovering "adaptive advantages." Toomey describes the way South American fur-seal pups in Punta San Juan will goof around in tidal pools even though this risks an attack by sea lions—just one example of overtly dangerous forms of play. Describing the conundrum presented by a puppy in the snow, he drily writes, "The puppy's pleasure is self-evident but, for many hypotheses of animal play, difficult to explain. The puppy will find its movements inhibited and, if the snow is deep enough, its vision compromised. How can that be fun?"

Toomey offers other examples of animal behavior that appears "nonfunctional." Many people have reported watching elephants slide down muddy embankments, appearing to deliberately collide with other elephants climbing up. Then they do it again. Describing a turtle that shared a tank with a nurse shark, Toomey notes that, now and then, the turtle would carefully bite the shark's tail just hard enough that the shark pulled the turtle around as it swam. A group of 45 bees was allowed to walk along a path that offered both food and small wooden balls. Individual bees stopped and pushed the balls back and forth. Some bees did it only once, but others came back for weeks to roll the balls again and again.

When you pause to think about it, the array of behavior that confounds ready categorizing as adaptive is delightfully broad. Before orcas began ramming yachts, they had what appeared to be a fashion trend of wearing dead fish on their heads. Songbirds sometimes sing when they are alone, repeating a phrase or trill several times; they seem to be singing simply for the sake of it. I had a golden retriever who would drop his beloved tennis ball in the eddy of a fast river and nudge the ball to the very edge of the current, waiting until the last possible chance

to snatch it out. A grainy video online of a crow in Russia shows the bird carrying a jar lid to the peak of a roof, climbing in, and snowboarding down. The crow does this several times. Toomey describes a group of common eiders gliding down a river's rapids and hurrying back to the spot from which they began to have another go. Perhaps if you can fly, sliding is peculiarly exciting.

Toomey calls this kind of activity "tinkering," an expression of "the craving for fun or sensation" in testing the ways of the world. He describes a raven who picked up a small rock and worked it to the edge of a cliff. The bird gazed down the side of the cliff, then pushed the rock off and watched it fall. It went to get another rock, repeating this in front of observing scientists who were stymied in their search for the behavior's utility. Toomey is less bewildered.

> You approach a ledge. You look down. Having no pressing appointments, you pick up a small stone and toss it over. You watch it fall, bounce off an outcropping, and hear it hit bottom. Then you do it again. Perhaps the answer to why the raven was dropping the stones is the reason you and I might do it. What is *that* reason?

It's … fun.

THE THEORISTS can be a bit dispiriting. Sometimes I wanted to whack one on the side of the head and say, "Hey, catch this ball." The quest for objectivity will sooner or later collide with the fact that in the kingdom of play, humans have plenty in common with other animals. We naturally romp with dogs. And dogs goof around with horses. Rats enjoy being tickled. The so-called play expression is common—a "relaxed open-mouth display." Is it possible to see this as a smile? That puppy in the snow: If you can't appreciate the fun of having your movements inhibited and your vision compromised by a weird substance, then I don't want to go to a foam fight or costume party with you.

Wry though Toomey can be about the somber ethology crowd, his own writing is sometimes dense. Evolutionary biology is the spine of his book, and his last chapters lean hard into the exegesis of theories, leaving the anecdotes promised by his popular-market subtitle behind. He loses the reader at times in a discussion invoking master genes and cladistics (a system of biological taxonomy) that aims to fit animal play into natural selection. And once he gets deep into evolutionary biology, the words *possible* and *imagine* come up a lot. We don't know—likely can never know—how behavior evolved over tracts of time beyond our ken.

KINGDOM OF PLAY: WHAT BALL-BOUNCING OCTOPUSES, BELLY-FLOPPING MONKEYS, AND MUD-SLIDING ELEPHANTS REVEAL ABOUT LIFE ITSELF

David Toomey

SCRIBNER

Plenty of questions remain. Many ethologists these days are willing to consider consciousness and emotion in animals, and that means anthropomorphism can interfere once again. Almost all the research into animal play has involved familiar placental mammals, such as primates and canids. Play has been observed in several species of reptiles and fish, but they still get little attention from researchers. Maybe many animals, like a few humans, don't play. "I think it more likely, though," Toomey writes, "that animals are all the time behaving in astonishing ways that we simply fail to notice."

In the end, the belief that animals are no less complex and mysterious than humans prevails in *Kingdom of Play*. Toomey understands that if we always reduce play to some form of utility, we are returning animals to the status of automatons. As the book winds down, his own enjoyment of the subject comes to the fore. He follows a few unexpected tangents, among them several stories about people whose deep sense of wonder at the lives of other species inspires them to extreme attempts at immersion in their existence. He describes a man who lived among goats in Switzerland, wearing hoof prostheses on his hands and feet and going on all fours, and a British veterinarian who tried to share in the aroma-rich world of a badger by crawling in the grass, smelling the ground as he moved. He ate earthworms for a time. We may ever be in the dark about animals' inner lives, but how much darker life is if we turn away because of that.

Of course, the real question isn't whether animals play, but how to understand what is happening when they do. If we can conceive of an animal simply having fun, we can no longer see animals as mere objects. We are challenged to change the way we treat them, and a solemn responsibility is added to our dominion. Somersaulting may be good training for the unexpected, but I wonder: Why is it so hard to believe that exuberance is in itself a good?

We can meet our fellow animals in the most surprising ways. An orangutan watches a person perform the cup-and-ball trick, putting a ball inside one of several cups, overturning them, and shuffling them around. The animal observes closely, Toomey writes, "until the performance's conclusion, when it is shown that the cup it thought would hold a ball is empty. Staring into the cup, confirming that against expectations it *is* empty, the orangutan rolls onto its back with obvious delight." The orangutan is not just playing. It has been played, and finds this to be an excellent joke. *A*

Sallie Tisdale's essays have appeared in Harper's *and other magazines. She is the author, most recently, of* The Lie About the Truck: Survivor, Reality TV, and the Endless Gaze.

PROMOTION

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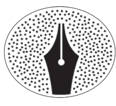
FICTION



Saint Dismas

By Jared Lemus

Carlito held one end of the rope, Omar the other. The three of us wore orange vests to seem official. Sebastián, our lookout, hid behind some bushes. ¶ "¡Here comes one!" I picked up my shovel and dug out some of the dirt we'd dumped in one of the potholes covering the road. Omar held up a gloved hand, signaling for the car to slow down and stop. Things had gotten more difficult for us

ILLUSTRATIONS BY MICHELLE GARCIA

recently, with the news warning of false checkpoints, where men dressed in military or police uniforms stopped vehicles under the pretense of government-sanctioned searches, forced all the passengers out of the car, and then drove off to have the car scrapped or sold. There was talk of rapes and beatings when the passengers failed to comply, and sometimes those things did happen. But we weren't like that—we wouldn't have known what to do with a car if we had managed to steal one.

We wanted drivers who were willing to spend money to get dirt off their car but not smart enough to keep us from looking inside. A car with fully tinted windows meant someone who might have more money on him, but we risked bullets getting lodged in our throats. Non-tinted meant less money, but also that we'd be alive to spend it. The best was a clean car with a fishbowl windshield—someone who had money but was stupid.

Sebastián had just flagged a silver Toyota with a cracked mirror. The car wasn't only dirty, but had tints. The worst combination: a driver who was broke and dangerous. We'd warned Sebastián about this before, but he was still a kid, barely 13. He'd be shaking with nerves and excitement, holding the tip of his dick through his pants to keep from pissing himself, and the moment he saw a car, he'd call out to us, not bothering to notice what shape it was in.

When the car came into full view over the hill, we all got into position. I stood in the middle of the road, leaning against the shovel and wiping my forehead. Omar and Carlito held the rope with little orange flags hanging from it. When the car stopped, I approached and motioned for the driver to roll down his window—barely visible through the darkness of the glass, the driver, who was wearing sunglasses, raised his hand, asking what the issue was without speaking.

I pointed at the road, the potholes, my shovel. "Construction," I said, not sure he could hear me.

The man shook his head no, then tried to pull forward, but I stepped in front of the car.

"You can't go through until we're done," I said.

The man honked his horn. He motioned for us to move, and when we didn't, he honked again. Then again, each honk seeming longer and louder than the one before.

I looked over at Omar. He nodded and let the rope slacken to the ground. We didn't want to draw unwanted attention. We'd made that mistake once and almost gone to jail because we kept trying to get the driver to roll down his window while he leaned on his horn. A police car had been not half a kilometer down the road from that spot, and we'd had to take off running into the jungle, leaving behind our rope and vests. We hadn't tried stopping cars there since. But that didn't bother us much; we moved up or down the highway when we felt a location was getting too hot. This spot was different because we'd been there for more than a week. The main draws were the uphill advantage on one side, and the two-kilometer visibility on the other.

I missed the lowlands on hot days like this, when you stepped out of the shower and immediately began sweating. I missed the desert; the wind, unobstructed by leaves, that hit your face. I missed home.

With the rope dropped, the man behind the wheel let up on the clutch and sped down the road. We watched his taillights fade.

"¡Sebastián!" Omar yelled at him. "You stupid son of a—"

"¡Here comes another one!" Sebastián yelled back.

Carlito rolled his eyes.

"¿Does this one look nice?" I called out.

"I think it's a Mercedes," Sebastián said.

Omar, Carlito, and I exchanged glances. Yeah, Sebastián was an idiot, but we had hammered home what fancy cars looked like, using the auto magazines we'd stolen from the supermarket back in the capital as guides. He'd once let two cars get by us while we hid in the brush, thinking them not worth our while, but Sebastián was good at alerting us to cops.

We got into our positions and waited for the car's logo to crest the hill. Sure enough, a black Mercedes. I wiped my forehead again, sweaty from the anticipation. Omar held up his hand and kept the rope taut with the other. I was already picturing what we would do with the money—ice cream, dinner at a restaurant, a hotel room in a nearby town. We were all in desperate need of a shower, a night when we weren't eaten alive by mosquitoes or whatever creatures crawled around the jungle floor in the dark.

We heard the purr of the engine and watched as the car got closer. By the time we realized that the car was speeding up, not slowing down, it was too late for Carlito and Omar to let go of the rope. I almost couldn't jump out of the way.

"¡Fuck!" Omar yelled as the rope tore out of his palm and got caught in the wheels of the car. "Motherfucker." Holding his hand, he watched the rope get dragged off by the Mercedes.

I eyed the car and saw the rope tumble free from underneath the tires. "¿You okay?" I asked Carlito, who was holding his left hand, rope-burned. He nodded and looked over at Sebastián, who was running down from his hiding spot.

"Holy shit, holy shit," Sebastián said.

When he reached us, Omar smacked him on the back of the head with his good hand. "I've told you about saying those words," he said. "Go get me some water."

Sebastián looked defiant for a moment before laying eyes on Omar's hand. He ran into the brush for one of the gallons of water we kept next to the tents we'd made from tarps and branches.

Carlito crossed the two-lane highway and sat down next to us. "¿How much money do you think he had in his wallet?" he said.

"Let's not think about that," Omar said. "It'll make it hurt worse."

Sebastián ran back with the jug and gave it to Omar. He uncapped the gallon with his teeth and dumped some of the water on his and Carlito's hands, then took a swig from it.

"¿Does it hurt?" Sebastián asked.

"It doesn't feel good." Omar slid out of his vest and took off his shirt, wrapping his hand in it. He instructed Carlito to do the same, tucking the end of a sleeve into the folds to keep the bandage in place.

"¿Now what?" I asked.

Omar looked at me like I'd spoken in tongues. "We still got about four hours of sunlight," he said, as though blood wasn't soaking into his shirt.

I couldn't believe it. "You and Carlito can't hold the rope," I said.

"I got two hands, ¿don't I?" he said.

I knew that letting the Mercedes get away would bother him unless we made enough for a hotel room that night.

Omar took another sip of water, then held it out to the rest of us. We all shook our heads no. Omar shrugged and swigged from the jug, letting water run down his chin and onto his neck, down his flat stomach. He was mostly skin and bones like the rest of us, but his muscles were more defined. While Sebastián and Carlito mostly got tired, Omar and I gained muscle from chopping wood or walking from town to town when we couldn't get a bus or van to pick us up. Omar was 20, born three years before me, and just over four years before Carlito. Sebastián had been a surprise.

"All right," Omar said. He capped the jug of water and shoved it into Sebastián's chest. "Go get us some clean shirts," he said. "One for Jaramillo too."

I looked at my shirt. Dirt all down the front of it, a tear near the navel, from when I'd landed on a rock jumping out of the way of the Mercedes.

Sebastián walked, rather than ran, back into the jungle and then came out with three shirts. I put mine on and tossed the dirty one on the road as a car drove by, heading down the hill.

"We're already losing money," Omar said, signaling for us to get into position. He leaned forward and grabbed his end of the rope and stared off into the jungle, waiting for us, like a statue, a saint. The patron saint of highway robbers.

THE REST of the day was successful. We managed to stop a few cars, avoiding the vans and buses. Too many people meant that we could be overpowered and held down until the cops showed up. We'd toyed with the idea of fake guns, but usually unsheathing machetes was enough to get drivers to comply. Plus, the driver might pull a real gun on us.

"I think we have enough," Carlito said, counting out money for a room.

"Not if we want to eat," Omar said. He motioned for Carlito to get back to his side of the road.

"¡A blue Kia!" Sebastián called down from his hiding spot.

Omar nodded. "Last one." He waited for us to get into position before lifting the rope.

When the car appeared at the top of the hill, I made my way over to the driver's side and told the man to roll down the window. He did so without hesitation.

"¿Yes?" he said.

Omar and Carlito grabbed their machetes while I reached in to unlock and open the door.

"All we want is your wallet," I said. I noticed movement in the back seat. Someone who had been lying down sat up with a jerk. I jumped back, expecting a setup, before hearing my name.

"¿Jaramillo?" The voice was familiar, but I didn't know why. The rear door swung open, and out stepped Leslie. "¿What are you doing?" she asked.

Leslie used to live in the same village as us. She was the same age as me, worked at my father's bakery just like I did, before one of the maras took over the village. The gang members had come without warning, without plans of negotiating, with violence. Anyone who opposed them was never heard of again. The mareros were all business, all gold teeth and tattoos—the last thing our parents ever saw. The same thing had happened to Leslie's mom.

I looked at the driver. Mr. Cortez, Leslie's dad.

"We," I started, "we were checking if you needed directions."

Leslie looked at Carlito's and Omar's machetes.

Sebastián came puffing down the hill in a cloud of dust. "Check the trunk," he said.

"Ah," Leslie nodded.

"We just wanted something to eat," I said.

She looked at Mr. Cortez, still behind the wheel. "We have some snacks," she said.

"We can get our own," I said.

"¿What kind of snacks?" Sebastián said.

"¿Are y'all heading to Peacheque?" Carlito asked.

"¿Do you guys want a ride?" Leslie asked.

I looked over at Omar, told Carlito no. We had to stop at least one more car.

"The town's near the lake, ¿right? ¿Why don't we meet there later?" she said.

"Nah, we're good," Omar said.

Leslie nodded, told us to come find her if we wanted. She gave me a sad smile and got back in the car. We watched her disappear. The mosquitoes were out, and it was getting dark. That was the worst part about the highlands. That and the humidity. I missed the lowlands on hot days like this, when you stepped out of the shower and immediately began sweating. I missed the desert; the wind, unobstructed by leaves, that hit your face. I missed home.

Omar kicked some rocks onto the highway.

"There'll be another car soon," Carlito said.

"Yeah, then we gotta come back out here tomorrow and do the same thing all over again." Omar picked up some rocks and launched them into the jungle.

I reminded Omar that it had been hard since before we'd been forced from our homes.

"Seems like Leslie's doing fine," Omar said.

"It's not her fault." I looked at the ground.

"Yeah," Omar said. "If only our dad had been a coward too."

None of us knew what to say. It wasn't fair to think like this, but sometimes it was all we could do. When the mareros came in, they offered each family 100 quetzales—enough for a family meal at Pollo Campero—to leave immediately. To grab their belongings and never come back. Those who stayed, who called the police, who wrote to the government, like our parents, didn't last the week. Leslie's

MICHELLE GARCIA

father was among the traitors who gave up, took the money, packed his things and his daughter, and fled. His wife stayed behind, refusing to leave her home.

When the mareros came for our parents, Carlito, Omar, Sebastián, and I snuck out the window in our room. We heard gunfire in the kitchen and didn't stop running until the sun began to shine along the highway. We never stopped running, just like everyone else who made it out alive. All of us, cowards.

Omar wiped his hands on his shorts and grabbed one end of the rope, again with his good hand; the other hung by his side. The rest of us weren't sure whether to speak. We got into place just as some headlights made their way over the hill.

IN TOWN at the hotel that night, I wondered where Leslie was. I tried to picture which room was hers.

"I'm gonna take a walk," I said.

Omar let Sebastián escape a chokehold. "¿Since when?"

"I'll be back soon."

Omar held the door closed as I tried to leave. "We don't need her help," he said.

I pushed past him and the door slammed behind me.

The night was warm, same as always, and the streets were crowded. Vendors sold tacos and ice cream out of carts, souvenirs from small booths. Why anyone would want to remember this place was beyond me. Younger kids chased one another and dodged oncoming traffic. Drivers honked at them or yelled from their windows. Down one of the three streets that made up the town, the *elotero* could be heard ringing his bell and shouting into the night.

The lake was calm, disturbed only by the sound of small animals jumping into the water. I bent down and picked up a small stone, illuminated by a streetlamp, and skipped it across the surface. I was reaching for another when I heard my name again, spoken as though she was still surprised to see me.

"I was hoping you'd come," Leslie said. She hugged me, and I couldn't remember the last time I'd felt someone's arms around me. "I'm sorry. It's just nice to see someone from home."

"I know," I said.

"¿Should we walk?"

I nodded. The water lapped at the shore. The wind carried the sounds of the vendors and children in town as though they were messages in a bottle.

"¿How long has it been?" she asked.

"Almost two years." This was something I tried not to think about. Each day felt like the one before as we struggled to survive.

"¿Is this what y'all have been doing?"

I couldn't tell what Leslie was thinking, but I knew she wasn't judging me. I was sure that she and her father had struggled at first too, and that no one was willing to help. The government ignored us—the cops ignored us—telling us we should have been prepared. And for the longest time, I couldn't understand why the mareros wanted our town. But Omar finally figured it out while looking at a map, plotting where we'd set up our next trap. Right between two big cities, our village served as a hub.

We heard gunfire in the kitchen and didn't stop running until the sun began to shine along the highway. We never stopped running, just like everyone else who made it out alive.

"¿What about you?" I asked.

Leslie sighed, then looked up at the moon, which was full. "We moved around a lot, like you."

I knew what she meant. We were like turtles, carrying our houses on our backs, settling wherever we could. Leslie put her hands in her pockets and told me that she and her father had tried to go to the capital, but that the mareros had also taken over their family's neighborhood there. She told me that they'd finally found a place outside Quetzaltenango, but that her father couldn't get a job and had ended up selling cold drinks on the side of the highway. His foot had been run over while handing someone a drink through a car window, and after that, she said, they'd been on the move. They searched for a place to work without having to walk too much.

"I think we might stay here a few days," she said.

"There are worse places."

We walked quietly for several moments.

"¿How long have y'all been here?" she asked.

"A week."

"¿And you stop cars every day?"

I nodded.

"¿How do you not get caught?"

I shrugged. "We don't make much."

Leslie nodded along. "¿Can I help?"

I couldn't tell if she was joking. "I don't think Omar would let you."

"I could help make you more money." She stopped walking and smiled at me. "Then I bet he'd let me."

"NO FUCKING WAY," Omar said. We were standing by the side of the highway again, the sun just starting to rise, when he noticed Leslie walking up the road. I hadn't told him the night before because I knew he would say no. But I figured if she showed up while we were already here, he'd at least have to listen.

"It's a good idea," I said.

"We barely make enough without having to split it with someone else." He looked toward Leslie, who was close enough to hear us now. "We don't need anybody else," he said.

"Good morning to you too," she said.

"Get her out of here," Omar said to me.

"¿Jaramillo told you my plan?" Leslie asked.

"¿To give you all our money? Yeah, he told me."

"Think about how many more cars would stop," I said.

"I only want a fifth, same as you," she said.

"¡Carlito!" Omar shouted. "Grab the rope."

Carlito crossed two lanes to the other side, afraid of upsetting Omar any further. I scooted closer to Omar, away from Leslie, and whispered to him. "Just one car."

Omar held his end of the rope. He looked at me out of the corner of his eye. "Fine," he said.

I smiled and patted him on the back. Leslie was already pulling a small knife from her purse. She made a few rips in her ankle-length skirt, then grabbed two fistfuls of dirt and covered her shirt, her arms, and her hair with it. She spread out her arms like, *¿What do you think?* Omar rolled his eyes, but I gave her two thumbs up.

Leslie inched toward the road and lay down. Omar shrugged his shoulders, mumbling under his breath, and stood by her head. Carlito crossed back over to us and followed Omar's lead. I knelt by her feet as Sebastián ran up to his hiding spot.

A few minutes later we heard a car engine.

"A Ford," Sebastián shouted down to us.

We took our positions, trying our best to look worried. As the car summited the hill, I waved my hands to flag it down. Carlito and Omar pretended to check Leslie's pulse before cradling her head. As the driver noticed Leslie's body, the car slowed. Then its window lowered.

"We need some help," I said, sounding panicked.

"¿What happened?" The driver pulled over and put the car in park.

"She was crossing the road," I said. "She got hit."

The man unbuckled his seat belt and opened his door. He walked over to Leslie, Omar, and Carlito. As soon as he reached them, Leslie sat up with her little knife and told him to empty his pockets.

"¿What is this?" The man put his hands in the air. Omar made quick work of checking his pockets, emptying his wallet. Carlito ran over to help me search the car. We found snacks, unopened water bottles, and some clean clothes to hawk or grow into. A new tire we could sell to a mechanic in town.

We unloaded everything and told him to leave.

"Not a word about this," Omar said—the same thing he said every time. How seriously drivers took him, I could never tell. "Or we'll find you and take more than just your shit."

The man walked indignantly to his car. He slammed the door shut. Dust and pebbles sprayed as he sped down the road.

"The very first car," I said, when he was finally out of sight.

"Probably luck," Omar said, counting the money in his hands.

I could tell he was happy about it. When he caught us watching him, he hid his smirk. He pocketed the bills and told us all to get back to our places. "¿You think we made enough to retire or something?"

Omar's temper had gotten worse since we'd left home. One good thing about it was that no one had ever picked on me at school.

Leslie and I exchanged smiles. Then she lay back down on the hot road.

BY THE END of that first day, after we'd sold the tire, along with the expensive cameras and phones we'd found in a car full of tourists that we dared to stop, we'd made more than we had in the past several months combined.

"Don't get too happy," Omar said. "She's leaving soon." He counted out some bills and gave Leslie her share as we stood outside the hotel. The sun set to the sound of beer bottles opening.

"This is more than my dad would make at work." She fanned the bills and brought them to her nose. "Maybe I can convince him to stay longer."

"No need. We're moving too," Omar said. "Spot's too hot now anyway."

I followed him as he walked inside. "We should do it again tomorrow. We should use her while she's here."

"Just because it worked once doesn't mean it'll work again." Omar turned to Leslie. "¿What would your dad think about what you're doing?"

Leslie shrugged. "Not sure he'd care," she said, folding the money into her pocket.

"One day doesn't make you a highway robber," Omar said. "So stop trying to act like one."

"One more day," I said. "We can't make this kind of money without her."

"¿Why not? We can get Sebastián to play dead, and it's the same thing."

"¿You really think cars would stop for a bunch of guys standing on the side of the highway?" Leslie said.

"¡Enough!" Omar yelled.

"One more day," I said, following Omar to our room and signaling for Leslie to come too.

He threw our empty pizza box from the night before against the wall. "We had a good day. Let's not fuck it up by talking stupid." Sitting on the bed, he began removing his shoes.

I was scared to say anything. Omar's temper had gotten worse since we'd left home. One good thing about it was that no one had ever picked on me at school. Not after Omar put a kid's head through the cafeteria wall. I had never asked for his help, and I was scared to thank him for it.

"¿What if I moved with y'all?" Leslie said.

Omar and I turned to look at her.

"We could hit a few spots, and after I made enough to last me and my dad a few months, I would leave."

"You don't know anything about this life." Omar shook his head, then was silent for a minute. "Now get the fuck out of my room," he said. With that, he lay back in bed and covered his eyes with a pillow.

I followed Leslie out. "I'm sorry." I closed the door carefully behind us.

"¿Why's he being such an asshole?" she asked.

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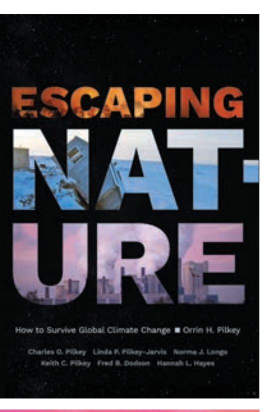

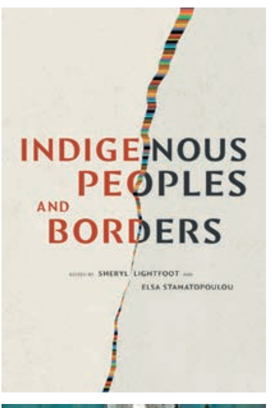

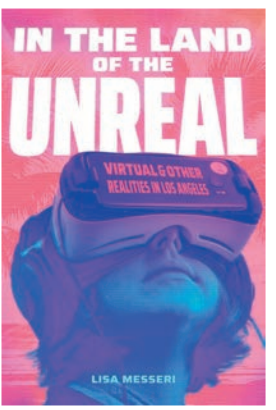

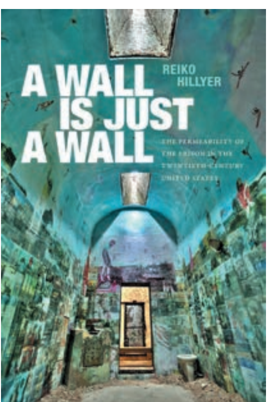

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"He's scared." I could see the top of her head now, all the dirt she'd have to wash out.

As Leslie reached the landing, she spun around. "So then I guess this is goodbye."

"I'll talk to him," I said.

She extended a hand when I was hoping for another hug. "It's whatever. If he doesn't want to make money, that's on him. Maybe I'll see you down the road." She patted her pocket with the cash in it, then spun back around and left me there.

Omar was waiting for me in the doorway to our room when I got back.

"¿Why'd you tell her no?" I pushed past him, noticing that he'd picked up the pizza box.

"We're better off." He followed me into the room.

"Look, she's cute, I get it, but we can't be taking on another person," he said. "I have to look out for all of you. She's not family, she's not my responsibility, and I don't trust her."

"We all lost things back there. That makes her family."

Omar sighed. "¿Why don't we get something to eat? We can talk about it over a Gallo or one of those American beers."

"I'm not hungry."

"Yeah, you are. I'm buying."

Omar bought a small bottle of rum on the way to the seafood place. He almost never drank, mostly because we didn't have the extra money for alcohol, but also because we had to be up early every morning. At the restaurant, he ordered a Coke and a glass and kept adding more and more rum. By the time Sebastián and Carlito found us there, Omar was pretty drunk.

"¿What's up, guys?" Omar said.

Carlito looked at me like, *¿What the fuck?*

"¿Why are you so happy?" Sebastián said.

Omar kicked two chairs out for them.

A waiter came by. "¿Can I get you anything to drink?"

"Just water," Carlito said.

"¡Get what you want!" Omar said.

The waiter looked at Carlito and Sebastián.

"Just a water." Carlito sat down. "I heard we're leaving tomorrow."

"¿That bitch tell you that?" Omar said.

"Stop talking about her like that." I pushed Omar.

"Yeah, she did," Carlito said.

"He just wants to fuck her," Omar said.

I stood up, balling my fists, ready to swing. Last time we'd gotten into a fight, it had been over a twin mattress we tried to tie on top of someone's car. Even then, I think I knew we couldn't drag that thing around, but I was tired of sleeping on the floor, tired of waking up with a branch or rock digging into my spine. Omar had given me a black eye and a busted lip; we didn't talk for days. It had been the rainy season, and we took turns sleeping outside because we couldn't stand being under the same tarp together.

"Fuck this," I said, swiping a biscuit from the table. I put it in my mouth and held it between my teeth, and flipped Omar off with both hands.

As I headed for the exit, I could hear him calling after me, but I didn't stop to listen. I walked outside and passed beggars and people on their way home from work. People sharpening their machetes and sweeping their front stoops and playing dominoes. I walked past children kicking around soccer balls and setting off small, handheld fireworks. I walked past the vendors selling fruit and ice cream, and finally made it to the hotel, where the front-desk worker nodded and waved me through.

I didn't have a key. Maybe that's what Omar had been saying when I left. I turned the knob to our room for good measure and the door creaked open. Inside, everything was exactly as we'd left it, except that Leslie was standing in the middle of the room. She held something in her hands. When she saw me, she startled.

She wiped her forehead with the back of her arm. "I thought it was Omar."

I stepped inside and felt like I was the one in the wrong place. I nodded at her hand. She shoved the bills into her pocket, then looked directly in my eyes. "You'll make this back in no time." She stepped toward me, but I blocked the door. "I left you some," she said. The tips of our shoes were almost touching. "You understand, ¿right?" Her lips were right below my ear. "I'm sorry." She reached for the doorknob. The bottom of the door hit my heels and I stood there for a second before moving out of her way.

LATER THAT NIGHT, Omar tore our belongings from the drawers and threw them onto the floor. He tossed out our clothes and the few toys from when Sebastián was younger. He snatched and pulled the tarp so hard that our machetes and water jugs fell from the dresser to the floor. We watched him shake it out like he was doing a magic trick.

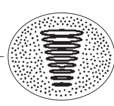
"¿Where is it?" Omar said, digging through the drawers as if he'd missed something.

The next day we walked down the road, sticking out our thumbs and hoping someone would give us a ride. No one stopped. The only person who pulled over was a bus driver, but we didn't have the fare. We dragged our feet and kicked the trash lining the highway gutters. When the sun began to set, we entered the jungle and put up our tarp. Looking up at it was almost like looking at the night sky, except without the stars.

We never made as much money in one day as we did with Leslie. Sometimes the memory of her would make me laugh. What do you call someone who robs the robbers? Omar would say "stupid," but I don't think so. I would say she's a thief hoping to sit at the right hand of God. Just like us. *A*

Jared Lemus's debut short-story collection will be published in spring 2025.

The Atlantic (ISSN 1072-7825), recognized as the same publication under *The Atlantic Monthly* or *Atlantic Monthly* (The), is published monthly except for combined issues in January/February and July/August by The Atlantic Monthly Group, 610 Water Street SW, Washington, DC 20024 (202-266-6000). Periodicals postage paid at Washington, D.C., Toronto, Ont., and additional mailing offices. Postmaster: send all UAA to CFS (see DMM 707.4.12.5); NONPOSTAL AND MILITARY FACILITIES: send address corrections to Atlantic Address Change, P.O. Box 37564, Boone, IA 50037-0564. Printed in U.S.A. Subscription queries: Atlantic Customer Care, P.O. Box 37564, Boone, IA 50037-0564 (or call +1 855-940-0585). Privacy: We occasionally get reports of unauthorized third parties posing as resellers. If you receive a suspicious notification, please let us know at fraudalert@theatlantic.com. Advertising (646-539-6700) and Circulation (+1 855-940-0585): 610 Water Street SW, Washington, DC 20024. Subscriptions: one year $89.99 in the U.S. and poss., add $10.00 in Canada, includes GST (123209926); add $20.00 elsewhere. Canada Post Publications Mail Agreement 41385014. Canada return address: *The Atlantic*, P.O. Box 1051, Fort Erie, ON L2A 6C7. Back issues: For pricing and how to order, see TheAtlantic.com/BackIssues or call 410-754-8219. Vol. 333, No. 3, April 2024. Copyright © 2024, by The Atlantic Monthly Group. All rights reserved.



CALEB'S INFERNO

By Caleb Madison

Warning: This crossword puzzle starts easy, but gets devilishly hard as you descend into its depths. See which circle you can reach before you abandon all hope.

ACROSS

1 "I Like ___" (1950s presidential slogan)
4 Sound from a stereotypical ghost
7 "I see what you ___ there …"
8 &
9 Manning whose brother Peyton was also a pro quarterback
10 Where people typically are when their alarm goes off
11 Fidgeting a lot, say
13 Vehicles whose passengers hopefully come in peace
16 Insane Clown Posse devotee
19 Gets out of a taxi, in a way?
20 Sound made during a belly rub, perhaps
21 Insulting shape to make on one's forehead using one's fingers
22 Court org. (or a former org. of a different court)
25 Spiraling
27 ___ Theodor Kocher, 1909 Nobel Prize winner for research into thyroid surgery
28 Scantest
30 Backed up on
31 *I and the Village* artist
32 Looked-past
33 Star-sign obsessives?
34 Leaves in stitches?
37 Sling for a sword
39 The Wright brothers, e.g.
40 Snap alternative
41 Where the Palm Dog Award is given

DOWN

1 "Drop" in a brainstorm
2 Oven for creating ovenware, perhaps
3 Tweak some text
4 Adorable pudginess on an infant
5 "I'm eating alone"
6 Like 5-Down
12 With 26-Down, 2005 hit single for Fall Out Boy
14 Word before *Miss* or *Opry*
15 "Save me from this deserted island ASAP, plz!"
16 Practical joke
17 It hangs out behind the tongue
18 HBO comedy that begins with Hannah Horvath's parents cutting her off financially
22 Tried for
23 Brush hair
24 Omitting nothing
26 See 12-Down
28 Classic nonsense song that originally appeared in the 1968 Italian movie *Sweden: Heaven and Hell*
29 Fighter of Angels in a classic anime
30 Dirty film?
35 Casually hang
36 Functions that create waves
37 Kaiser, to some
38 Crop-sharing abbr.

1	2	3	■	4	5	6
7			■	8		
9			■	10		
11			12		■	■
■	■	■	13		14	15
16	17	18				
19						
20				■	■	■
21			■	22	23	24
■	25		26			
■	■	■	27			
■	28	29				
30						
31						
32						
33				■	■	■
■	34			35	36	■
37						38
39						
40						
41						■

FOR HINTS AND SOLUTIONS, VISIT:
TheAtlantic.com/inferno

If you are anywhere in your journey with substance use disorder,

I want you to stop,
look around
and open your heart.

Revel in the abundance of
your existence.
See how small substance
use disorder can be when
sat next
to all that you are
or ever could be.

Fill your existence
with beauty, purpose and
a life of service.

And your substance
use disorder—
your history of addiction,
the things you
may have done
that you are not
proud of—will one day
be small enough
to deal with
while allowing you
space to live this life
of joy.

Hold on.

We are not the sum
of our scars but rather
a beautiful mosaic of the
life they hold together.

—Joseph
Washington, DC
In recovery from
substance use disorder

Learn how substance use recovery can

StartWithHope.com

NATIONAL COUNCIL *for* Mental Wellbeing

Pat Steir in her studio, Chelsea, New York, 2022. Photo: Marisa Chafetz