

A

*The Atlantic*

EST. 1857



CONFESSIONS  
OF A  
TOKEN BLACK  
PROFESSOR

*Why I lost faith in academia*

BY TYLER  
AUSTIN HARPER

Plus:

Al-Qaeda,  
25 Years After 9/11  
*By Graeme Wood*

A Firefighter's Story  
*By Sally Jenkins*

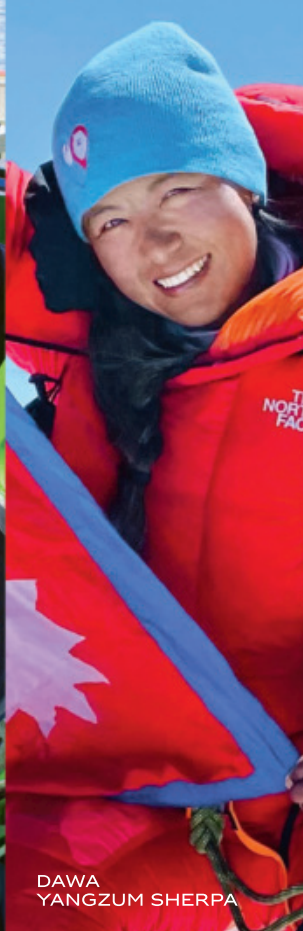




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# OF NO PARTY OR CLIQUE

VOL. 338-NO. 3

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CONTENTS

## Features

# 26

### Did al-Qaeda Succeed?

*Twenty-five years after 9/11, analysts can't decide whether the terrorist organization got what it wanted.*

By Graeme Wood

# 36

### How Do Monarchs Do It?

*Scientists are only just beginning to understand their secrets.*

By Vann R. Newkirk II

# 48

### The Cities That Said Yes to Drugs

*Policies that gave addicts clean needles and places to use drugs were intended to reduce harm. They created a "zombie apocalypse."*

By Michael Powell

# 58

### The Great Romance Slump

*Why are so few young people finding love?*

By Faith Hill

# 68

## COVER STORY

### Confessions of a Token Black Professor

*Why I lost faith in academia*

By Tyler Austin Harper



# 16

## KEVIN DOWDELL'S BOYS

By Sally Jenkins

*When a veteran firefighter vanished on 9/11, his teenage sons went looking for him.*

*Kevin and RoseEllen Dowdell with their sons, Patrick, 2, and James, 1, in 1986*

COURTESY OF THE DOWDELL FAMILY

Front

8  
**The Commons**  
*Discussion & Debate*

Dispatches

11  
**The Blue Book Is Back**  
*Thank God.*  
By Walt Hunter

14  
**You Call That a Pull-Up?**  
*The secretary of defense needs to work on his form.*  
By Tom Bartlett

Culture & Critics

82  
**Not Quite the Vineyard**  
*How the hit series Widow's Bay channels the horror and comedy of the times*  
By James Parker

84  
**What if Freud Was Right?**  
*A neuroscientist dares to argue that old-fashioned psycho-analysis holds the key to curing mental illness.*  
By Scott Stossel

89  
**Bad Luck, Bad Choices**  
*Richard Russo is America's portraitist of left-behind people in hollowed-out towns.*  
By Mark Oppenheimer

92  
**A Book That Wasn't Meant to Be Read**  
*Why does J. D. Vance's Communion exist?*  
By Matthew Walther

96  
**Invisible Men**  
*Gay Jamaican men struggle for survival in Marlon James's new novel.*  
By Stephanie Burt

99  
**Stance**  
A poem by Deborah Garrison

Back

100  
**Music's Most Mysterious Profession**  
*What conductors actually do*  
By Matthew Aucoin

108  
**Look Closer**  
*At David Hockney's Contrejour in the French Style*  
By Susan Tallman

On the Cover

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**NINETEEN  
EIGHTY-FOUR**  
GEORGE ORWELL

 The Folio Society

*Behind the Cover:* In this month's cover story, "Confessions of a Token Black Professor" (p. 68), Tyler Austin Harper recounts his decision to leave a tenure-track assistant professorship at Bates College, in Maine. One of the few Black faculty mem-

bers, Harper came to find the college's performative commitment to social justice suffocating, and ultimately hypocritical. On the cover, the outline of a lone figure walks away, set against the Bates seal.

— Paul Spella, *Senior Art Director*

# THE

## History Is Running Backwards

*In the May issue, David Brooks considered why reactionaries are taking over the world.*

### Letters

“H

“History Is Running Backwards” is a provocative article. But I think David Brooks errs in framing traditionalism and modernity as an either/or, when in fact they exist in a both/and context. One can be both a traditionalist and a modernist simultaneously. The key, as Brooks notes, is that “a well-adjusted life consists of daring explorations from a secure base.” Would that we all were so blessed to have that!

Judy D. Cottrell  
*Eugene, Ore.*

In dividing humanity into two neat psychological types—stability-seeking traditionalists and novelty-seeking progressives—Brooks misses an essential point: Psychology

doesn't exist in a vacuum; it constantly interacts with changing social factors. People who not long ago may have readily switched jobs and moved cities are now more likely to stay in place because of the scarcity of new positions and lack of affordable housing. Their psychology didn't change—their circumstances did. Our ancestors who ventured out of Africa 1.9 million years ago were likely seeking their next meal, not the thrill of adventure. These days, people are liable to deny science and seek safety in traditional institutions because the grandest creation of modern technology—artificial intelligence—threatens everything about our way of life. Debates should focus not on psychological insecurity but on

the technological, economic, and political decisions that are fostering material uncertainty and pushing people to cling to a much safer past.

Allen Frances, M.D.  
*Carmel, Calif.*

The fact that the traditionalists whom Brooks discusses cannot even agree on when humanity's “fall” occurred should raise doubts about their ideology. What they are constructing is less history than creation myth: As in the story of Adam and Eve, the fall occurs when people begin thinking for themselves. History and science teach us that there never was an Eden of perfect human harmony. Civilization was built painfully, and by most measurable standards,





life today is far better than it was in the past.

The key to understanding the traditionalists is analyzing not the past they claim to describe but the present in which their appeals are gaining traction. Their movement has emerged as society has granted more rights to previously marginalized groups. Beneath the traditionalists' arguments lies a recurring sentiment: *My group once had the authority to define how society should function, and now it no longer does. If only people would stop questioning inherited traditions and defer once again to established authority, as defined by my group, then society could recover its lost harmony.*

Brooks suggests that cultivating a sense of "rootedness" might help blunt the traditionalists' appeal. But many Americans do not see themselves reflected in what passes for American tradition. Our society does not make it easy for them to feel "rooted"—they do not see people like themselves in the literature or history they study. We need to develop broader narratives that tell the country's whole story. That in turn can cultivate a broader sense of belonging. The humanities do need revival, as Brooks argues. But they should not be organized around a myth of decline. They should be grounded instead in the founding principles that all people are created equal and

possess inalienable rights. The continuing struggle to realize those ideals could provide the shared civic story in which all Americans might find roots.

Thomas M. Thurston  
*Rosarito, Mexico*

## Everything Is Free and Nothing Matters

*In the May issue, Noah Hawley described what he saw at Jeff Bezos's Campfire retreat.*

F. Scott Fitzgerald once wrote, "Let me tell you about the very rich. They are different from you and me." Ernest Hemingway, in "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," issued a reply, writing, "Yes. They have more money." I returned to their exchange while reading Noah Hawley's essay about his time at Jeff Bezos's retreat. Hawley demonstrates that Fitzgerald was indeed correct—and not merely in the way Hemingway considered. Bezos, Elon Musk, Mark Zuckerberg, and their peers are so wealthy that they cannot spend all of their money in their lifetime. They really are free from consequences.

Neil Ravin  
*Hampton, N.H.*

Billionaires are certainly having a moment—they're more powerful than ever. But Noah Hawley's assertion that they are living consequence-free lives is

false. After Elon Musk criticized Donald Trump's "big, beautiful bill," the president was clearly displeased, and a rift emerged between the two titans. But it was short-lived: Trump had the power to damage Musk's business interests by canceling his lucrative contracts with the federal government. Political leaders still have the power to rein in billionaires—if only they're brave enough to try.

Ken Taub  
*Saint James, N.Y.*

## I Found It: The Best Free Restaurant Bread in America

*In the May issue, Caity Weaver wrote a "fun article for people to read."*

When I received my print edition and saw that the cover story was about America's "best free bread," I was a little grumpy. The world is in chaos, democracy is withering, and this was the best *The Atlantic* could do? But because the story was on the cover, I sat down and read it. Turns out the answer was "Yes!" Caity Weaver's article is

an amazing novella. Her style is witty and brilliant, light and insightful. The article is a masterful piece of journalism and a true delight to read, even with its wrenching moments. Thank you for featuring something that pushed the chaos and gloom to the back of my mind for an hour.

Stacey Wells  
*Oakland, Calif.*

In the midst of a particularly taxing, soul-sucking, and bleak week, "I Found It: The Best Free Restaurant Bread in America" made me smile and laugh and remember that there are still lovely things to discover about the world. I'm very sorry for Weaver's loss. I'm sure her parents would be proud that her articles have brought much joy to the world, and made a random computer programmer in Las Vegas not want to have a tantrum in the conference room.

Evan Appel  
*Las Vegas, Nev.*

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

**Corrections:** "Never Call Retreat" (July) misstated the name of the labor organization that repurposed "Battle Hymn of the Republic" into "Solidarity Forever." It was the Industrial Workers of the World, not the International Workers of the World. "How Britain Became as Poor as Mississippi" (July) stated that the economic gaps between London and other British cities are comparable to that between cities in West and East Germany. In fact, the economic gap between southeastern England, where London sits, and the rest of Britain is comparable to that between West and East Germany. "So You Want a Coat of Arms" (July) gave the incorrect impression that Kate Middleton directly received her own coat of arms. The arms were granted to her father ahead of her royal wedding.

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# DISPATCHES

OPENING ARGUMENT

## THE BLUE BOOK IS BACK

*Thank God.*

BY WALT HUNTER

**A** Across the faded blue covers of the exam books in my attic, I can trace the arc of my academic career. I can still see the grades I received on tests in “The Meaning of Abstraction in Modern Art” (A) and in Neurobiology (B–). Just the sight of the booklets is enough for me to feel the pressure to perform, to sculpt the contents of a semester’s worth of knowledge into some fresh shape. But by the time I became a college professor myself, in 2013, the blue book had begun to disappear. Why struggle to discern student penmanship, or risk misplacing a final exam in the trunk of one’s Subaru (to cite a completely hypothetical example), when tests, like everything else, can be administered on a laptop?

The coronavirus made every aspect of education virtual, but even after it abated,

in-person final exams remained out of favor for many classes. Part of the reason was simply administrative—the challenge of finding faculty or graduate students to watch over the test-takers. But there was also a shift in how teachers appraised student learning. The blue book meant timed essays and handwritten work, modes of assessment that felt regressive, cruel. It recalled an age of higher education—punitive and bleak, the domain of Dickens’s stern Mr. Gradgrind—that the modern university was eager to outgrow. Not entirely, of course; some faculty still lugged boxes of blue books home in the snow and scribbled grades in red on the covers. But alternatives to the in-person exam proliferated: the capstone project, the take-home essay, the portfolio of selected work from the semester.

The blue book seemed destined to become a relic, as obsolete as cursive. But it had one virtue that hasn’t been easy to replicate: Cheating on a blue-book exam is difficult. When faculty moved away from in-person pen-and-paper exams, they assumed that cheating would be kept in check by honor codes, or by “locked” browsers, which would prevent students from accessing sites that would jog their memory or simply give them the answers. But these measures were never wholly effective. In a survey of undergraduates published in 2020, 62 percent admitted to cheating in some manner.

The advent of AI has only exacerbated the problem. In a matter of seconds, students can create an entire essay with the help of a chatbot. If they’re savvy, they can spend a bit more time to make it sound authentically human enough to evade detection by their professor. As

my colleague Rose Horowitch has reported, such cheating has become so prevalent that Princeton recently gave up on its venerable honor code. For 133 years, students had signed a pledge not to cheat, and professors had trusted them to do the right thing. In May, in the face of rampant AI-enabled cheating, the university’s faculty voted to begin proctoring exams for the first time since the Gilded Age.

Universities find themselves in a surprising position. The only reliable way to evaluate what students have learned may be to bring back pen and paper. Faculty are reverting to in-person, handwritten assignments and timed essays—anything that keeps assessments offline. The unlikely hero of the day is the blue book, sales of which are up by as much as 80 percent for some universities since 2023.

Yet the blue book is more than a last redoubt against cheating. Despite its antiquated appearance, the blue book encourages experimentation, even virtuosity. It deserves to live on not because of what it rejects but because of what it makes possible: thinking on the page, a hallmark of the humanities that is indispensable to their value—and essential to the kinds of human beings that a liberal-arts institution hopes to send out into the world.

THE BLUE BOOK hasn’t changed much for a hundred years or more, with its sky-blue tint and pale-red margin lines, its two neat staples and wide-open spacing, and its austere list of requirements on the cover (NAME, SUBJECT, CLASS, SECTION). The precise history of the blue book is lost to time. One origin story pinpoints its

emergence in the 1920s at Butler University; the pamphlet is said to have borrowed its distinctive hue from the university’s colors. Harvard lore suggests that the blue book is older still: By one account, a classics instructor, Evangelinus Apostolides Sophocles, burned a stack of blue-book exams to protest the university’s move from oral to written examinations in 1857.

I realize that by advocating for the blue book in 2026, I might be engaging in the same opposition to progress as old Professor Sophocles. But to me, the blue book represents a timeless human activity—namely, trusting your mind to discover unknown capabilities.

I think of my college-age self, looking up at the clock as I turned the page, crossed out a sentence, broke the tip of my pencil. I recall the satisfaction of filling one book and getting up from my desk to take another, the adrenaline of using my knowledge to improvise something and then having more to say. What I learned by writing this way was distinct from what I learned by composing a five-paragraph essay, with its thesis statement, staid structure, and rote deployment of argument and evidence. Any AI agent can mimic that template.

Taking a blue-book exam is an almost athletic endeavor, and not just because of the stamina it requires of both mind and hand. The test-taker is forced to compose an essay that will demonstrate their command of a semester’s or year’s worth of material. They have to summon the verve to tackle a prompt about the place of freedom in the American novel, or the value of a human life in *Hamlet*, or what Whitman meant when he said

that “the United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem.” Staring down the empty pages of a blue book, I learned to throw myself into my writing. In the process, I discovered what I was capable of as a writer and a thinker. When you’ve done the reading and reviewed your lecture notes, you can feel like a basketball player whose hours in the gym made possible a transcendent playoff performance, or like a musician whose endless runs of arpeggios in a soundproof practice room allowed for a spectacular solo in the concert hall.

Not every student can put pencil to paper for 90 minutes without looking up. Even the strongest students can struggle, at first, to answer the question, or to organize their thoughts. But this, too, is a reason to love the blue book. When students write, they write into uncertainty. They court risk. No surrogate exists for feeling an idea form in your mind and trying to express that idea on the page. And wonderfully, for the instructor, the blue book documents how students strain their way to an answer or an argument. The marks on the page are indelible, and efforts to amend them leave marks of their own: furious erasing or hasty strike-throughs. The blue book is a record of first thoughts, instincts, intuitions.

These fits and starts and failed experiments are a good thing—for the education of the individual and for the health of a society. The humanities are distinguished by the habits of mind that they inculcate, not for their success in forcing students to memorize facts. Among the most significant of these habits are a nimbleness of thought and a flexibility of



argument, the ability to draw connections between diverse sets of facts. Those habits are honed by writing under pressure. Challenged by the blue book, students learn to identify and stand behind their individual commitments. As their professor, I hope they carry that lesson beyond the classroom, beyond the university, and into the fractious world they enter as citizens.

Often the key insight arrives just as time is expiring, and I love how no part of the book

is out of bounds for a final thought at the buzzer. “Education is the single greatest thing Thoreau believes in,” one student sneaks into the margins of the final for my American-literature course. For the teacher, this is the pleasure of the blue book—despite its uniform presentation and its rigid lineation, any part of it might reveal a sudden moonshot of an idea. Many of the best sentences appear on the back inside cover, such as this ending to an essay on Toni Morrison: “A good life

is what we make it to be—now all we have to do is live it.”

STUDENTS, OF COURSE, know what they’ve been taught: the timeline of the English Civil War, the structure of a sonnet by Gwendolyn Brooks, the development of a motif in a Mahler symphony. But the blue book demands more than a recitation of facts. It asks students to demonstrate not just that they know when or where something happened, but why it did. It asks them not just

who wrote a poem, or when, but what the poem conveys about the world in which it was written. The best-prepared students, the ones who inhabit the history and poetry and music that have made up the semester’s syllabus, find that they understand the material in ways they didn’t appreciate before they opened the blue book and the clock started ticking.

Proponents of artificial intelligence have promised that, by removing certain elements of the craft of writing, students can concentrate on making their work more polished and their ideas more clearly defined. That’s a dangerous ruse. To see what a student has learned, look at the moment when they struggle to begin—and then transcend that struggle to create something genuinely surprising. That’s the moment the full force of the writer’s mind takes possession of the process.

When we eliminate the possibility of writing badly or incoherently, we eliminate writing’s greatest satisfaction: the feeling that we have stepped outside ourselves and are watching our own words fall together in the right order. What I describe sounds like a state of grace, but it’s also a furious act of intellection and expression undertaken with only one’s study and wits to guide them. I’ve come to love handing out blue books on exam day and seeing the look of ready intelligence on my students’ faces. The essay they are about to write will be better than they think it can be. All they have to do is write it. *A*

*Walt Hunter is a contributing editor at The Atlantic and an English professor at Case Western Reserve University.*



## YOU CALL THAT A PULL-UP?

*The secretary of defense needs  
to work on his form.*

BY TOM BARTLETT

**P**ete Hegseth wants us to watch him sweat. Videos of the secretary of defense in a T-shirt and shorts working out alongside military personnel have become a trademark of his tenure. He has been filmed running on Omaha Beach, swinging a kettlebell on a university campus, and doing jumping jacks on an amphibious assault ship. In one clip, Hegseth pumps iron with troops at the Guantánamo Bay naval base—or, as a Defense Department X account put it, “America’s @SECWAR CRUSHED 44 reps on the bench after a morning run.”

But did he *really* crush those reps? Each time a new episode of *Boot Camp Pete* drops, critics skewer his form and mock his endurance. They insist that he’s all flex and no fundamentals. In that bench-press clip, for example, he doesn’t fully extend his arms, making the exercise far easier and inflating his total. A few seconds into the clip, you can hear someone

yell, “All the way down, all the way up!” Hegseth fails to heed that helpful cue.

Such nitpicking would be uncharitable if Hegseth were just another 40-something dad getting a lift in at Planet Fitness. But these are highlight reels, posted by the Pentagon. Plus, the former Fox News host isn’t exactly known for withholding judgment himself: Recall how, last September, he gathered the nation’s generals and admirals together so that he could upbraid them for being overweight. He told them that leaders set the standard and that when “you let the small stuff go, the big stuff eventually goes.”

With Hegseth’s wisdom in mind, let’s examine what the United States military’s training manuals have to say about proper exercise form. Short answer: a lot. You’ll find hundreds of pages spelling out precisely how to perform all manner of movements, including how to stretch your thighs (“grasp the left ankle and pull toward the left buttock”), how

to plank (“forearms flat on the ground, forming a triangle”), and how to throw a four-pound ball from a seated position (“do not throw the medicine ball like shooting a basketball”). These manuals are replete with charts, bullet points, and illustrations. The Army’s *Holistic Health and Fitness Testing* manual provides detailed instructions, accompanied by photographs, on the bench press, warning that you must not “jerk or shrug the shoulders, arch the back, or allow the hips to rise off the bench” (note to Secretary Hegseth: p. 65, Appendix B).

Standards vary across branches, even for basic exercises. Take the push-up. For the Army’s fitness test, soldiers must do what’s known as a hand-release push-up, requiring them to stick their arms straight out to the side after each repetition. The Marine guide devotes several hundred words to describing how to do a traditional push-up, specifying that soldiers “may not rest their chest on the deck except as required to ensure that the upper arms are at least parallel to the deck.” In the Air Force, your feet cannot be more than 12 inches apart, and you must maintain a “rigid head to heel form.” These are directives rather than suggestions. Failure to meet the standard results in a “no-go,” in military parlance, meaning you haven’t passed that portion of the test.

Hegseth’s push-ups wouldn’t pass muster in any branch. Last summer, Hegseth and Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. kicked off the “Pete & Bobby Challenge,” in which participants attempt to do 50 pull-ups and 100 push-ups in less than 10 minutes. Hegseth’s push-ups are more like half-ups: In the ones captured on video, he doesn’t go through

the full range of motion. His substandard technique is ironic because he’s on record ridiculing others for their lack of push-up prowess. In his 2024 book, *The War on Warriors*, Hegseth mocks women soldiers who can do only “ten push-ups at a pop” and refers to a transgender woman as a “ten-push-up kind of guy.”

To be fair, Hegseth’s pull-up form, at times, is more or less textbook. The issue is consistency: Hegseth can’t seem to maintain the standard for the duration of the competition, and raises his knees to his chest to give himself additional oomph. This is known as “kipping” and is forbidden in an eight-page pull-up guide published by the Marines. In one clip, Hegseth kips while using an underhand grip, which technically makes what he’s doing a chin-up—an exercise often considered less challenging than a pull-up. (The Marine guide permits both, though kipping is always forbidden.) According to the guide: “Poor quality work will prevent you from getting the most from your workout and can lead to injury.” Hegseth’s work is, by Marine standards, poor.

Hegseth claims at the end of the video that he finished in less than six minutes, which would be impressive if he weren’t flouting the rules and sacrificing form for speed. What’s more, he’s doing these exercises incorrectly during a challenge that bears his name. Given all of this, it’s impossible to have confidence in the validity of Hegseth’s self-reported feat.

Granted, I am not a trained grader of military exercises. Prior to perusing these manuals, I wasn’t aware that your arms need to be at a 45-degree angle in relation to your trunk



for the modified bent-leg body twist, or that it is imperative to point your toes to the rear for the prone row. I was entirely unfamiliar with the squat bender and the quadruplex. Nor did I know, before watching an Army instructional video, how to swing a kettlebell.

As it happens, neither does Hegseth, who, in January, was filmed swinging a kettlebell with recruits at UCLA. You're supposed to keep the kettlebell near your body and generate momentum with your legs and hips. Instead, Hegseth squats, as if doing deep knee bends, and brings the weight far too close to the ground, putting strain on his shoulders and back. This is wrong, according

to Joel Del Rosario, a retired Marine and a kettlebell coach. Del Rosario told me he's glad to see Hegseth encouraging better fitness in the military, and he noted that, in his experience, pretty much everyone who gives the kettlebell a whirl fails at first. He said he'd be honored if asked to show Hegseth how to do the exercise properly.

I consulted other military exercise experts too. Among them was Stew Smith, a former Navy SEAL and the author of a series of books about prepping to qualify for the Special Forces, including one on the Ranger Physical Assessment. A former Army National Guard infantry officer, Hegseth has bemoaned slipping standards across the military, including at the Ranger School—even though he never completed the famously grueling 61-day leadership and fitness course. Smith said he doesn't evaluate the performance of people unless they ask, and so wouldn't comment specifically on Hegseth's

approach and abilities. But he said he stresses to his students the importance of going all the way up and all the way down, whether it's a pull-up, push-up, or bench press.

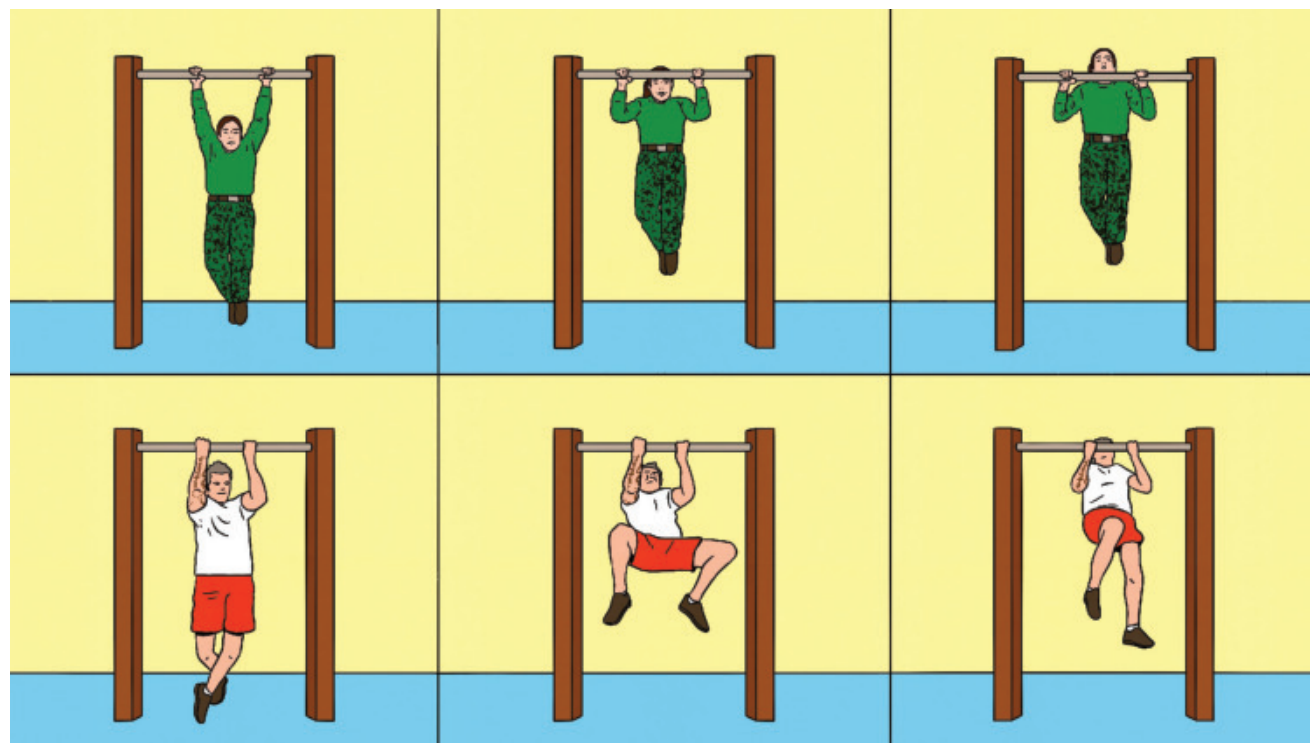
I also asked Maureen LeBoeuf what she made of the "Pete & Bobby Challenge" video. LeBoeuf is a retired brigadier general and the first and only woman to head the physical-education department at West Point, a position known as "master of the sword." She said that nothing she saw from the defense secretary in that video would have counted if she had been the grader, and she has graded thousands of such tests. "His pull-ups or chin-ups and the kicking that he does—you would never allow that. You'd stop somebody; you'd say, 'Okay, you're done,'" LeBoeuf said. "He just keeps kicking, and it's not a good look." She allowed that he might have been exhausted in those clips, but the Army doesn't usually

recognize fatigue as an excuse. And it's hard to forgive such lapses and corner-cutting from someone who, as LeBoeuf put it, is "real big on standards."

In response to an inquiry about the criticism of Hegseth's workouts, Joel Valdez, the acting Pentagon press secretary, insisted that Hegseth was being unfairly singled out. "Have you ever seen Lloyd Austin's form? Did the Atlantic ever ask about it?" he wrote. "The answer to both of those questions is no." That's true, but Austin, the previous secretary of defense, was not known for posting self-promotional exercise content on social media. He did, however, complete Ranger School and Airborne School, command the 10th Mountain Division in Afghanistan, lead the fight against the Islamic State, and earn a Silver Star. *A*

Tom Bartlett is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

Top: Proper pull-up form, as demonstrated by a Marine Corps officer. Bottom: Secretary Hegseth's form is inconsistent. In one clip from the "Pete & Bobby Challenge," he does a chin-up and raises his knees to give himself additional oomph—a technique known as "kipping" that is forbidden by the Marines.









# Kevin Dowdell's Boys

When a veteran firefighter  
vanished on 9/11, his teenage  
sons went looking for him.

*By Sally Jenkins*

*Photographs by  
Haruka Sakaguchi*



T

o a firefighter who is inside one, a fire creates as much darkness as heat. Flames start bright but throw off smoke that can swathe everything in pitch black. Lieutenant Kevin Dowdell did not *fight* fires so much as he groped through and problem-solved them, relying on

half-blind judgment and expertise—and his fellow firefighters to keep flaming debris off his back.

At the cinderling end of a successful 24-hour shift with the New York City Fire Department, Kevin would hang up his helmet, so ash-rubbed that it looked salty, and drive home to his wife and two sons in Rockaway Beach, Queens. “Oh, we had a good job last night,” he’d say, elated as well as exhausted. By “good,” his family knew, he meant the fire had been *big*.

In his innermost firefighter’s heart, Kevin liked it when the alarms went off. A good job broke the tedium of drills and doughnut-dunking in the firehouse kitchen. It called on Kevin’s whole mind and body; he had to calculate burn rates and airflow while wielding 40 pounds of gear. Fire needs four elements: oxygen, heat, fuel, and a chemical reaction. Deprive a fire of even one of those, and it goes out. But in New York—a steel-stacked, deep-tunneled metropolis with architecture ranging from tenements to glass towers—the interaction of the elements is complex. One of the questions on the test to become a lieutenant: *What is the expansion factor of a 100-foot steel beam as it reaches the inherent heat level of 1,200 degrees Fahrenheit?*

A firefighter had to be part chemist, part engineer, and part daredevil. But the mission itself was simple. “You show up on someone’s worst day and try to make it better,” Kevin told his sons, Patrick and James.

The FDNY had a saying: There were people who just worked for the department for a paycheck, and then there were firefighters. Kevin was a firefighter. “They *love* to go to a fire,” his widow, RoseEllen, told me, sitting at Patrick’s kitchen table in Rockaway Beach. “They’re *waiting* for a good fire.”

But on September 11, 2001, Kevin met a fire that looked like hell’s own flames. It burned a quarter of a mile up in the sky, unreachable by any ladder, almost at the top of the World Trade Center’s Twin Towers. Kevin’s unit, Rescue 4 in Queens, arrived about 20 minutes after the second hijacked plane had hit. He would have read the color of the smoke and picked apart the elements of the fire: aviation fuel, combustible office materials, and an oxygen-rich chimney effect. They did not make for a good fire. They made for an uncontainable one. Nevertheless, Kevin led his men into the South Tower.

Twenty-five years after the attacks, “Never Forget” is a T-shirt slogan. A third of the American public is too young to recall that

day. Anniversaries have become rote rituals in which politicians describe scenes they did not witness and national unity that no longer exists. To get beyond the benumbed abstraction, it’s necessary to remember with specificity. September 11 was a *lived* event. One way to recall it meaningfully, then, is through a life.

**KEVIN DOWDELL** was handsome in a regular way, with dark-brown hair in an old-fashioned side-comb and a lean triangle of a face that tapered to a good chin. But he had some gravel in him, and his forearms were as thick as the fat end of a baseball bat. He was the grandson of an Irish longshoreman who’d left a dying fishing port in Fingal and arrived at Ellis Island in 1904 with \$3 in his pocket. Kevin’s father, a butcher, raised seven children on leftover baloney ends in an 1,100-square-foot rowhouse in Brooklyn.

At the age of 18, Kevin went to work as a “sandhog,” the nickname for miners who dug the city’s maze of tunnels that carry cars, steam, sewers, water. He spent his early manhood descending hundreds of feet into compression chambers, which sometimes caused the “staggers” or “chokes,” as sandhogs called the bends. He dynamited through rock and dug out muck up to his knees—slow, grimy work so hazardous that it was said to kill a man for every mile. But a four-hour shift paid as if you’d worked eight.

When he wasn’t sandhogging he was at Rockaway Beach, where he surfed and hung out in Jacob Riis Park with a crowd from his old Brooklyn neighborhood. Among them was RoseEllen Fedele, a tall, slim 18-year-old college student. At first he was too shy to make eye contact, but he eventually got her number. They dated for five years, which was how long it took him to get out of sandhogging—and she never doubted that he would. Between shifts he studied for and took every civil-service exam in the city. In 1980, Kevin qualified to be a police officer, and he married RoseEllen, who had become a schoolteacher. He spent just a year wearing a badge before he transferred to the fire department, intrigued by a brother-in-law’s stories about how satisfying the job was.

RoseEllen had Patrick on Easter Sunday 1983. When they brought the baby home and relatives crowded to hold him, Kevin refused to let go. “Nobody’s touching him,” he joked. The Dowdells moved to the Rockaways, known as the “Irish Riviera” for its enclaves of firefighters and cops, where the neighbors might swap shifts so you could spend time with your kids. Kevin found a small bungalow that wasn’t winterized and renovated it with his own two hands. They were so poor that they couldn’t afford a stove at first; instead, they cooked on a hot plate. When James came 17 months after Patrick, they put a second crib in the tiny nursery. “You had to, like, slide between them” turned sideways, RoseEllen said.

Kevin often worked seven days a week. When he was off duty, he laid hardwood floors and tile to make extra money. If he got home from work and found the boys in bed, sometimes he’d wake them up just to spend a little time with them. “Come on. Let’s take a walk.” They’d stroll down Rockaway Beach to look for old glass bottles, then get an ice cream. He taught them to surf and how to handle the large waves. “Dive to the bottom and grab a fistful of sand. By that time, the wave will have passed over. Trust me.” They did.

On Sunday mornings, RoseEllen would simmer red sauce on the stove while she took the boys to Mass, then jar it for the rest of

the week's dinners. One of their few indulgences was Friday dinner in Greenwich Village, usually at a favorite Italian spot at the corner of Carmine and Bleecker Streets called Trattoria Spaghetti. "Put on something nice," Kevin would tell the boys. "Dress like your father has a job." He would order the veal parmigiana and a glass of red wine, look around the table at his family, and say, "This is what I work all week for."

The boys spent so much time at the firehouse that they learned the meaning of the crackling radio talk. A "10-75" was a structure fire in progress, and "K" meant the end of a transmission. The boys would yell, "Rescue 2 to Queens 10-75 K!" They did drills with Kevin and his team. The big men would strap 10-year-old James into a harness and hoist him over the second-floor firehouse roof. When a call came in, the boys would ride on the front bench seat of the truck, between the men in their bulky turnout coats. They'd get to press the foot pedal that sounded the horn. Kevin showed them how to release it in short blasts. "You have to tap it." He'd pat James on the knee—the signal for another horn blare. At the site of the fire, the boys would watch through the windshield as the men dismounted in their cumbersome gear and walked through smoking doorways. "The bigger the fire," James told me, "the bigger the smiles when they came out."

The city had five rescue units, one per borough, and their members were drawn from among the most capable firefighters in the FDNY. Kevin trained for the worst emergencies: tunnel fires, structural collapses, aviation crashes, train derailments. He carried specialized tools and was a skilled black-water diver, for when cars went into rivers. As Rescue 4's lieutenant, he organized logistics and made swift, expert judgments about risk factors. A manhole cover weighed 300 pounds but could blow six stories into the air. Hidden fuel could be anywhere. An apartment lobby might have an adjacent dry cleaner; grocery stores had stock closets with flammable ingredients. Smoke and heat moved one way in hallways and another in vertical shafts. In a single day, Kevin and his men might pluck a stranded window washer off a building, deal with a transformer fire down a manhole, and fish passengers from the Hudson after their helicopter went down. In 2000, the unit responded to 2,524 calls. But primarily, Rescue 4 went to fires. Sometimes there were half a dozen in a shift.

The bigger the fire, the calmer Kevin acted. "He could pull up to the building and tell you right away where the people are gonna be trapped and which way the fire's gonna spread," Liam Flaherty, a colleague in Rescue 4, told me. "I think his heart rate actually went down the worse the fire got." Often Kevin's men could feel the fire but not see it. "When you're in this dark environment that's hot,



*Kevin responds to a four-alarm fire in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, in February 1985.*

it's like being locked in a room with a tiger," Billy Murphy, another colleague, told me. "You're like, 'Where is it?'" Flaherty would peer through his breathing mask at an acrid black veil, trying to find his way around a burning apartment. Then he would hear Kevin's cool voice. "Hey, Li, how we making out over there?"

**OVER THE YEARS**, Kevin worked so many "good" fires that he became something of a legend in the FDNY, according to Flaherty. In 1991, Kevin helped keep flames at bay on the 12th floor of a Seventh Avenue building to aid a stunning rope rescue of two men from window ledges. In 1993, he was among the first responders to the terrorist bombing of the World Trade Center, which left a crater several stories deep and required him to comb through hazardous rubble, still glowing orange, while gas tanks exploded in the underground parking garages. In 1994, a gas leak blew up a diner in Long Island City, dropping the ground floor into the basement and pinning a waitress under slabs of





Flaherty, a tousle-haired raconteur, was their drum major. Murphy, a tall Coast Guard veteran, played the bagpipes. Kevin loved the Pipes and Drums so much that he coaxed his sons to take Irish-music lessons—Patrick, the pipes; James, the snare drum—so they could march in the St. Patrick’s Day parade, alongside Kevin himself on the bass drum. “I work with the best guys in the world,” he would tell his sons.

As with every FDNY unit, the heart of Rescue 4 was the firehouse kitchen, where the men ate together, and drank coffee, and debriefed after every incident. It was also the scene of geyser-like laughter, juvenile and often at someone’s expense. If Kevin corrected the pronunciation of his name (it was *Dowdell*), they’d call him “Diddle.” A shift was up to 24 hours, and between alarms they had time for pranks. Once, an officer made the mistake of complaining that he didn’t like hot dogs. For the next month, all the

concrete. Kevin and his partners crawled into the wreckage and worked for three hours to free her as piles of debris quaked over them. He took turns holding her hand and shielding her body with his own, in case the slabs caved. They got her out alive, and won medals for that job. In 1995, he was part of an elite FEMA squad deployed in the aftermath of the Oklahoma City bombing to search for survivors and recover bodies.

With his record, he could have risen higher in the department. But a captaincy would have required leaving Rescue 4 for another unit in the city, and he wanted to stay. “Better to be a happy lieutenant,” he told RoseEllen.

The unit had a strong sense of brotherhood; many of its members played together in the Emerald Society Pipes and Drums, an Irish group within the department that marched in civic events.

unit served for dinner was hot dogs. Hot dogs in barbecue sauce. Hot dogs in pasta. Hot dogs, grilled and boiled. The officer grimly waited it out. At the end of the month, a large meat loaf landed in the center of the table. Then they cut him a slice. The meat loaf was stuffed with hot dogs.

Rescue 4 gave Kevin a sense of home, and a feeling that he was personally protecting his beloved Rockaways. He didn’t just *respond* to trouble in the area—he sought it out. After a boy in their neighborhood fell into a septic tank, Kevin installed a scanner on his dashboard; he believed he could have helped if he’d heard the call. He’d listen to emergency dispatches while driving home from Little League and say, “We’re close by. Let’s just go check it out.” Kevin would pull over if he saw a car accident and extricate someone from the wreck before EMS arrived. He’d tell his sons not

to be bystanders. “Don’t sit on the sidelines. Make things happen. Do things.” Once, when Kevin saw smoke coming from a building in their neighborhood, he told the boys to call the fire department and then ran off, grabbed a garden hose, and climbed through a back window to start putting the blaze out himself.

He was strict and exacting with his sons. For every minute they were late to something, Kevin docked them half an hour of free time. When they were old enough, he enlisted them in construction work, and didn’t pay them until they could lift heavy loads. “You work like a man, you get paid like a man.” He once called James home from a friend’s house because he hadn’t cleaned his room. He marched James into the doorway and said, “Look at that.” There was a pair of socks on the floor.

Patrick was growing into a burly achiever who aspired to West Point. James was slighter, milder, but with a distance runner’s stamina. During long car rides in New York gridlock, Kevin would ask the boys what they intended to do with their lives. Their grandfather was a butcher. Their father was a fireman. “I want you to be the next step up from that,” Kevin told them. “I want you to do something better than me.”

BY LATE SUMMER 2001, Kevin had earned 20 citations for outstanding performance. He was beginning to think about retirement, and he dreamed of traveling—to Iceland in particular, with its volcanic landscape forged in fire. And the boys were nearly men. Patrick was 18 and had just started at Iona University, in New Rochelle, having been wait-listed at West Point. James was turning 17 and starting his senior year at Xavier High School in Manhattan. He wanted to be a firefighter. “You’re *going* to college,” Kevin insisted, but he took James on a scuba-training run under the Throgs Neck Bridge. James donned an FDNY dry suit and plunged into the dark, roiling East River while his father supervised from the boat. After the dive, someone took a picture of the two: Kevin’s hand is clapped on his son’s shoulder, and James, shrugging off the suit, is grinning widely.

On Sunday, September 9, the family celebrated James’s birthday. Kevin had the day off and Patrick came down from Iona, and they barbecued and ate cake. Kevin and Patrick cloistered themselves in the den to work on his reapplication to West Point. Then Kevin drove Patrick back to school and kissed him on the cheek. “Love you. See you soon. I’ll talk to you next week.”

Kevin reported to Rescue 4 at 6 p.m. on the evening of September 10 for a 24-hour shift. Liam Flaherty went off duty and headed to band practice at the Elks Lodge. Billy Murphy was on vacation. The kitchen was quiet.

At 8:46 the next morning, American Airlines Flight 11 made a terrifying yeering sound as it accelerated into the North Tower of the World Trade Center. Rescue 4’s summons came at 8:55. Seven men hopped on the rig with Kevin: Terrence Farrell, William Mahoney, Peter Nelson, Durrell Pearsall, Peter Brennan, Allan Tarasiewicz, and a potential recruit named Michael Cawley. The ride probably took about 20 minutes. As they barreled toward Lower Manhattan, an unnerving alert came over the dispatch radio: “Be advised we have jumpers.” From a distance, Rescue 4 would have seen the smoke surging from floors 93 to 99 of the



Above: *The South Tower collapses at 9:59 a.m., September 11, 2001.*  
Opposite page: *RoseEllen in Rockaway Beach earlier this summer.*

North Tower, the tallest building in New York. About seven minutes into their drive, they might have seen the blooming explosion of the second jet, United Airlines Flight 175, as it tilted into the South Tower between floors 77 and 85.

Rescue 4 arrived at a scene that was too much for the senses. A torrent of debris fell from the buildings—shredded metal and insulation, chunks of concrete, shivering glass shards—amid an earsplitting clamor of sirens and screaming. Torsos, luggage, and aluminum scraps of 767s were strewn on the sidewalks. What looked like splashes of red paint on the plazas were the remains of jumpers who had pinwheeled from the upper floors of the North Tower. Kevin ran into a stunned fellow lieutenant named Robert LaRocco, from Ladder 9, who had seen a severed forearm with a perfectly manicured hand. LaRocco managed to get a call through to his wife. He told her, “It’s raining people.”

Kevin reported to a command post across the street from the North Tower, where the FDNY’s chief of special operations command, Ray Downey, was doling out orders. He assigned Rescue 4 to help with evacuations in the South Tower and, if possible, to get upstairs and beat back the fire. Kevin was seen lining up his men and talking to them intently. He then led them single file toward the South Tower, hugging the sides of buildings.

A rescue squad would have had its hands full in the lobby alone. Elevators were broken, stairwells smoked, and radios were unreliable. People were streaming down, badly burned or bloody, and some had to be carried. One elevator had stopped just short of the ground floor with people trapped inside. Firefighters pried open the outer doors and could see their legs, but couldn’t find a way to lower the car enough to free them. Flaming jet fuel cascaded down the shaft as the crews worked.

At 9:52 a.m., about half an hour after Kevin had arrived, a battalion chief named Orio Palmer reached the South Tower’s 78th floor, where the jet’s wing had inflicted mass casualties. “We’re going to need two engines up here,” Palmer radioed down.



Wherever Kevin was—trying to force open elevators, or starting the slow ascent to 78—the elements of the fire were taking over. The second plane had struck the South Tower at more than 500 miles an hour, stripping the fireproofing from steel trusses and columns. The inferno fed on carpets, curtains, chairs, desks, computers. Plumes of soot trapped the heat. The temperature hit 1,800 degrees Fahrenheit, softening the bones of the building. At 9:59 a.m., the top of the South Tower sagged. Then it began to collapse. Beams and struts slammed into one another. As each floor failed, the falling mass increased, picking up velocity. About 500,000 tons of concrete and steel sped to the earth, reaching an estimated 124 miles an hour.

Lieutenant LaRocco of Ladder 9 had just put his foot on a stalled escalator on the north end of the South Tower's mezzanine when he felt something like a wave in the floor. He heard a mounting roar, like a space shuttle taking off. The light in the windows vanished, as if someone had yanked a giant shade down.

Kevin would have had little time to think about the sound above him. It took just 10 seconds for the tower to fall. As the mass neared the ground, it generated a huge blast of compressed air and seismic waves equal to those produced by a 2.1-magnitude earthquake.



*James holds his father's Halligan bar.*

Paperwork from the towers drifted miles away, littering the beaches of the Rockaways. For most of that day, RoseEllen had been at P.S. 312, preoccupied with getting her third graders back to their parents. Now, at home, she waited for Kevin to call. He always did, leaving a message when she didn't answer. "Hey, it's me. If you see anything on the news, don't worry about it.

I'm okay." But 6 p.m. came and went without any word. At 12:30 a.m., Special Operations Command called and told RoseEllen that Kevin was listed among the missing; all of the guys on Rescue 4's rig were unaccounted for, as was their captain, Brian Hickey, who had been working with Rescue 3 that day.

RoseEllen stayed up all night, her eyes darting between the television news and the front door. Around sunrise, RoseEllen went onto the porch and stared down the street. "At that point, I knew," she would say, years later. "In my head, I knew."

After a week, one of the crews digging through the pulverized wreckage at Ground Zero came across a Halligan bar, which might have been used to claw at an elevator door. It was marked with KD and R4. *Kevin Dowdell, Rescue 4*. The tool had been blown out of the lobby. But there was no other sign of Kevin.

THE REMAINING MEN of Rescue 4 set up a war room in the firehouse, manned round-the-clock shifts to dig through the wreckage, and assigned a firefighter to liaise with each family who was missing someone. "Did we find him today?" RoseEllen would ask. No, Billy Murphy would say, day after day.

Whenever the door to the Dowdell house opened, three faces would swivel toward it with hope. "We were like, 'If anyone got out of there or could get out of there, it's him,'" Patrick recalled, but it was always a relative or neighbor. Two weeks after the attacks, RoseEllen decided that sitting around the house in their grief was not doing them any good. "Listen," she said to the boys. "You're going back to school, and I'm going back to work." On the drive to Iona, she persuaded Patrick to finish his reapplication to West Point. "You will not—we will not—use anything as an excuse in your life," she said.

Xavier High School was steeped in mourning; 60 alumni and close relatives of students and staff were lost. Counselors and priests watched James for signs of depression, but when RoseEllen pushed him to see a therapist, he protested. "All I do is talk to people," he told her. He would channel his emotions into running, sometimes 12 miles at a time.

Back at Iona, Patrick couldn't concentrate. He called James and suggested that they go to Ground Zero to search for their father's remains. "If we find him, I want to be there," Patrick told James. "I want to see him. I want to help carry him out."

James heard his father's voice in his head. *Don't sit on the sidelines. Make things happen. Do things.*

"I'll meet you there," James told his brother.

Rescue 4 held a meeting about whether to allow them to join the search. They took a vote, and the boys won. Murphy and Flaherty geared them up with fire boots, gloves, Carhartt suits, helmets, and tools. The guys worried about giving the boys nightmares. Murphy warned them: "If we come across somebody, I'll ask you to step away until we find out who it is."

The pile, as it was called, was eight stories of contorted metal, sticking up like giant fork tines, spread over 16 smoldering acres. The burning electrical smell was sickening. As Patrick and James clambered through it, they could feel heat in their boot soles. Grapplers lifted steel from the smoking heaps, and the diggers showed the boys what to look for underneath: a

boot, a piece of helmet, the reflective tape from a turnout coat. But the main sign of human remains was the odor of decay. As soon as the diggers smelled it, they would wave at the machines to stop.

The first time the boys were present for a recovery, the crew cast side-long looks at James and Patrick. The men and boys removed their helmets. A chaplain was called. They stood at attention as the remains were carried away on a flag-draped stretcher.

"You good?" Murphy asked Patrick.

"Yeah, I'm good," Patrick said.

For seven months, James and Patrick worked at Ground Zero as much as they could. "Being away from it became harder than being there," Patrick recalled. When his classes at Iona were done for the day, he'd find a ride to the city and dig half the night, then return to campus at 3 or 4 a.m. slit-eyed from ash and lack of sleep, stowing his dusty gear in a garbage bag in his dorm. James kept his Carharts and tools in his Xavier locker. He would shed his school uniform—blue oxford shirt, necktie, insignia-patched sweater—and tromp out the school-house door, transformed, in coveralls and boots.

The crew found parts of helmets, and parts of people. They found impaled bodies that had to be cut away from the steel with torches. They found intact bodies in strange voids; how long had some people survived under the wreckage? Sometimes the boys just put bone fragments in buckets.

At the firehouse, Patrick and James sat around the kitchen table debriefing like members of the company. They listened to the men of Rescue 4 wrestle with survivor's guilt. If they had been on duty, they'd have been in the South Tower at 9:59 a.m. Survival was a matter of lefts and rights, as Flaherty said. They posed terrible "What if?" questions. Should the fire commanders have foreseen the towers' collapse? If so, should they have kept men from going up?

"Well, what was the alternative?" Flaherty argued at the table. "There's people trapped upstairs. We have to go get them." Could you imagine, he said, if the FDNY had just given up on the towers? "That would have been the worst day in the history of the fire department the *other* way."

The kitchen conversations were a kind of counseling for the boys. "We had our people, and we just talked amongst ourselves, and that was enough," Patrick remembered. So were the funerals



Top: Patrick, Liam Flaherty, and James at the St. Patrick's Day parade in 1996.

Middle: Patrick (left) and Flaherty at Ground Zero in spring 2002.

Bottom: Rescue 4's rig at Kevin's memorial service in April 2002.

for firefighters they played at with the Emerald Society Pipes and Drums. They stood by graves in kilts and red tunics that Flaherty had given them, and performed "Amazing Grace" and "Going Home." Many children of the dead were preschoolers or grade-schoolers.

RoseEllen saw that the firefighters were helping to steady her sons. "Is school good?" Flaherty and others would ask the boys while they dug through the pile. "If your grades aren't good, you can't be here."



As a picture of Kevin's movements with Rescue 4 emerged from survivor accounts, the recovery concentrated on a spot near the South Tower elevator shafts. In late October, on a day the boys were not working, a crew found the remains of four men from Rescue 4. But not Kevin's. A few feet away was a large, burned-out space where fires had raged below the tonnage for weeks.

"You recover two guys that were kind of close by to each other in the rubble, and then you don't get anybody else," Patrick said. "It's really hard. You don't know how that happens, but that's how it happens."

On the morning of November 12, 2001, when an American Airlines plane accidentally crashed into the Rockaways shortly after takeoff, RoseEllen could see the smoke from the porch. "You are not going over there," she told James. When Rescue 4 pulled up to the crash site, James was already there in his gear, hosing down a burning house. "You're one of us now," a firefighter told him. James, though just 17, took the FDNY entrance exam and passed.

By spring, the pile had become a pit, with almost 1.8 million tons of debris removed. The site was practically broom-clean. The recovery process was down to DNA testing of the smallest fragments. Even then, no Kevin.

"There's nothing there," Murphy told RoseEllen. "It's over."

"Nothing?" she asked.

"Nothing," he said.

**THEY HELD KEVIN'S MEMORIAL SERVICE** on April 20, 2002. His casket was filled with dust from the spot where they believed he had died, and mementos of him: his extra turnout gear, a pair of fire boots, a copy of the *Irish Voice* newspaper, travel brochures for Iceland. Letters from his sons and siblings. Hundreds of people attended, including the mayor. Patrick played a bagpipe solo of "Amazing Grace" as the casket was carried into the church. "He was a teacher, mentor, tradesman, listener, and my best friend," Patrick said during his eulogy, concluding with an Irish blessing that Kevin had recited to him: "May the best days of your past be the worst of your future."

The memorial service marked an abrupt end to months of mission. "It was so consuming from September to April that after it was all said and done, there was a sense of 'Now what do we do?'" James recalled.

Kevin was irrecoverable. But they had his voice. *Don't sit on the sidelines.*

Patrick had just been accepted to West Point, and in June he entered "Beast Barracks," the academy's rigorous six-week cadet-induction program. It made the news: *9/11 firefighter's kid joins the War on Terror*. Overnight, he went from friends consoling him to officers barking orders. He marched to breakfast, marched to lunch, and spent nights shining his shoes.

What if he couldn't cut it? He feared letting his father down. He refused to buy his mother a West Point sweatshirt. "I didn't want it to be a constant reminder of my failure if I didn't make it through," Patrick said. The combination of mourning, loneliness, and self-doubt made him mutinous. He racked up punishment tours for lateness and absences, and was made to march in circles carrying a rifle for five hours at a time. He would

sneak out to bars to meet old friends from the Rockaways. He felt like he was trying to break free from prison. He considered quitting, to escape the pressure.

RoseEllen felt powerless and wished for her husband. Patrick had relied on Kevin. "I didn't know anything about the Army," she said. "I couldn't help him."

Flaherty stepped in. "Bro, failure is not an option," he told Patrick. "You cannot—you *cannot*—drop out." He warned him that quitting would alter the trajectory of his life. Patrick rallied, though not before he missed a 9/11 anniversary ceremony because he was walking another punishment tour. This time, it was about a girl: He'd met Katie Neudeck at a party in Rockaway Beach at the end of summer break. He was supposed to report back to West Point that day, and his lateness cost him 20 hours of walking. She was motivation to graduate; so were the pictures of his father taped to his dorm-room wall, and a steel bracelet on his wrist etched with LT. KEVIN DOWDELL 9-11-01.

James couldn't formally enter the FDNY until he was 21, and at one point talked about joining the Marines. "No, you will not," his mother said. Instead he enrolled at Iona. RoseEllen was alone in the house, but had two sons she still needed to get to the finish line of manhood. Patrick and James were strapping—bigger than their father, all bone and muscle and hard-charging. They had chosen dangerous futures, and there was little she could do about it. "That's what they knew," she said.

In 2006, when James turned 21, he dropped out of his final semester at Iona to enter the FDNY academy; he then joined Ladder 174, in Flatbush. (He finished college the following year.) That same spring, Patrick graduated from West Point and prepared for deployment to Iraq. "I want to kill terrorists," he declared to the Associated Press. By 2008, he was a platoon leader on combat patrols in Baghdad.

With Patrick skirting roadside bombs and James running into fires, RoseEllen could only pray. Her faith told her that Kevin was still on watch. "I just said, in my head, *He's protecting them*," she recalled.

**THIS IS WHAT** Kevin Dowdell worked all week for: Patrick would make captain in the Army, and James would take his old man's badge number and carry his Halligan tool. And RoseEllen—who never allowed pain, hers or theirs, to be an excuse—would see them through.

While Patrick was serving abroad, James was earning a medal. At 4:30 one morning in March 2010, Ladder 174 responded to a heavy fire in a two-story building. James and another firefighter battled their way to the second floor with a fire extinguisher and, working in high heat and zero visibility, forced open the door of a rear apartment. In the smoke, James found an unconscious nine-month-old on a bed. Their team got four people out of the building alive, including the infant.

James joined Rescue 2. He would be working with some of Kevin's former colleagues, and would be expected not to drag the anchor chain, as they said in the department about slackers. In 2017, while working under Flaherty, James set the unofficial FDNY record for a rope rescue when he descended 200 feet down an unlit Con Edison



James, RoseEllen, and Patrick at a 9/11 memorial in the Rockaways

shaft to help workers trapped in an underground elevator. “I was just the dope on the rope,” he said, crediting his partners who’d made the rig. Early last year, he was promoted to lieutenant—his father’s rank. He’s now studying for the captain’s exam.

After Patrick left the Army as an assistant operations officer for an artillery battalion, he thought about joining the FDNY. He scored first on the entrance test, out of about 45,000 applicants, but again heard his father’s voice: *I want you to do something better than me*. Patrick didn’t think there was any vocation greater than firefighter, but he opted for a career in business. He works in cybersecurity in Manhattan, and his home is on the bayside of Rockaway Beach, where he can look directly at One World Trade Center and the twin light towers that shine every September 11.

Each year on the anniversary, RoseEllen and her sons return to Rescue 4’s firehouse for a memorial ceremony. Firefighters gather in their dress uniforms. They bow their heads for a moment of silence in front of a plaque bearing the names of the dead. Invariably a pedestrian will pause in the firehouse driveway and say, casually, “What’s going on? Is there a parade or something?”

James or Patrick will raise his head and say, “It’s September 11.”

“Ohhh,” comes the reply.

After the memorials, the Dowdells return to the Rockaways for a family dinner. They leave the seat at the head of the table open, with a glass of red wine in front of it. At the end of their meal, they pass around the glass, and each person tells a story about Kevin. Among those seated at the family table is a retired firefighter named Tom O’Day, whom RoseEllen began seeing in 2010 (“He understood everything,” she said). When Hurricane Sandy hit the Rockaways, RoseEllen evacuated but Tom stayed to save her possessions; he carried every memento of Kevin he could find above the flood line. In 2019, Tom and RoseEllen went to Iceland, where she buried a Mass card from Kevin’s memorial service on a remote beach, placed a rock over it, and noted the coordinates.

Five grandchildren, ages 5 through 13, are also at the family table, as are Patrick’s and James’s wives, Katie and Chrissy. They all live within walking distance of RoseEllen and the old home, where an oil portrait of Kevin hangs in the front hall. The grandchildren have been going to firehouses since they were born. As they run around, climbing and sliding down the fire pole, they talk about Grandpa Kevin as if they knew him. Recently the youngest grandchild, Carly, sat with RoseEllen, looking across Jamaica

Bay. “I see Grandpa Kevin’s building,” she said. “What happened to him?” RoseEllen explained again about the bad guys who flew planes into the buildings and made them fall.

That day, reflexive acts of duty turned a terrible event into a survivable one for many people. In the aftermath, firehouses cared for the families of the fallen with something beyond duty.

Beyond duty: two grieving boys hunting for their lost father and instead recovering other people’s fathers, and playing hymns for them. A firehouse full of rowdy, imperfect men finishing the job of raising them, and giving them the balm of purpose.

The FDNY lost 343 men on September 11; 65 of their sons and daughters now serve in the department.

Twenty-five years later, Kevin is still missing. James’s promotion to lieutenant fell on what would have been his 70th birthday. “Never Forget” is no slogan to the Dowdells. “We live it, and we live with it,” Patrick said. Living without Kevin is a form of bravery, of course—a fire all its own. Living his example is how they find their way out of the smoke. *A*

*Sally Jenkins is a staff writer at The Atlantic.*

# DID

TWENTY-FIVE  
YEARS AFTER 9/11,  
ANALYSTS CAN'T  
DECIDE WHETHER  
THE TERRORIST  
ORGANIZATION GOT  
WHAT IT WANTED.

# AL-QAEDA

BY  
GRAEME WOOD

ILLUSTRATION BY  
MARK HARRIS

# SUCCEED?



UP TO A \$25,000,000  
PUSH TO





S

ince September 11, 2001, al-Qaeda has pulled off exactly one fatal attack inside the United States. If you remember the details of that attack, you probably spend too much time thinking about terrorism. On December 6, 2019, in Pensacola, Florida, a 21-year-old Royal Saudi Air Force officer took out a legally acquired Glock pistol and killed three U.S. sailors at a naval air base, before police arrived and killed him. The shooter, an affiliate of al-Qaeda's branch in Yemen, had been on the base for flight training. I was in Taif, Saudi Arabia, at the time, and the Saudis I met said they were sorry about the incident but relieved that after 18 years of terrorist R&D, the most ferocious blow al-Qaeda could strike on the path of jihad was not much worse than the kind of mundane workplace violence that we Americans regularly inflict on ourselves.

The group yearned to attack America again after 9/11 and had considered several schemes, but only on three occasions before Pensacola had it actually tried to execute an operation. All three plots had failed.

On December 22, 2001, a slovenly thug named Richard Reid tried to blow up a Miami-bound airplane by lighting a bomb concealed in his high-top sneakers. He failed because he could not light the fuse—which had apparently been moistened by foot sweat and rain—and because he tried to light it, striking match after match, in full view of other passengers rather than in the privacy of an American Airlines lavatory.

The next attack would not occur for another eight years. That one, in 2009, resembled the first: A competent bomb maker entrusted his package to a complete moron. On a plane descending into Detroit, a passenger with an explosive charge sewn into his underpants injected a chemical initiator that fricasseed his crotch but left the plane intact. The next year, in a much more formidable plot, al-Qaeda used FedEx and UPS to send bombs hidden in laser printers on cargo planes bound for the United States. Authorities intercepted the packages. In 2017, the United States killed the bomb maker, Ibrahim al-Asiri, in a drone strike in Yemen.

Surviving until 2017, as an al-Qaeda leader, was itself something of an accomplishment. Anne Likuski, the author of *Al-Qaida After 9/11* and a researcher at the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment, told me the upper echelons of al-Qaeda had been “eradicated” by 2012—droned into oblivion and replaced by younger jihadists with less experience and credibility. In 2011, Osama bin Laden himself was killed in Abbottabad, Pakistan, and his successor, the Egyptian physician Ayman al-Zawahiri, was struck by Hellfire missiles on his balcony in Kabul in 2022.

Judging from this streak of incompetence, it is difficult to see al-Qaeda as anything but a failure. In a November 2002 audio-tape, bin Laden posited a ledger of death, and promised that his group would keep it balanced. “The time has come to settle the accounts,” he said. “Just as you kill, so you shall be killed; just as you bomb, so you shall be bombed.” His group murdered 2,977 people on September 11, but in the past 25 years, it has run a serious deficit in its account.

Among terrorism analysts, a prominent school of thought nevertheless holds that the group is the shrewdest and most effective terrorist organization of all time—and that it is more dangerous than ever. Bruce Hoffman, who has been studying terrorist groups since before al-Qaeda was founded, told me that it was singular in its resilience. “They’ve survived the greatest military onslaught in history ever directed against a terrorist group,” Hoffman, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, said. He pointed to the very simple strategy that bin Laden articulated in a 2004 video: wear Americans down and “bleed” them “to the point of bankruptcy.”

“That strategy is working,” Hoffman said. A 2021 Brown University report put the cost of the War on Terror at more than \$8 trillion.

This unfathomable investment succeeded in removing al-Qaeda from the little camps it once controlled in Afghanistan. But these havens have been replaced by large ones elsewhere, including in parts of the Horn of Africa, Yemen, and the Sahel, the arid region



The 9/11 attacks, which killed 2,977 people, instilled fear in Americans. But for al-Qaeda, fear was a means to an end: political change.

of West Africa just south of the Sahara. The al-Qaeda franchises in those places are ruthless and rich. The East African branch fields a force that has been estimated at 10,000 men and pulls in about \$100 million in revenue annually through taxation, smuggling, and outright theft. It gets a taste of almost all commerce in Somalia and has recruited supporters from as far away as Southern California.

“On the ground, these groups are not only winning military victories but also exercising sovereignty and governance,” Hoffman said. Al-Qaeda’s branch in the Sahel, Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (“The Support Group for Islam and Muslims”), sounds like it meets over coffee and stale doughnuts in a church basement. But just this year, trucks bristling with weapons swept across Mali under its banner and nearly toppled the country’s government. Militants associated with JNIM killed Mali’s defense minister in his own home.

If al-Qaeda halted its attacks on America because it preferred, temporarily, to measure its progress not in American corpses but

in square miles of planet Earth, then it has been a roaring success. And it could, Hoffman said, turn back to its old priorities. “The al-Qaeda concept has taken root,” he said, and has given the group’s leadership—sometimes called “al-Qaeda core”—the luxury of deciding when to begin killing Americans again. “What worries me is that al-Qaeda is husbanding its resources to do something in the U.S., and might enlist the franchises to carry it out.”

Worry is an occupational hazard for people who study terrorist attacks professionally. Al-Qaeda’s resurgence has been predicted for two decades, and so far, no resurgence. Another possibility, rarely uttered for fear of jinxing things, is that sending exploding hoboos onto airplanes 17 years ago was the pinnacle of the group’s post-9/11 powers, and that al-Qaeda core has been quiet because it has gone the way of RadioShack, Blockbuster, and the Hartford Whalers. It no longer exists, and the affiliates—fearsome though they may be in the deserts where they operate—are just wearing the jersey of a team that folded long ago.

**A** QUARTER CENTURY after the 9/11 attacks, about half the world’s population is too young to remember them. Those who do will recall both the horror of the imagery—thousands dying on live television, in seconds—and the disorientation of the day. Nobody knew whether the four planes were the only ones, or whether 40 more were hurtling toward other targets. That evening, CNN was speculating that the death toll might be in the tens of thousands.

If fear was the goal: mission accomplished. But fear was the means, not the end. The end was political change. And any assessment of al-Qaeda, both on 9/11 and in the ensuing decades, should ask whether it leveraged that fear to bring about the political results it sought.

The people who grade bin Laden most generously in this regard focus on how al-Qaeda persuaded America to poke itself repeatedly in the eye in the years that followed September 11. In 2021, the political theorist William A. Galston awarded bin Laden “a sweeping if posthumous victory” for provoking stupid responses that have distracted, divided, and weakened America. Others, such as the former CIA official Bruce Riedel, have suggested that these traps were bin Laden’s plan all along, and that he wanted to lure the United States into an invasion of Afghanistan and “a long and bloody war of occupation.”

The American capacity for self-harm, at astronomical cost, is at this point undeniable. Equally incalculable is the cost in human life: soldiers and civilians killed during the open-ended hunt for remnants of al-Qaeda, and others who survived but saw their communities destroyed or traumatized. But these costs are evidence of an American defeat, not necessarily a bin Laden victory.

Because bin Laden was a chatterbox and loved giving interviews before he became the most hunted man in history, the record he left of his hopes and strategic thinking is quite complete, and provides a standard—his own—against which to measure al-Qaeda’s success or failure. To these public statements we can add roughly 6,000 pages of internal documents seized by the United States from the Abbottabad compound where bin Laden

spent his final years. These private documents banish any temptation to think of him as a mastermind who predicted each misstep by his enemies and laid traps years in advance.

In 1998, he stated his goals: to “kill Americans and their allies,” and “to liberate al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem and the Holy Mosque in Mecca from their grip, so that their armies leave all the territory of Islam, defeated, broken, and unable to threaten any Muslim.” This theme—the withdrawal of the United States from Muslim land, particularly his native Saudi Arabia, as well as the end of Israel and of American support for Israel and secular autocracies in the Arab world—was consistent in his statements.

Bin Laden was equally clear about how he thought terrorism would yield his desired result. In a March 1997 CNN interview with Peter Bergen, he spoke of transferring “the battle into the United States.” In a May 2000 speech, he told supporters that the war would henceforth be waged “against the United States, in the United States.” Americans, he observed to ABC’s John



ABC’s John Miller interviews Osama bin Laden in 1998. Bin Laden said Americans could not tolerate pain and would not fight back if attacked.

Miller in 1998, cannot tolerate pain, and will react to attacks not by fighting back and blaming al-Qaeda, but instead by asking “what their government has done that forced us to defend ourselves.” In a November 2001 interview, he hinted at a theory of political change in America: Its citizens should “take the same stand that they did previously,” when they protested the Vietnam War and the presidents who waged it.

Nelly Lahoud, a professor at the Army War College and the author of the definitive book on the Abbottabad documents, told me this political pipe dream was bin Laden’s whole plan: “to replicate the anti-Vietnam War movement of the United States, to get the American public to put pressure on the U.S. government to withdraw its forces from the Middle East.” The documents reveal a man and an organization blindsided by the American reaction to the September 11 attacks. Bin Laden and his associates “didn’t think that the United States would respond by waging war,” Lahoud said. He did not contemplate



or plan for the long-term occupation of Afghanistan, nor did he expect the methodical killing of his operatives in a campaign that lasted years.

For good or ill, American Middle East policy during this period was roughly the opposite of what bin Laden expected and intended. Rather than withdrawing, U.S. forces surged into the region. The United States has troops, and friends, in Syria, Bahrain, Iraq, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. The only Middle Eastern despot the United States abandoned post-9/11 was Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, and after less than two years of experimentation with Islamist rule, Egypt switched back to an America-friendly autocrat. In the mid-2000s, Saudi Arabia—whose leaders bin Laden considered tyrants—was a decrepit gerontocracy in regular peril of jihadist revolution. Its current leader, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, is in his early 40s and an ally of the Trump administration. He began his quest to transform his kingdom into a modern state by locking up anyone who had expressed even the faintest interest in jihad.

Bin Laden experienced the 2000s as a series of disappointments. After nine years of continuous hunting of his comrades, and after one of them had ignited his scrotum somewhere over southeastern Michigan, he was ready to concede privately that his theory of political change was ill-considered. “By 2010, bin Laden had to reflect on things,” Lahoud said. Having looked further into the Vietnam comparison, he learned that about 58,000 Americans were killed during that 20-year war. Because Americans were then being killed in Iraq and Afghanistan at a rate of about 500 a year, he decided that his allies could not plausibly step up the pace enough to stoke popular outrage in the United States. In one captured document, bin Laden argues that a better strategy would be a financial hit that affected the “income of every American citizen.” He suggests that al-Qaeda consider attacking shipping in the Strait of Hormuz. He was developing that plan (clever, come to think of it) around the time SEAL Team 6 shot him in the face.

**T**HE EVIDENCE that bin Laden was mostly neutralized in the years immediately after 9/11—according to Lahoud, the Abbottabad documents indicate that he was barely in touch with anyone in al-Qaeda from 2002 to 2004—makes for a peculiar contrast with the attribution of strategic genius to him that was occurring during this exact period. He was more Clouseau than Clausewitz. But the United States was at the time preparing to embark on the Iraq War, and perhaps it was difficult to imagine that a folly of such magnitude could be self-inflicted, rather than planned by a Machiavellian enemy.

Bin Laden encouraged this impression. In 2004, when he issued his first video in nearly three years, addressing American voters on the eve of the presidential election, he told them he was planning a war of attrition. He warned them that he intended to bleed them slowly, as al-Qaeda had “bled Russia for 10 years” in Afghanistan, “until it went bankrupt and was forced to withdraw in defeat.” (Bruce Hoffman noted that bin Laden was engaging in stolen valor here, because his Arab fighters had been war tourists

and the Afghans had done the hard work of fighting the Soviets. “Still,” he said, “it fit the narrative.”)

Publicly, bin Laden made a virtue of necessity and told the world that getting attacked by America was a blessing. But Lahoud is adamant that the Abbottabad documents show the opposite of crafty planning, and instead reveal constant complaining about the very setbacks that al-Qaeda supposedly welcomed. Privately, bin Laden bemoaned his network’s impotence, lack of money, and inability to mount even small operations. “Al-Qaeda came up with the ‘war of attrition’ idea afterward,” Lahoud said. “This was not by design.” Those who awarded bin Laden points for strategic genius had fallen for his propaganda.

After bin Laden’s death, al-Zawahiri made attrition the official al-Qaeda doctrine: to exhaust America and bleed it to death, “so



Members of the Obama administration receive an update on the mission to kill bin Laden in May 2011. By 2012, much of the upper echelons of al-Qaeda had been eliminated.

that it meets the fate of the former Soviet Union and collapses under its own weight.” A similarly themed article appeared in *The Onion*, under the headline “FBI Uncovers al-Qaeda Plot to Just Sit Back and Enjoy Collapse of United States.” It was illustrated by a calm bearded man, relaxing on a sofa with a television remote in his hand. The photo appeared to be modeled on one of the last known videos of bin Laden, channel surfing in a shabby, windowless room.

Bin Laden seemed to have realized that he’d created a debacle for himself and his allies. At one point, he argued that the Taliban was doomed anyway, and that he was therefore blameless for provoking an invasion of the group’s country and the destruction of its regime. “We knew for certain that Afghanistan was already a target, and that America was determined to bring down the Taliban,” he wrote in a document quoted by Lahoud. He and his non-Afghan terrorist crew could hardly be faulted for an American invasion that was already inevitable. “Everything that happened was going to happen even if we did not strike,” he wrote. This ludicrous claim, that George W. Bush wanted to occupy Afghanistan and merely advanced his calendar because of 9/11, is self-serving, Lahoud writes, and “reeks of repressed Arab guilt.”

W

HETHER AL-QAEDA hit upon the attrition strategy brilliantly or simply claimed prescience after the fact is in some ways immaterial. The United States was, in fact, eventually exhausted by protracted war—that is why we fled Kabul in 2021 and handed over the government to the Taliban, with our compliments—and American overreach was predictable even if bin Laden failed to predict it. One could conclude that al-Qaeda stumbled at first by losing

its haven in Afghanistan, but then recovered its composure and played its hand masterfully thereafter. But that, too, would be giving the group too much credit, and would underestimate just how catastrophic the attacks on America were for its cause.

The cause, as of September 9, was going well—in part because of a cunning move by bin Laden, though he unwittingly undid its effect on September 11. Two days before the 9/11 attacks, bin Laden sent two Tunisian suicide bombers, posing as journalists, to kill Ahmad Shah Massoud, the leader of the anti-Taliban coalition known as the Northern Alliance. Had he stopped there—killing Massoud and calling off the planes—the trajectory of South and Central Asia, and the future of political Islam, would have been different.

By mid-2001, the Northern Alliance had lost Kabul to the Taliban and had no prospects of recovering it. The group had been pushed into the Panjshir Valley and the rugged northeastern corner of Afghanistan, and with Pakistani help, the Taliban had begun consolidating its gains. For Pakistan, Afghan territory was useful as a base for attacks on India. The videos of al-Qaeda terrorists swinging from monkey bars in a training camp in Afghanistan before 9/11 made news in the United States. But most campers at sites like these were training to fight in Kashmir. India had no control over or access to Afghanistan, and Pakistan viewed the Taliban as an asset.

What some Pakistani generals saw as a strategic asset, other Pakistanis saw as a religious one. It is difficult to overstate how much hope South Asian Islamists invested in the Taliban's success. My first acquaintance with the Taliban and its supporters came five months before the September 11 attacks. I was in Peshawar, the Pakistani city just over the Khyber Pass from Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. Taliban supporters were ubiquitous there that April because members of their sect were holding a jamboree with thousands of attendees. They regarded the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan as an epochal event, not so different from the Islamic State's declaration of its caliphate 13 years later. (Mullah Omar, the Taliban's leader, called himself "commander of the believers," a title historically reserved for caliphs.)

At the jamboree, I met men from the Persian Gulf countries, England, and South Asia. (Few were Afghan.) The Taliban itself was an Afghan movement with little knowledge of the world or interest in conquering it. But other Sunni Islamists thought that from these provincial beginnings a state would arise that could incubate a range of Islamist projects. The attendees viewed Taliban-led Afghanistan as a laboratory of conservative Islamic governance, and they considered bin Ladenism a particularly promising and righteous experiment. Outside the conference, I bought a T-shirt

that said OSAMA BIN LADEN—GREAT MUJAHID OF ISLAM. It was decorated, in brazen defiance of trademark law, with a Nike swoosh.

In 2001, the Taliban was, in other words, ceasing to be a merely local movement. Others had plans for the group, and it had tentative plans of its own to seek outside help and lock in its rule. In fact, at precisely the point when al-Qaeda decided to attack America, the Taliban was seeking international approval—and had a path to getting it. Rateb Popal, an Afghan who had fought in the jihad in the 1980s (he'd lost an eye and an arm in a failed bombing in Kabul) and later ran a security company during the American occupation, told me just how close the Taliban had come.

The United States had ostracized the Taliban for harboring bin Laden and for its human-rights record. But other countries—not just Pakistan—were ready to do business there. I met Popal



A video showing al-Qaeda fighters training circulated in June 2001, making news in the U.S.

in Beijing in 2010. He had lived in the United States and served time in a U.S. federal prison for drug smuggling. He was unusually worldly for an Afghan, and when he returned to Afghanistan from the United States, he ended up becoming a liaison to the Chinese. The China Building Material Industrial Corporation, he said, had sent a single intrepid representative to meet with the Taliban in the late 1990s. Kabul was wrecked from years of war. After seeing the rubble, the Chinese sent a group of engineers to determine whether they could open a cement factory—a resource that would be in high demand, if ever the country were to be rebuilt. The Chinese, as usual, were also sniffing around for mining opportunities. In 1999, Popal led the first Taliban delegation to Beijing. They met with company officials and discussed collaboration. "They treated us like VIPs," he told me. "All halal food."

By late 2000, China had sent a delegation to Kabul and to Kandahar to see Mullah Omar—a rare meeting between the reclusive Taliban leader and non-Muslims. China's one political demand was that the Taliban restrain any Chinese Muslim organizations challenging Beijing's rule in Xinjiang.



2003. The alternative history he imagines is tantalizing. With Massoud gone, he said, “the morale of the Northern Alliance was 99 percent dead,” and the Taliban could have “just walked” into the Panjshir Valley, completed its conquest of the country, and enjoyed uncontested control of Afghanistan. Most countries hated the Taliban—even the Chinese were furious after it blew up ancient stone-cut Buddhas in early 2001—but at some point, any country hoping to do business with Afghanistan would have had no choice but to join Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Pakistan in recognizing Taliban rule over the country. With China on board, one of the last barriers to recognition would have fallen, and this jihadist proving ground would have been on its way to enjoying the same official status as Turkey and Luxembourg.

Popal told me that the Taliban was operating at that point “completely separately” from bin Laden and al-Qaeda, even though they were religiously simpatico. (There is a debate about how closely the Taliban worked with al-Qaeda, or for that matter how well it would have understood the 9/11 plot and its ramifications. The leaders were at least socially close. Popal twice dined with al-Zawahiri, whom his Taliban hosts introduced as “an Egyptian doctor building hospitals.”) The group was eager to clinch its control over Afghanistan, and was in no rush to risk it all to strike a blow against infidels in a distant land. Had bin Laden refrained from attacking America, he might have lived to see his movement nurtured by Taliban rule into a more formidable and mature Islamic power. Formal international recognition became impossible as soon as the Americans determined that al-Qaeda had committed the atrocity, using Afghanistan as a base. The Taliban is now seeking recognition again. Bin Laden set it back 25 years.

**T**HE CONTENTION THAT al-Qaeda deserves high marks, or even a passing grade, as a terror group must therefore fend off the objections that, for the past 25 years, it has almost completely failed to attack America; its key personnel have been killed off; the war of attrition it apparently stumbled into has failed on its own terms; and its great success, the September 11 attacks, abruptly ended the most promising Sunni Islamist-state project to have been launched since the end of the Ottoman caliphate, in 1924.

The most compelling answer to these objections comes down to one word: *franchises*. Like a malevolent Ray Kroc, bin Laden and later al-Zawahiri began licensing the al-Qaeda brand to hitherto independent jihadist organizations far from Afghanistan. In 2004, after overtures from jihadists in Iraq, bin Laden started the process of taking on franchises; it had become clear that the frontier of jihad would be the killing of American soldiers there. Al-Qaeda received loyalty oaths from the franchises’ leaders and tried to vet them. Bruce Hoffman called this proliferation a “survival strategy” and said it had worked as intended, as a solution to the unrelenting heat that the United States was putting on the core group. Hoffman said bin Laden accepted, reluctantly, that he no longer had a base in Afghanistan, and he established bases elsewhere to hedge against extinction. Those affiliate organizations—in Iraq, North and West

Africa (joined in 2007), Yemen (2009), East Africa (2012), and the Indian subcontinent (2014)—have at times misfired, but the successes have paid off handsomely.

Compared with al-Qaeda core, these groups are nouveau riche. Bin Laden whined for years about a lack of money and fighters. The franchises, particularly in Africa, are flush with men and materiel. Even one of the weaker affiliates, on the Indian subcontinent, is now in an enviable position, with the Taliban back in power in Afghanistan and ready to support that group by letting its followers



The Egyptian physician Ayman al-Zawahiri succeeded bin Laden. He was killed in a Hellfire-missile strike in Kabul in 2022.

congregate and train within Taliban territory. Neither the United States nor any other country has managed to destroy one of these franchises; indeed, the governments of Somalia and Mali have come very close to falling to them, as have cities in Yemen. In April, fighters affiliated with the Sahel franchise, Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin, raided Bamako, the capital of Mali, and they continue to control much of the northern part of the country.

Sara Harmouch, a security contractor and terrorism expert who monitors jihadist groups, told me the franchises have learned from the mistakes of al-Qaeda core. She cautions against assessing al-Qaeda as weakened merely because it has not carried out attacks recently. “Al-Qaeda is making huge gains across multiple theaters,” she said. “Their current capability is far beyond what they were before 9/11.” Silence is a “deliberate strategy,” she said, to allow clandestine rebuilding. “They don’t want to make noise that would put eyes on them right now, because they’re not ready to make the comeback attacks they’re planning.” The Yemeni branch, which carried out the Pensacola shooting in 2019, has been tasked with leading operations against the West, and it has developed drone programs.

Moreover, Harmouch said, there are signs that the franchises’ loyalty oaths to al-Qaeda core are still being honored. Since al-Zawahiri’s death, in 2022, most signs have pointed to succession by another Egyptian, who goes by the nom de guerre Saif al-Adel, or “Sword of Justice.” A former military officer now in his 60s, Saif

al-Adel seems to have paid attention, during his training, to strategy and tactics. He advised bin Laden not to attack the Twin Towers, on the correct theory that doing so would invite reprisals against the Taliban. He has survived being marked for death by the most powerful country in the world for 30 years—the past two decades as the guest of the Islamic Republic of Iran, under an enemy-of-my-enemy deal whose terms are not known. (As an extremist-Sunni group, al-Qaeda is not a natural ally of extremist-Shiite Iran.)

According to Harmouch, the affiliates are heeding Saif al-Adel's commands. He told the Yemeni branch of al-Qaeda to focus on maritime-attack capabilities. It did. He directed the groups to concentrate on achieving financial independence, and the Sahel branch began developing ransom-based revenue streams. Newly detected efforts to deploy drones and adopt 3-D-printing technologies also followed his statements urging the franchises to nerd out on the path of jihad. Harmouch allowed that the groups manage their own affairs, and that none has publicly renewed its loyalty oath to al-Qaeda by acknowledging Saif al-Adel as its new emir. "But they are listening to him," she said. "They are following what he's been saying to a T." If true, this claim is concerning, because Saif al-Adel's recent directives include the advice to poison wells, contaminate food supplies with bacteria, conduct urban assassinations, and replace human suicide bombers with killer drones.

By now the rhythm of terrorism analysis should be familiar: For every piece of evidence that makes al-Qaeda's leaders look like evil geniuses, there is counterevidence that makes them look like hopeless bumbler. As with the war of attrition, Nelly Lahoud said, there is little evidence that bin Laden ultimately thought franchising out was a winning strategy, and a lot of evidence that he considered his far-flung allies pains in the terrorist ass. Bin Laden called them a "liability to jihad." In his Abbottabad compound, he became a pioneer in remote work, realizing long before COVID how hard it is to manage an organization whose employees he never saw.

Almost immediately, the franchises proved unruly and, frankly, insane. Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, the leader of the Iraqi franchise, turned out to be a raving psychopath. Bin Laden fancied himself cerebral, deliberate, and discriminating in deciding who should die. Al-Zarqawi, by contrast, erred on the side of beheading, and positively reveled in gore. When al-Qaeda leaders asked him to stop killing Shiite civilians because doing so was alienating potential supporters, al-Zarqawi ignored the request. The group ghosted al-Qaeda in 2007 and never really listened to it again.

Other franchises adopted the al-Qaeda brand before the group's leadership could vet them. Their priorities often conflicted with bin Laden's, and he and al-Zawahiri were reduced to an advisory role. Instead of building loyal, resilient versions of itself, al-Qaeda created a management problem from hell. Even the more housebroken of the franchises, such as those in Yemen and North and West Africa, at various times told bin Laden, in the most deferential terms, to mind his own business. Chronically behind on the local agendas because of his isolation, he gave advice that was stale or ill-informed. He told the group in North and West Africa not to cut a ransom deal with France after the

group seized hostages. He reminded the Yemenis that they ought to focus on attacking America, and not the Yemeni government or the Iranian-backed Houthis. In both cases, the affiliates assured their absentee leader that they knew best, and bin Laden was left to pout and write frustrated internal memos.

The most dramatic instance of insubordination was the Islamic State, the successor to al-Zarqawi's branch of al-Qaeda. The ISIS project eventually foundered after the whole civilized world decided to stop it by force. But before that happened, it overtook



Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi was the leader of the Iraqi franchise of al-Qaeda. But al-Zarqawi ignored requests from al-Qaeda leaders to stop killing Shiite civilians.

al-Qaeda as the premier jihadist group. By comparison, al-Qaeda looked cautious and stuffy. It had taken far less territory, shed less blood, and earned a reputation as the group of choice for radical Muslims who enjoy hiding in basements with elderly Egyptians. Al-Zarqawi was killed in 2006, but ISIS continued its spiritual founder's passion project of dismembering infidels on camera, a practice al-Qaeda considered counterproductive.

In her book, Lahoud quotes a 2011 letter from al-Zawahiri to bin Laden, incredulous at the Islamic State's apparent policy of shocking and appalling even its own potential followers. "I do not understand," al-Zawahiri wrote. "Are the Brothers not content with the number of their current enemies, being so eager to add new ones to their list?" In 2014, al-Qaeda disavowed ISIS after months of disputes between their leaders. Later, ISIS excommunicated al-Qaeda after its leaders refused to pledge loyalty to the caliphate of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

The Islamic State turned many Muslims off the idea of jihad altogether. Many had sympathized with bin Laden and been bitter toward America and Israel, and were intellectually but not viscerally opposed when those two countries were attacked. (*I don't condone terrorism, but ...*) The Islamic State convinced many otherwise undecided Muslims that the logical conclusion of jihadist terrorism was a death cult.

In some ways even more devastating to the al-Qaeda model was the opposite transformation of al-Qaeda's other regional leader,

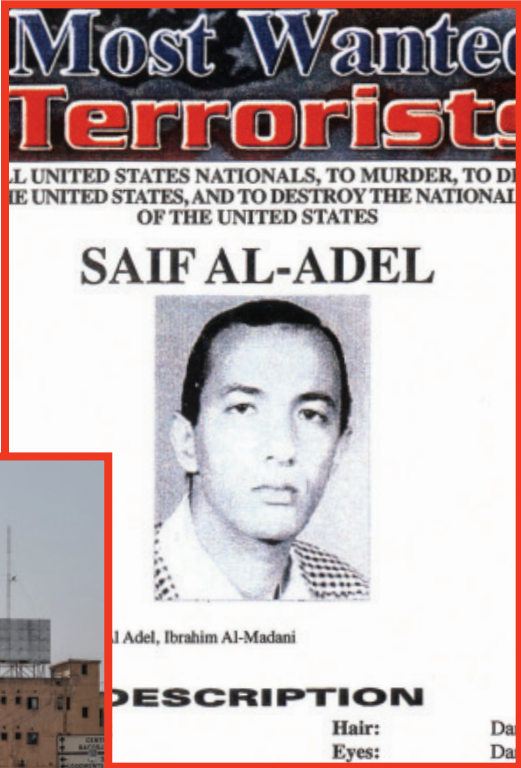
Ahmed al-Sharaa. A veteran of the jihad against the Americans in Iraq and a close associate of al-Baghdadi's, al-Sharaa split with al-Baghdadi in 2013, shortly before he declared his caliphate. The group al-Sharaa led, the Nusra Front, was not much better: It, too, tortured and killed and established a jihadist state, in this case loyal to al-Zawahiri. But over a period of about five years, al-Sharaa and his followers lost their taste for jihad. In 2023, he told the journalist Wassim Nasr that they were no longer jihadists, and that the global jihadist movement had "only brought destruction and failure to their communities." According to reports, he and his recovering jihadists helped the United States attack ISIS elements in the Middle East. Then, in December 2024, they sacked Damascus

and took over the Syrian government. As president, al-Sharaa has since visited London and Washington. Donald Trump met him, pronounced him "a young, attractive guy," and later gave him a bottle of cologne.

This example has been noticed. Nasr, a reporter for France 24 and a senior research fellow at the Soufan Center, recently interviewed the leadership of al-Qaeda's current Sahel branch, JNIM. He told me that the group learned from al-Sharaa that it is "possible to get out of the jihadi sphere and be accepted by the international community—if global terrorism is denounced." He said the group is thinking about trying to transform along similar lines. The main impediment to such a move is the Islamic State



Clockwise from top: Ahmed al-Sharaa, a former leader of an al-Qaeda affiliate and now the president of Syria; a WANTED poster for Saif al-Adel, the purported new leader of al-Qaeda; smoke rising above the streets of Bamako, Mali, after an attack in April orchestrated partly by al-Qaeda's branch in the Sahel, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin





West Africa Province. Before he could moderate, al-Sharaa had to wait for ISIS to be crushed in Syria, so he would not face defections. JNIM is still fighting ISIS, and Nasr said it isn't yet in a position to explore moderation.

"Al-Qaeda fathered a good son and a bad son," Thomas Hegghammer, a scholar of jihadism at the University of Oxford, told me. "The bad son was ISIS and went on to do so much bad stuff that the whole family got a bad reputation. But then the good son played his cards so well that he reached state power." Al-Qaeda wanted the franchises to show how it endures. Instead they showed that its ideology leads to crucifixions and beheadings if followed, and power if renounced.

**I**T'S HARD TO ACCEPT that your enemy is an idiot and that somehow you are losing to him anyway. Perhaps Saif al-Adel, with ample free time in his safe house in Iran, has taken online executive-M.B.A. classes and learned how to motivate his employees and keep them on mission, as his predecessors surely did not. The other possibility is that Saif al-Adel controls nothing and has been irrelevant for years. Neither possibility makes the United States look good. The first suggests that after 25 years of the War on Terror, terror is winning. The second suggests that these incompetent nobodies have persuaded the U.S. to burn through its military budget without improving its standing in the Middle East.

Both are possible, and it is difficult to tell the difference between an al-Qaeda that is stealthily rebuilding and an al-Qaeda that is dead. A cat that is stalking its prey is exactly as silent as a cat that was hit over the head two weeks ago with a shovel. Some of those who study and analyze jihadism sound exasperated by the task of convincing people that al-Qaeda core is the second type of cat. Cole Bunzel, a historian at the University of Texas at Austin, told me he considers the notion that al-Qaeda is a "secret behemoth," gathering strength under the guise of weakness, "mostly nonsense."

"I see pretty much no evidence that al-Qaeda has any competence or capability as a centralized organization," Bunzel said. The various affiliates call themselves al-Qaeda, but they appear to take no meaningful guidance from anyone in al-Qaeda core. He likened the core group to a "mostly defunct podcast," a bunch of old guys who occasionally get together to put out a statement, but who have no power to do anything other than shout into a void, because global jihad has long since moved on.

"The branches that operate under al-Qaeda's name have very little to do with the central leadership based in Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan," Bunzel said, adding that the fact that Saif al-Adel lives under Iranian supervision would make it awkward for anyone to take orders from him without having to wonder whether the orders were dictated by an Iranian intelligence officer. While other jihadists have spent the past 25 years declaring caliphates, sacking major cities, and sowing carnage and fear, Saif al-Adel has been writing essays and murmuring promises about something big in the works. Those essays, Bunzel said, are not exactly greeted with enthusiasm by jihadists, especially younger ones. The kids are lining up for other acts.

Daniel Byman, a veteran al-Qaeda watcher at Georgetown University, reminded me that al-Qaeda has not even officially announced that Saif al-Adel is in charge. "Their unwillingness to name a leader seems to me very damning," he said. "If you're a 20-year-old who wants to join, what are you going to think? *Here's a group that hasn't done much, and I don't even know who the leader is. That's the group for me!*" As time passes and al-Qaeda delivers almost no punches against its prime enemy, "at some point the numbers just get pretty clear," Byman said, and the most probable conclusion is that al-Qaeda core is "very, very weak."

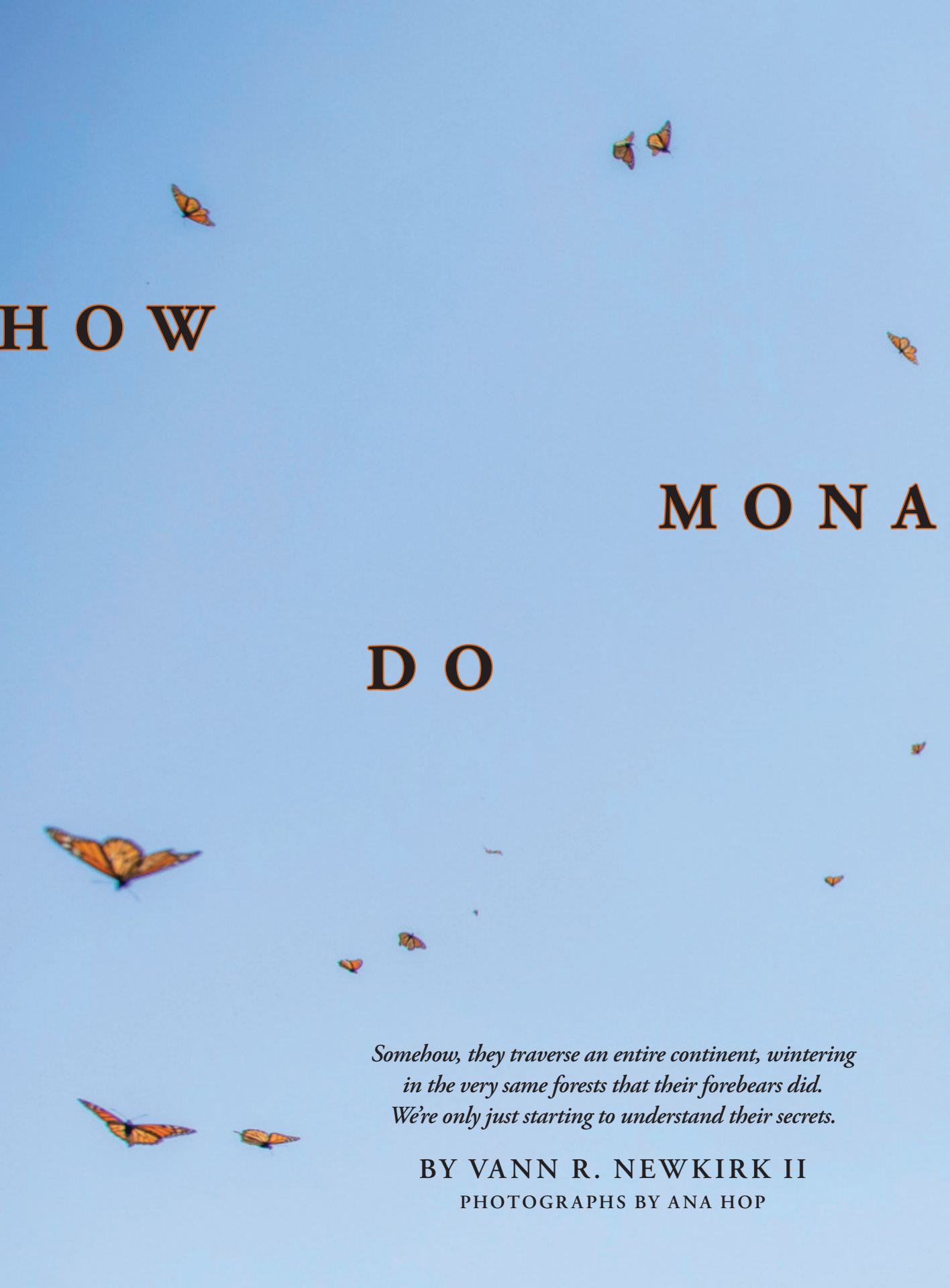
**F**OR DECADES, Thomas Hegghammer said, he has been puzzled by the speculation that a big al-Qaeda attack is just around the corner: "How long do we have to wait before we decide that prediction is wrong?" He acknowledged that an attack could happen at any time. But almost any terror group, including ones that nobody has ever heard of, can pull off a single attack. The question to ask, he said, is whether al-Qaeda can mount a sustained campaign of terror, as the Islamic State did in 2015. That question can be studied and assessed, and right now the answer appears to be no.

What's most remarkable about al-Qaeda, Hegghammer said, is that it has persuaded so many of its enemies to bumble along with it. This band of incompetents has somehow managed to "live rent-free inside the head of the American national-security establishment for an extraordinary number of years." It has dwelled in and dominated this collective imagination, and its persistent ability to remain in its enemies' mind is more impressive than any substantive accomplishment. The threats posed by the group were real, he said, and it made sense to find and destroy it. But what Hegghammer called the "ghost story" of al-Qaeda—the incessant and intrusive thoughts about it, including frantic projection of power and genius onto an organization that by all evidence is in shambles—should have ended long ago.

In 2015, during the Islamic State's heyday, I gave a talk about it before a private audience of policy makers and experts. I emphasized that the group wanted to build a state, and that unlike al-Qaeda, it would reduce its efforts to mount terrorist attacks in the United States if it thought those attacks would conflict with its state building. After the talk, a former senior official at the State Department came up to me and said he had no reason to doubt my analysis. But he said I should choose my words with great care, because anyone who predicts fewer attacks will be ridiculed when one occurs, and anyone who says the enemy's capabilities have been degraded is going to be forever ignored when the enemy manages to lash out one last time. "You don't want to be that guy," he said: the one who tells everyone to chill out, the day before thousands of people are poisoned with Saif al-Adel's ricin in their Cheerios.

But in the case of al-Qaeda, that guy has been right for the past 25 years. *A*

*Graeme Wood is a staff writer at The Atlantic.*

The background of the entire page is a clear, light blue sky. Scattered throughout the sky are several monarch butterflies in various stages of flight. Some are large and clearly visible, while others are smaller and more distant. The butterflies have orange wings with black veins and white spots on the underside.

H O W

M O N A

D O

*Somehow, they traverse an entire continent, wintering  
in the very same forests that their forebears did.  
We're only just starting to understand their secrets.*

BY VANN R. NEWKIRK II

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANA HOP



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“¡Mire!” My guide, Silvestre, pointed upward, as if I wasn’t already walking with my neck craned as far back as it could go. The sky was alive with millions of fluttering shapes, congregating into clouds at random, occasionally turning into ribbons that wound through the trees. So many butterfly wings beat the air that their vibrations were audible, like a waterfall rushing in the distance. I understood for the first time the immensity of the event I’d come to see.

I was in the center of El Rosario butterfly sanctuary, part of Mexico’s Monarch Butterfly Biosphere Reserve. Unaccustomed to the thin air at nearly 11,000 feet above sea level, I’d ridden Pelucha, a rust-colored mare, to the heights of the reserve. About halfway up, the orange-and-black butterflies had begun appearing in groups, alighting on flowers or gathering to sip water from puddles. Coupled pairs mated everywhere, and their constant entanglements on the path made it difficult to avoid stepping on them; Pelucha happily crunched more than a few underfoot. I dismounted at the top of the trail and followed Silvestre as he ducked under a rope that kept tourists from accessing the most sensitive areas of the reserve.

It was February, and the monarchs—northerners that had wintered in Mexico—were preparing for their final journey, which doubled as the first leg of a multi-generational relay race north. Their delicateness belies a life cycle that more resembles long-haul trucking than anything you might read in a children’s book. Each of the butterflies above me had already braved many grueling trials. In the following week or so, the majority would be on their way.

Monarch migration is a wonder of the natural world, one of the longest annual cycles of movement undertaken by any creature on Earth, spanning thousands of

miles. Over the past half century, the lands that the monarchs traverse have become more hostile to them, a result of development and herbicides, global warming and organized crime, all of which have put the future of that migration in doubt. And yet, the story I’d come to write—my reason for interloping in this and other sanctuaries—was not just a narrative of beauty being diminished by human trampling and greed. Recently, there’s been good news: Population estimates, after a long march downward, have been increasing for the past two years. This stabilization appears to be connected at least in part to efforts to save butterfly habitats in Mexico, the United States, and Canada. Those developments are reason to hope that there may still be a pathway left for saving the monarchs and their migration.

The monarch persists partly because of the dogged work from its human partners; because of people who have given their life—in every sense of the phrase—to preserve nature. But mostly, the monarch persists because life’s job is to live; because within those thimble-size bodies hides a dynamo of survival that puts our most incredible machines to shame. The more we learn about the butterflies, the more we understand how extraordinary it is that they have so far beaten the odds

we have stacked against them, and how forbidding those odds remain.

WE’VE KNOWN JUST how epic the monarch’s migration is for only about half a century. In the 1970s, using paper tags placed on butterflies’ wings, the Canadian butterfly researchers Fred and Norah Urquhart completed a lifelong mission to uncover the mystery of where all the monarchs born in Ontario went in the fall. To their surprise, the sojourners they followed made it all the way down the length of the U.S., and on to the mountain forests of Michoacán, Mexico. There they roosted, packed tightly into just a handful of colonies that collectively cover no more than a few city blocks, yet hold nearly all of the continent’s monarchs in winter. The Urquharts first visited these colonies in 1976, and *National Geographic* published a cover story on their breakthrough.

For centuries, Indigenous people in Mexico’s highlands have witnessed the monarchs’ annual return during harvest season, though for most of that time they didn’t know where they came from. The butterflies have been making this migration for as long as 20 millennia, once finding paths to and from the fields gouged out by glaciers retreating with the spring during the last Ice Age. Now their roosting grounds sit within a handful of sanctuaries that I visited. At Sierra Chincua, a few miles north of El Rosario, I stood on a cliff overlooking the slender trunks of oyamel fir trees. I watched living streams of monarchs flying in different directions, sometimes winding about one another like a gigantic knot forever being tied, and looked in vain for three monarchs that I knew were in the fray.

Each had been given a designation in a spreadsheet—CHI016, CHI013, and CHI001—but those were all very boring names for butterflies, so I’d asked my 6-year-old daughter to give them better ones. She’d come up with Cinderella, Eric, and Carle. (She knows *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* by heart.)

Nothing about the trio was unusual, save for the gear they wore. Affixed to each butterfly’s thorax, like a tiny backpack, was a transmitter the size of a grain of rice. These transmitters, called BlüMorpho tags, had been developed by a company called



ANA HOP FOR THE ATLANTIC



*A monarch butterfly in El Rosario butterfly sanctuary, in Angangueo, Mexico*

Cellular Tracking Technologies, and Cinderella, Eric, and Carle were part of the first generation of monarchs to wear them.

Before my visit to the sanctuaries, I'd spoken with David La Puma, an executive at CTT and one of the brains behind the BlüMorpho. The company had initially focused on developing tech for tracking eagles, but La Puma had previously worked in monarch conservation, and carried his interest in the butterflies with him. Tracking a monarch is different from tracking an eagle, as monarchs each weigh less than a dollar bill. Any transmitter attached to one could weigh no more than a few grains of sand.

No battery could be made that small and still provide power over months of flying, and the solar panels that CTT used for eagle trackers were much too heavy. But the team figured out a solution: taking the ultrathin solar squares that line the wings of satellites and carefully chopping them up into tiny bespoke cells. An early version of the tracker, applied to butterflies with dabs of eyelash glue, was linked with a cellphone app via Bluetooth, allowing enthusiasts to follow nearby butterflies—a sort of “Pokémon Go for monarchs,” La Puma said—and record their locations in somewhat haphazard fashion. The newest iteration works more like Google Maps, providing far more complete data on the butterflies' locations to anyone, almost in real time.

Knowing more about butterflies' individual habits may enable us to help them thrive collectively (more on that later). The data also just help us get to know the monarchs better. As it turns out, some seem to be worse with directions than others, and can find themselves traveling west or south from Mexico. In the prototyping stage, some monarchs were detected near oil platforms in the Gulf of Mexico, nowhere near land, and some butterflies appeared to enjoy Caribbean vacations. Yet the majority seem to follow well-established paths along invisible corridors in the air.

Cinderella, Eric, and Carle had all been tagged in Sierra Chincua, which meant that I could deduce certain facts about their lives. They were already bona fide world-class wanderers, having flown there all the way from Canada in the fall, a three-month







trip. Along the way, they'd dodged birds and windmills and cars, eventually reaching the same patch of forest—perhaps even the same trees—that their great-grandparents had roosted in. For much of the winter, they had not eaten and had barely moved, jamming themselves so tightly against their fellow travelers that from a distance they looked like scales armoring the sides of the trees. Now they'd awakened, stretching their wings and warming up.

Though I couldn't spot them in the sky, I could see from my phone that Cinderella, Eric, and Carle were near. Over the next several weeks, I would keep tabs on them, following their movements with a level of detail that would have been impossible only a year ago.

**INDIVIDUAL BUTTERFLIES CAN** travel as far as 100 miles in a single day and can congregate in groups so thick that they show up as clouds on weather radar. Glider pilots have seen them flying at altitudes above 10,000 feet. Year after year, new generations tend to gather around the same landmarks, despite having never seen them before. They seem, for example, to love the Barnegat Lighthouse on Long Beach Island, in New Jersey.

The monarchs' feats of navigation are enabled by their internal technology, a set of instinctual tools that in some ways surpasses our understanding. The butterflies' eyes can sense the angle and intensity of different forms of light. In each antenna, a complex series of molecules maintains their circadian clock, which, when combined with sunlight cues, gives them their sense of direction.

When the sun is unreliable, monarchs have a secondary method of pathfinding—a biological compass that allows them to sense Earth's magnetic field. Internal thermostats help govern the timing of their northward movements.

The butterflies' migration evolved to fit North America's geography. Monarch

caterpillars eat only milkweed, which grows best in cooler climates, but the butterflies can't tolerate freezing temperatures. The length of the continent's interior, unbroken by mountains or oceans, allows the monarchs to find the right weather and plants throughout the year—a Goldilocks ecology, neither too hot nor too cold. They are a marvel of nature's engineering, of the kind of elegance that evolution can achieve over deep time.

"Winter is hard for insects that have to survive it, and monarchs basically avoid it by leaving," says Karen Oberhauser, a researcher at the University of Wisconsin at Madison and a co-founder of the Monarch Butterfly Fund. Unlike many other butterfly species, which are adapted to very specific microbiomes, monarchs have options if a local environment changes.

Indeed, they seem strikingly well adapted for living alongside the world's most disruptive change agent: humanity. Milkweed tends to thrive in transitional areas, such as fallow fields, unkempt lawns, and the edges of highways. "When I first started studying monarchs, it really did seem like they kind of had an advantage over a lot of other species," Oberhauser told me. "That's a disturbance-adapted species." She said, affectionately, that monarchs are like rats or pigeons, all part of the strange but sturdy menagerie of modern life.

But there are limits to any creature's adaptability, and human activity has steadily eroded the monarch's margin for error. In the 1930s, Mexico's land-reform program created *ejidos*, areas designated for communal use by peasants. They began clearing the ancient oyamel forests to plant corn, beans, and squash, and sold the felled timber. Commercial interests also stepped in, accelerating logging in the butterfly's winter habitats.

North of the Rio Grande, there have been disturbances to the disturbances. Although milkweed can flourish along

roads, the advent of the interstate system also introduced one of the most efficient killers of butterflies: speeding traffic. And although farmland in the Midwest was once a reliable (if accidental) incubator for milkweed, the development of Roundup Ready crops in the '90s allowed more promiscuous use of herbicides. Almost overnight, milkweed disappeared from large-scale farms.

According to a recent report from the World Wildlife Fund, the total area covered by monarch colonies in winter decreased from 45 acres in 1996 to a low of fewer than two acres in 2013. The five-year average of colony size has dropped by 80 percent since the mid-'90s, a plunge of some 170 million butterflies.

As Oberhauser told me, the changes wrought by humans have caught up to the monarchs. In fact, the complexity of the migration might now be a liability, as multiple stops on the journey face upheaval at once. "What makes them so strong also makes them vulnerable," she said.

My trio of butterflies had been strong from their beginnings. As caterpillars, they'd gorged on milkweed, a plant that is toxic to most animals, and incorporated its poison into their bodies. Their distinct coloring is both a warning for predators and a badge of initiation.

They are already one-percenters—only one in 100 of the eggs laid in Ontario last year had produced butterflies that made it this far. Their generation, called a "super-generation," is bigger and more robust than their parents' was or their children's will be: They are centurions built to make the journey all the way south and partway back. (Two successive generations will eventually complete the round trip to Canada.) Now, after a winter of fasting, huddled close against the cold, they are regaining their strength, sipping nectar from flowers near their roosting trees. On my phone, I can see a map with each location that the butterflies ping as they meander from place to place, ever returning to their central roosts.

My phone shows only their movements, not their more private matters, but I know that before they leave these forests behind, they will each find a mate. For Cinderella and Eric—which, as I told my daughter, is a female butterfly—their mates' package of

*Monarchs at rest on a tree branch at El Rosario in early March.  
In winter's colder temperatures, the butterflies pack themselves together  
so tightly that they resemble scales on the trees.*

sperm will also contain a deposit of nutrients that will help them handle the rigors of the trip. Carle will weaken himself, giving his mate a gift that she must use to ensure the survival of their offspring.

**FOR THE PAST** several decades, a diverse group of grassroots activists, scientists, and enthusiasts has worked to forestall the monarchs' decline. I'd come to Sierra Chincua as the guest of one of them. José Luis Álvarez Alcalá, a local activist and farmer, showed me around. He pointed to the visitors' center, restaurants, and gift shops near the sanctuary's entrance. "None of this was here 30 years ago," he told me. Then he pointed to a copse of young trees creeping up the hills. "A lot of that wasn't either," Álvarez Alcalá would know: He helped create much of it.

Years of chain-smoking can be heard in the thickness of Álvarez Alcalá's voice, and when we met, he sported a limp from a recent fall while working. He wasn't originally a butterfly guy, he said, but was interested in revitalizing the region that encompassed the sanctuaries, and he ran a tree nursery on Hacienda la Cruz, a 17th-century Spanish colonial estate that he'd restored. By the 1980s, just a few years after the *National Geographic* story came out, the monarchs were already drawing streams of intrepid sightseers from abroad, despite almost no tourism infrastructure. Álvarez Alcalá realized that there might be a way to align the survival of the species with the local economy.

In 1986, President Miguel de la Madrid gave national protections to the main colony sites, creating the Monarch Butterfly Biosphere Reserve. But those protections did not halt or even slow logging. Encouraged by the butterfly scientist Lincoln P. Brower, Álvarez Alcalá and his associates came up with a more proactive plan. They would give the members of the *ejidos* oyamel fir and pine saplings to grow, instead of their usual crops. The growers would still be free to profit from their land by selling timber for Christmas trees, lumber, or charcoal, but would be encouraged to harvest the wood sustainably. If done right, on a wide-enough scale, the model could help provide both income for the *ejidatarios* and the basis for butterfly tourism.

Álvarez Alcalá says that, since launching in 1997, his La Cruz Habitat Protection Project has planted about 20 million oyamel fir and pine trees. Other groups have also reforested hundreds of hectares. The oldest of the trees planted as part of this experiment are now maturing and providing winter homes for exhausted monarchs.

Over the span of just a few years, reforestation and ecotourism have transformed much of Michoacán, the state in which the sanctuaries reside. In the municipality of Angangueo, a brilliant mural depicts the social history of the monarchs, the "*hijas del sol*," including a painting of the now-famous 1976 *National Geographic* cover. In El Rosario, the trinkets and souvenirs, the tour-bus parking lots, and even the stable of horses for rent all speak to a symbiosis that has only recently come to be.

The monarch's star turn has changed the places along the more northerly parts of its route as well. In the U.S., seven states list the monarch as their official insect or butterfly, and in many places, monarchs appear on license plates that urge fellow drivers to protect the environment. More than 50,000 yards, parks, and schools now feature Monarch Waystations, special gardens stocked with milkweed and flowers.

According to the World Wildlife Fund, the overwintering areas covered by monarchs this year increased by 64 percent. Cinderella, Eric, and Carle's generation was the largest to leave Mexico in seven years. The measured takeaway from the WWF is that "despite challenges, conservation efforts are making a difference."

Yet there are new challenges, new crises in front of the monarchs. And these may eclipse the ones they've seen so far.

**"FUCKING AVOCADOS."** Álvarez Alcalá's son Luca was driving me around the outskirts of Hacienda la Cruz, where La Cruz Habitat Protection Project is based. He pointed to the offending field in the distance, its neat rows of hunter-green bushes

a dead giveaway. The fruits represented one of the emerging threats to the reforestation mission, and to the monarch's survival.

I'd arrived in Mexico just after the annual high-water mark for avocado consumption: the Super Bowl. Michoacán is the largest avocado-growing region in the world, producing nearly all avocados eaten in the United States. Its volcanic soil is ideal for the fruit, and intense American demand for guacamole and fancy toast has, in these parts, given avocados the moniker *oro verde*—"green gold."

Unfortunately for monarchs, their forests sit right in the middle of some of the most promising areas for growing avocados. And the green-gold rush is so lucrative that it has drawn the attention of the area's cartels, which now extort local growers, smuggle many of their avocados across the border, and even operate plantations directly. There's a good chance that if you bought chips and guac to eat while you watched Bad Bunny during the big game, a cartel profited.

Recently, cartels have been a major force behind illicit logging in the forests that Álvarez Alcalá and his son have tried to revive and protect, and much of the land has been converted for avocado farming. In 2020, Homero Gómez González, a prominent conservationist at the Biosphere Reserve, was found dead in Ocampo, the closest municipality to the sanctuary. Gómez González had been known as a vociferous antagonist of loggers. His killing has not been solved, but many outlets have placed the blame on the cartels.

Those same cartels instigated the crisis that gripped Mexico during my travels. Just three days before I got to Hacienda la Cruz, Mexican authorities killed Nemesio Rubén Oseguera Cervantes, the leader of the Jalisco New Generation Cartel. The death of "El Mencho" sparked violence across the states of Jalisco and Michoacán: Cartel members erected barricades on major roads and ambushed National

*José Luis Álvarez Alcalá at Hacienda la Cruz,  
his home and tree nursery*











By mid-February, Cinderella is restless, regularly streaming to the southwest and back, even visiting Ocampo, veering toward a little snack bar in town.

*An ecotourism industry has developed around El Rosario. Rental horses and guides help tourists travel along the reserve's high mountain trails.*

Guard members, killing at least 25 and also attacking several journalists.

When I asked the elder Álvarez if touring the region would be safe, he gave perhaps the least-encouraging encouragement I'd ever heard: "I think there will be no problems," he said. "But nothing in life is for sure." During my trips to El Rosario and Sierra Chincua, both sanctuaries were mostly empty of tourists; cartels had been burning cars near the base of Sierra Chincua. It was all a stark reminder of how precarious monarch tourism is, and how much money there is to be made in destruction.

When I spoke with Megan Fulton, the executive director of Álvarez Alcalá's project, she was keen to point me to a recent report from the WWF showing that, the avocado boom notwithstanding, rates of forest degradation and illegal logging in the sanctuaries have slowed in the past year. She attributed the positive development to the local communities being galvanized by global warming and weather changes. "They are the communities that are already seeing the effects of climate change," she said. "So they want to restore their land and protect it for future generations."

But the very fact that the communities are experiencing tangible effects—unprecedented heat waves that have killed hundreds, record droughts and wildfires that have ruined crops—means that the problem is bigger than organized crime, and perhaps beyond the ability of individual people or local groups to solve. Climate change is an accelerant for troubles that are already afoot. High mountain elevations that were once cool and less hospitable for avocado growing are getting hotter—and thus more tempting for felling. Warmer temperatures will also narrow the already tiny bands of habitability for oyamel firs, disrupting forest ecologies even in places that logging hasn't yet touched.

The most ominous signs were visible from Hacienda la Cruz. In the forests just outside the property, like scars on the green mountainside, three ugly patches of brown, bare tree skeletons stood out. Luca explained that these patches had been infested by pine bark beetles, notorious evergreen-killers that feed on stressed or weakened conifers. The beetles are a normal part of forest ecosystems, and

their numbers are usually controlled by cold winters. But the season has grown warmer. More trees now suffer from heat stress and dehydration, making them targets. Oyamels are particularly vulnerable. Authorities have already been forced to cut down whole sectors of the reserve to keep beetle infestations from spreading.

ON MY PHONE, I can see that by mid-February, Cinderella is restless, regularly streaming to the southwest and back, even visiting Ocampo once or twice, veering toward Loncheria Los 4 Elementos, a little snack bar in town that sells tortas, burgers, and micheladas. Eric is a bit more adventurous, making her way almost as far west as Ciudad Hidalgo, where the great father of the nation once owned a hacienda. Carle is more of a homebody, sticking closer to Sierra Chincua and often staying in its forests.

Eric is the first of the trio to leave for good, but her eagerness might be her undoing—the weather might not yet be warm enough for a successful transit. She flies north through Querétaro, but then her tracker stops transmitting. Cinderella and Carle choose to leave with the bulk of their cohort a week later, around the second week of March. There's not much road ahead for Carle; he stops transmitting soon after.

But Cinderella keeps going, winding her way through Querétaro, swerving toward the old colonial city of San Miguel de Allende, then bending northeast. On March 15, she crosses the Rio Grande in the vicinity of Rio Grande City, Texas.

The same week that Cinderella and her fellow survivors began fanning out into the United States, I visited Monarch Watch, an organization based at the University of Kansas that has long served as a hub of monarch research and conservation. I met Kristen Baum, its current director, and Chip Taylor, its founder and director emeritus. Baum runs a blog for Monarch Watch that tracks the radio-tagged butterflies' movements. These data points could help conservationists model the migration more accurately, anticipate changes in population size, and better decide how and where to allocate resources to restore habitats. The day before my visit, Baum noted that CHI016, Cinderella's

government name, was likely the farthest north among all the tags.

The tiny building that Monarch Watch occupies is jam-packed with records, research, and the butterflies themselves. In one room, I watched as a female split open her green chrysalis and emerged to spread her wings. Across the hall were refrigerators full of milkweed seeds—the group has donated more than 1 million milkweed plants for restoration projects since 2015.

Taylor himself developed an artificial diet that could be used to raise caterpillars in lieu of live milkweed. In 2009, Monarch Watch sent caterpillars provisioned with this food (which looks something like old guacamole) on the Space Shuttle Atlantis to the International Space Station, where they successfully metamorphosed into butterflies.

The word *emeritus* doesn't capture the full role that Taylor, 88, still plays; he is a constant presence around the building. Before he secured more generous funding, he'd bankrolled many of Monarch Watch's activities himself, using the proceeds from investments that he and his wife had made in Apple. He helped pay 100-peso rewards for finding paper butterfly tags—still the standard, low-tech method of tracking the creatures—in Mexico, which became a problem one year when people recovered more than 3,000 tagged butterflies. "That cost me \$12,000," he told me. "I wasn't too anxious to do that over and over again."

It was hard, there in the middle of all of the butterfly posters and joyful pictures, to ask him the question I'd really come to ask. But Taylor eventually sighed and launched into an answer on his own. "What we're doing ecologically to save the monarch butterfly, the scale of it is just nothing compared to what's going on," he said. "The population is going to creep lower and lower in time because we're incapable, I think, at this point, of really mastering enough of the restoration."

In the United States and Canada, the math leads to a similar place as it does in Mexico. For all the bootstrapped recent successes in forestalling the butterfly's decline, we've merely been playing catch-up. Now climate change is the primary threat to monarch numbers, and it is implacable. Higher temperatures make

monarchs more susceptible to infection by a protozoan called *Ophryocystis elektroscirrha*, a parasite that drains the butterfly's strength and makes it less likely to complete its journeys. And climate shifts are yet another threat to milkweed's viability in particular locales, throwing off the distances and timing that are so crucial to each butterfly's travels.

"Maybe we can do something about the climate, but the opportunities for doing that are really, really diminishing very rapidly," Taylor said. Even accounting for this year's surprising bounce-back in numbers, he puts the timeline at 20 years or so before the migrating monarch's numbers become too low to recover. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service estimates upwards of a 50 percent chance that the eastern migratory monarchs will be extinct by 2080.

WHEN I WAS growing up, the flowers outside my bedroom window always brought visitors. I'd often wake up in the morning to the buzzing of a hummingbird's wings. But the visitors I greeted most joyfully were the monarchs. On late-summer days, kaleidoscopes of butterflies would land together, covering the flowers like an orange blanket. Even then, I understood that there was something special about their fleeting delicateness. And fleeting it was: The world will probably never again see as many monarchs as existed then.

But I would not bet entirely against the monarch. The fight to protect the species continues. In its persistence and its cooperative nature, that fight shares qualities with the monarch itself. The project is proof, in a fractured time, that people can join together and decide to help defend the things they see as valuable.

Even as Taylor despaired of the monarch's future, he mused, briefly, about the possibility of restocking wild-butterfly

populations using a scaled-up version of Monarch Watch's colony program. With that, his exertions in perfecting his home-grown colony process—the green smoothie for caterpillars, testing procedures for parasites—came into clearer view for me. They could be understood, I realized, as the beginnings of an attempt to bottle a fragment of the monarch's magic for the future world. Maybe migration will continue, in that future, with an assist from something like a butterfly doomsday vault. Or maybe the next generation of the monarch's friends will find further innovations to defeat problems that now seem insurmountable.

The things we have learned recently about individual butterflies will be helpful for vanquishing those scientific problems, but the most important contribution of all this new information might be wonder itself. I am not a scientist, but after watching and tracking the butterflies for months, it seems to me that monarchs have something of a *personality*, a level of individuality that might endear them even more to the public. Some appear impulsive, or impressively rangy, leaving earlier and traveling more, whereas others fail to leave altogether. In El Rosario, when I asked Silvestre, my guide, about why groups of butterflies chose specific times to find water, he was enigmatic: "They decide."

And whether or not we call it personality, there's science behind the idea of the butterflies' individuality. In humans, traits such as neuroticism and recklessness appear to have some evolutionary basis—emerging perhaps to provide our species with sentries who alerted us to threats, and with explorers who led the way to new food sources. Research suggests that the goofball butterflies that might seem to lack a sense of direction are actually pioneers, scouts finding new habitats to exploit or new places to hunker down should worse come to worst.

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Top: A paper tracking tag being affixed to a monarch at Monarch Watch, a hub of butterfly research and conservation in Lawrence, Kansas. Middle: A butterfly habitat box, used to transport monarch caterpillars from the center to the International Space Station in 2009. Bottom: A University of Kansas student, Merrie Clough, prepares caterpillar food, which will be sent, along with larvae, to individuals and schools hoping to raise monarch butterflies.





No matter what happens along the Mexico route, the monarch is likely to live on, albeit in smaller numbers, elsewhere. Across the planet, most populations of monarch butterflies—in Spain, in Hawaii—are likely descended from vagrants that veered off the Mexico migration path. Monarchs introduced to Australia in the 1870s have now established an annual migration along the east and southwest coasts—they have earned the fitting local epithet of “wanderers.” And in little pockets of the United States, Central America, and the Caribbean, in places where milkweed grows year-round, small monarch populations have settled in, no longer migrating and now sporting shorter wingspans than their more transient cousins.

For all their seeming fragility, monarchs will be an extraordinarily capable partner in efforts to save them. They may yet surprise us. We may yet surprise ourselves.

**CINDERELLA IS A MARATHONER.** She flies through San Antonio and then skirts Austin, avoiding the congestion of the city proper during the South by Southwest festival, and then cuts through the Piney Woods toward Texarkana. At the time of her last detection, Cinderella is in Arkansas, having likely traveled from the Great Lakes to the Mexican highlands, and then halfway back. The diaspora she belongs to has spread out across a wide expanse of the country, ending up in Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and every place in between. They’ve spent themselves, but they have fulfilled their biological missions.

During her roughly eight-month life, Cinderella traveled farther than scientists might have imagined possible, more than 3,000 miles as the butterfly flies. Along the way, she likely glued hundreds of tiny eggs onto milkweed plants. Perhaps some of the hatchlings will live, and continue her line. Perhaps they, too, will have her preternatural strength and tenacity. I hope, for the sake of my own daughter, and her ability to live in a world of beauty, that they will. *A*

*Vann R. Newkirk II is a senior editor at The Atlantic.*





# THE CITIES THAT SAID YES TO DRUGS

*Policies that gave addicts clean needles and places to use drugs were intended to reduce harm. They created a “zombie apocalypse.”*

By Michael Powell | Photographs by Dana Golan





*Seattle's Jose Rizal Park has become a favorite spot for addicts to smoke and inject fentanyl.*



**L**ate last year, I walked roughly a mile from downtown Seattle to the working-class neighborhood of Little Saigon and came upon a montage of human despair. An open-air drug market stretched along the intersection of 12th and Jackson: about 250 people, many smoking fentanyl or bent over in the thrall of the drug, tilting as if mid-fall. Three women lay passed out on the sidewalk, their chests slowly rising and falling, while fellow addicts stepped over them and dealers made sales. Young boys, schoolbags on their backs, stood on a far corner and watched.

I walked around the block to the Hoa Mai playground, named for a Vietnamese flower that signifies rebirth. City workers had installed gates to keep drug users away, but at 4 p.m. on a Wednesday, I counted 27 people smoking drugs and nodding off. No children were in sight.

Half a mile to the south, in the Beacon Hill neighborhood, I visited a 10-acre park named after the Filipino nationalist Jose Rizal. It has a playground and the remnants of an apple orchard, and at night you can peer downtown and see the city lights. As I arrived, a drug user squatted next to a child's slide and relieved himself. Others had set up tents and colonized the park pavilion, where they heated fentanyl on tinfoil and inhaled the fumes with glass pipes. A few went old-school and injected it.

Across the street, I spoke with Angelina Monsegur as she waited at a bus stop. When she was a kid, she told me, she and her father ate candied apples in the park and watched Fourth of July fireworks. A few weeks earlier, she and her 6-year-old daughter had gotten on the bus and seen a man smoking fentanyl on board. "Are you serious?" she'd shouted at him. "My daughter has asthma." I asked if she had called the police, and she smiled at my naivete. "All the city does is send out teams who hand out aluminum foil and fentanyl pipes."

Seattle is one of the wealthiest and best-educated cities in the world. It can afford to try various strategies to address its drug epidemic and high rate of fatal overdoses. Yet many of the city's leaders, apparently supported by voters, view enforcing bans on the open sale and use of narcotics, and forcing addicts off the streets and into treatment, as akin to an act of state repression.

Seattle, like a striking number of other liberal American cities, has embraced a radical form of "harm reduction," which is more a philosophy about treating addiction than a scientific approach to it. Harm reduction's adherents hold that police and outreach workers should "meet the addicted where they are," which is to say without judgment. The New York State Department of Health, a bastion of harm reduction, describes it as a "social movement" committed to "building leadership" among drug users. In these places, de facto and sometimes legal restrictions on narcotics use have been greatly loosened; cities fund teams of workers to hand out drug paraphernalia, and in some rare cases they've created dedicated spaces for addicts to shoot up. Meanwhile, police departments struggling with staffing shortages and budget cuts have stopped devoting resources to sweeping users and dealers off the streets or out of parks and playgrounds.

Harm reduction was born 50 years ago of an admirable humanitarian impulse. Its most basic ideas, such as providing clean needles to users, deservedly draw broad support. There's a debate to be had, though, about whether this approach has saved lives or added to the carnage of America's terrible drug epidemic. From 2014 to 2024, roughly 862,000 Americans died of drug overdoses, more than twice the toll of the previous decade. Several studies have shown that addicts who shoot up at official injection sites are far less likely to die of overdoses than those who use drugs in, say, alleyways and parks. Over the past decade, however, overdose-death rates climbed sharply in nearly every city where the strongest harm-reduction policies were in place, and even with declines in the past two years, the rates remain well above those of previous decades. From 2016 to 2025, 7,089 people died of overdoses in King County, which includes Seattle—seven times the number of homicides in that period.

Harm reduction isn't just a problem for addicts. In many cities, the autonomy of drug users has taken precedence over nearly everything and everyone else, not least working-class families like Monsegur's who must live alongside addicts and accept dystopian decay. Keith Humphreys, a Stanford psychiatry and behavioral-sciences professor and a former adviser to President Obama, supports needle exchanges and opposes the widespread jailing of users. But when he argues that drug policy must take into account the impact on communities, he told me, some critics dismiss him as a reactionary. Their arguments, he said, "sound a lot more like gun rights and vaccine refusal. It's no longer about the whole population; it's about the subset who use drugs."

In recent years, officials in cities such as San Francisco and Philadelphia have moved to rein in the excesses of harm-reduction policies. Nevertheless, these policies retain a powerful hold on public-health and political leaders in blue parts of the country. I witnessed this in visits to Seattle and Burlington, Vermont—two of America's more progressive cities. Both are afflicted by high overdose rates, overwhelmed police forces, parks and public squares often captive to drug use, and the theft and disorder that accompany all of that. Yet many of their elected officials continue to insist, despite everything, that harm reduction is the most effective and moral solution to addiction.

**HARM REDUCTION TOOK ROOT** in the 1970s in the Netherlands, where addicts formed unions—the Junkiebond in Rotterdam, for instance—that distributed needles and pushed back against official insistence on abstinence from hard drugs. Not long afterward, this philosophy gained support in some American and Canadian cities. I first encountered it when I reported on a heroin-shooting gallery in Bushwick, Brooklyn, in 1991. The work of harm-reduction advocates at the time undoubtedly saved lives. HIV-infection rates for drug users in Bushwick had reached 50 percent or higher, at a time when that diagnosis was close to a death sentence. Activists risked arrest to distribute clean needles and bleach to disinfect used ones. But some began to argue for a more radical step: There would be less death, they said, if addicts could inject drugs without fear of arrest.

That momentous step came about not in New York but in Vancouver, a city whose political culture was left-wing and





*In Seattle's working-class Little Saigon neighborhood, where hundreds of people gather in open-air drug markets, businesses and playgrounds have installed gates to keep addicts away.*

libertarian, celebrating the rights of the individual. In 2003, as overdose deaths surged, the Liberal Party of Canada carved out an exemption to federal drug laws and established North America's first sanctioned injection site, in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, a troubled dockside neighborhood. Addicts could bring their heroin and cocaine to a 13-seat center where staff dispensed needles, swabs, and sterile water to cook the drugs and offered advice on vein maintenance. Clinic staff were trained to reverse overdoses, and if that failed, to call a hospital for help.

Initial opinion surveys found broad public support for the center, and it shone like a beacon for some activists, academics, and journalists in the United States and other parts of Canada. A stream of studies and articles celebrated Vancouver's legal shooting gallery, which resulted in fewer cases of AIDS and other infections, and fewer deaths. Public-health officials coined a nonjudgmental nomenclature that persists to this day. The word *addict* was stigmatizing; better to refer to *people who use drugs*. People *used* rather than *abused* narcotics. They did not *fail a drug test*; they *tested positive*.

Vancouver's model spawned dozens of injection sites across Canada. Health officials in British Columbia went still further, championing a program known as "safer supply": Former government officials started companies that provided addicts with free opioid alternatives such as pharmaceutical-grade hydromorphone pills—considerably more powerful than heroin. Drug users obtained these pills from pharmacies and specially designed vending machines.

By 2020, the rights of addicts in the province had edged toward the fantastical. In 2023, the province decriminalized small amounts of certain hard drugs. One hospital instructed nurses not to confiscate fentanyl or meth from patients and not to restrict suspected dealers from visiting patients. When British Columbia banned illicit-drug use within 50 feet of a public park, playground, or swimming pool, the provincial supreme court blocked the law, ruling that it could cause "irreparable harm" to drug users. "Harm reductionists had the force of a bulldozer," Julian Somers, who studies addiction at Simon Fraser University, told me.

Some addicts learned to game the system by obtaining daily allotments of hydromorphone pills—15 or more a day was

typical—and then selling them to dealers in exchange for stronger fentanyl concoctions. Dealers could then sell the original pills on the street. An investigation by the *National Post* reported a price drop of 70 percent or more for black-market pills in cities that had instituted safer supply. This, in turn, expanded the circle of the addicted and led to more overdoses.

The consequences were predictable. Over the course of two decades, many thousands of drug users poured into the Downtown Eastside and other Canadian neighborhoods in search of narcotics and places to shoot up. Overdoses spiked. In 2014, British Columbia recorded 369 overdose deaths; in 2023, the figure peaked at more than 2,500. Fatal overdoses last year decreased to 1,826, as Canada moved to reverse decriminalization and tighten regulation of narcotics, but that still represents a nearly ninefold increase over 15 years. Advocates of harm reduction have long held that more addicts would die if officials closed injection centers. But a recent study found that after an injection site in Alberta closed, there was no increase in the number of overdose deaths, and more addicts sought treatment. Advocates have also insisted that crime does not spike near injection centers, but the data are more mixed than they admit.

Not long ago, I walked through a park in Toronto to a fence with hundreds of purple ribbons tied to it. Each represented a resident who had died of an overdose, and I was unavoidably moved. Then, as I read a leaflet, I realized that the memorial was the work of the Harm Reduction Advocacy Collective, “a liberation movement of people who use drugs,” along with public-health professionals and academics who “stand up for the rights

of drug users.” It’s one of a number of similar groups in Canada, such as the Substance Use Health Network, which condemns “anti-euphoria prohibitionist principles” such as “the idea that illicit drugs are inherently bad.”

British Columbia is starting to rethink its runaway experiment. In 2025, the province began requiring addicts using the safer-supply program to consume their prescribed narcotics in front of pharmacists, and earlier this year, the drug-decriminalization program expired. Provincial health authorities are now making attempts to encourage addicts to get treatment. The sense is of a political culture reluctantly shaking off a decades-long stupor. In 2024, the premier of British Columbia appointed Daniel Vigo, a psychiatrist and public-health researcher, as the province’s chief scientific adviser on toxic drugs. Vigo has spoken of the terrible toll that repeat overdoses take on addicts’ brains, and has advocated for a new policy of mandating treatment for some addicts. Progressive activists and journalists tend to talk about forced treatment as a conservative-driven return to a carceral state, but considerable data show that addicts who enter mandated treatment are as likely to avoid drug use and rearrest as the relatively small number who seek treatment voluntarily.

Vigo’s words today would have amounted to heresy a few years ago. “It’s as if we forgot that the goal was to try and stop people from getting addicted,” he told me, adding later: “Harm reduction gets people in trouble when it stops being one part of a holistic strategy and it becomes an ideological movement.”

But even as Vancouver has begun the painful process of revising its harm-reduction policies, the city still exerts a powerful hold



*Medics attend to a man who overdosed on drugs in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside neighborhood. Thousands of addicts have poured into the city since it opened North America's first sanctioned injection site, inspiring similar programs across the U.S. and Canada.*

GARY CORONADO / LOS ANGELES TIMES / GETTY



on the imagination of liberal leaders in the United States. In New York City, which established two injection sites in 2021, health officials and academics point to the perceived success of Vancouver as inspiration. Rhode Island, where an injection center opened in Providence in 2024, also holds up Vancouver as a model. The Washington State legislature appointed a working group that in 2025 recommended establishing a safe supply of narcotics for addicts, and officials repeatedly cited the Vancouver program.

The shadow cast by Vancouver extends to Burlington. Last year, the city council approved the establishment of an injection center. The group that the city chose to run it noted that Vancouver “remains the source of much of the evidence” showing the benefits of such spaces for drug users and the community.

**BURLINGTON SITS ON** Lake Champlain, the Adirondack Mountains rising on the far shore. It’s a beautiful city, but its drug scene is not covert, spreading over downtown and several other neighborhoods. Users pitch tents in churchyards and parks and along the waterfront. When I sat in City Hall Park last September, I counted at least 70 users and dealers, many looking hyperkinetic in the way of the strung out. I walked through an alley next to city hall where, a few weeks earlier, a group of young people had allegedly beaten a man to death in an argument over drugs.

Vermont has strict laws against possession of heroin and cocaine, but users in Burlington are rarely arrested or prosecuted for possessing small amounts. Although it’s hard to isolate the effects of these policies, in 2024, the city of almost 45,000 recorded 585 drug overdoses, 28 of which were fatal. That is more than twice the rate of fatal overdoses per capita in New York City the same year.

Beth Sightler walked me around her working-class neighborhood in the Old North End. Burlington’s progressive political culture and tradition of caring for the poor are well established; Bernie Sanders served four terms as mayor in the 1980s. Sightler, a liberal who runs a mental-health center, said she has fished needles out of her flower boxes and seen people overdosing in cars and cemeteries. She carries naloxone, a medication that can reverse an opioid overdose, when she walks her dog. One morning she saw a young woman on the grass near her porch wearing underwear, a bra, and sandals. “There was this beautiful woman, absolutely beautiful, sitting there trying to find a vein and inject,” Sightler recalled. “I told her, ‘Sweetie, you gotta move along.’”

Many people in Burlington offer similar stories. A block from City Hall Park, the King Street Center provides tutoring and recreation programs for families living in poverty. Staff members arrive early to sweep up needles outside the building. When drug dealers began playing dice out front last summer, Shabnam Nolan, the executive director, called the police, who eventually chased the dealers away. “We’ve tried to sound the alarm, and yet people are not taking us seriously enough about what’s happening,” Nolan told me. Why does a drug user’s “right to ‘dignity’ violate children’s right to come to our center without seeing blood and needles?”

“It’s as if,” she said of Burlington and its culture, “we are frozen with fear that someone might see us as uncompassionate.”

## “IT’S AS IF WE FORGOT THAT THE GOAL WAS TO TRY AND STOP PEOPLE FROM GETTING ADDICTED.”

The city’s political class has compounded these problems. In 2020, activists launched a campaign to defund the police department, although it was regarded as relatively progressive and community-oriented. The city council cut almost \$1 million from the police budget. Six years ago, Burlington had about 100 officers; now it has fewer than 70. The current city-council president, Ben Traverse, a liberal Democrat who has grown uncomfortable with Burlington’s direction, told me that sometimes as few as five officers are on duty citywide after midnight on the weekends. It used to be that if you wanted to deal drugs, “you did not come to Burlington,” Traverse said. But that’s changed: “Open-air drug sales are a common occurrence here.”

State’s Attorney Sarah George, the prosecutor for the county that includes Burlington, is a progressive Democrat who once wrote that the American legal system “was built on the oppression and caging of black, brown, and poor people.” She told me that the combination of COVID, ever less affordable housing, and a cascade of evictions fed a drug crisis that has devastated Vermont. But she doesn’t blame addicts, who she said are “rarely dangerous” and are suffering. “I’m very frustrated with this narrative that City Hall Park is the end of the world,” George added. “That park is still a very safe place to be.”

I asked her how Burlington might balance drug users’ sometimes dominant presence in the city’s parks and streets with the desire of residents to use and enjoy those same places. The city, she replied, should start by opening its planned injection center so that addicts can use drugs in private. The state legislature has allocated about \$2 million that it obtained from a national opioid settlement to help fund the center, though potential neighbors have pushed back against the sites that have been floated so far. More broadly,

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George opposes pushing addicts to the margins. "They cannot be disappeared," she said. "They are part of our community."

In 2022, George announced a new policy: If police officers stopped cars with broken taillights, tinted windows, or expired licenses and found a cache of narcotics, her office would most likely decline to prosecute the cases, on the grounds that racial discrimination could have motivated the traffic stops. She emphasized to me that police officers could in any case confiscate and destroy the drugs. But she questioned the need to go beyond that. "Is prosecution needed?" she said. "Or have we done enough already?" George has been reelected twice and is running for a third term.

In April, I spoke with Burlington's mayor, Emma Mulvaney-Stanak, of the Vermont Progressive Party, which has governed the city for much of the past four decades. She has seen firsthand the effects of the drug epidemic. When she lived in the Old North End and her child was a toddler, they awoke to drug dealers beating on their door. She told me that she supports police and Drug Enforcement Administration investigations that target dealers, although she noted the "whack-a-mole" nature of that work, as new dealers replace those who are arrested. She said that without more help from the county and state, the city lacks the funds to build larger shelters that could help keep addicts off the streets. She is aware that Burlingtonians have grown impatient living with a drug-abuse epidemic. "We are fatigued with our compassion," she told me. "All of the attention on harm reduction and public health—I get that."

But, like George, Mulvaney-Stanak has not backed away from harm-reduction policies that she sees as humane and essential. Last summer, she opposed a city-council resolution calling for police officers to be stationed in City Hall Park to clear out users and dealers, arguing that the drug traffic would only go elsewhere

and that there were not enough officers to enforce the policy. She signed off on the resolution, but she shares George's philosophical objections: "Displacement and removal of people is not the solution," the mayor said.

Wouldn't an injection center, I asked her, draw more addicts and dealers to Burlington? She acknowledged the possibility, but framed it as a necessary risk. She repeated the harm-reduction maxim: "It helps people where they are at." The city's problems, Mulvaney-Stanak insisted, were more image than reality: "People need to ignore the clickbaity articles that distort the nature of Burlington."

Recently, Traverse and other Democrats on the city council have begun to challenge the mayor on harm reduction. Jennifer Morrison, the state's public-safety commissioner, has also spoken up. She served as Burlington's interim police chief for six months in 2020 before quitting, in part because of what she described as the city's "mismanagement" and "social activism." She and Governor Phil Scott, a moderate Republican, have clashed with Mulvaney-Stanak. They have periodically, at the city's request, sent state troopers to Burlington to help local police with drug enforcement and patrolling the central business district. "I lived through the decisions that got us to the place that we are now," Morrison told me. "We are exposing our youth to terrible consequences by normalizing drug use and addiction."

The business community in Burlington has also pushed back. In more than a dozen interviews, local merchants spoke of feeling abandoned. In testimony before the state legislature, the owner of Outdoor Gear Exchange reported that in 2024, the business lost an estimated \$400,000 to shoplifting, as addicts stole to support their habit. At Homeport, a 40-year-old home-furnishings store downtown, a co-owner, Mark Bouchett, told me that he lost \$95,000 to shoplifting in 2024 and was forced to hire a security guard. Drug users defecate in the doorways of businesses.

Bouchett joined 170 other business owners and restaurateurs who last year wrote an open letter to the mayor warning that the city was in crisis. Their tone was reasonable; they sought treatment for addicts, not incarceration. But a broad coalition of the political left in Burlington—unions, harm-reduction groups, pro-Palestine and trans-rights activist groups, and the local chapter of the Democratic Socialists of America—countered with their own letter, in which they denounced the business owners and demanded that they open bathrooms and sheltered doorways to addicts. To call for more police to help address the city's drug problem, this group wrote, would "further harm our most vulnerable community members." One of the signatories, Food Not Cops Burlington, posted and then deleted a boycott map targeting the business owners.

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*An encampment in South Queen Anne, Seattle. Since taking office in January, Mayor Katie Wilson has authorized sweeps of encampments and signaled an openness to pulling back on harm-reduction policies.*







*People who live in Jose Rizal Park know “there is no consequence for being swept multiple times or doing drugs or vandalizing a park,” one community activist says.*

Overdose deaths in Vermont dropped last year to 170, a 37 percent decrease from the peak in 2022, but still far above the 78 deaths recorded in 2010. At the Ben & Jerry’s on Church Street, I saw staff hand out cards to customers who asked to use the bathroom: “Vermont is experiencing a tragic increase in overdose fatalities. Our bathroom has also become a destination for folks seeking to inject drugs.” The bathroom was permanently locked.

Families and children speak of being left on their own to navigate these harsh realities. Through the King Street Center, I met a young woman who was earning top grades at the University of Vermont. When she walks her younger sisters home from school, they pass drug dealers on the way. A Burlington High School student told me that her teachers have instructed students to avoid eye contact with dealers and users. A week earlier, she said, an addict had trailed her home after volleyball practice. She broke into a run, yelling for help, and the person eventually turned away.

Then there was Britany, a mother of three young children, who moved two years ago from a homeless shelter to an apartment on King Street. (She asked me not to use her last name, fearing for her

family’s safety.) She said that she often found drug paraphernalia in the apartment building and, on some nights, encountered an addict sleeping in the hallway; her next-door neighbor was a fentanyl dealer. She had constructed a safe room for her children to flee to in case of gunfire. “Everyone talks about needle exchange and harm reduction,” she said. “I mean, okay. But it’s like my children and I are living in the zombie apocalypse.”

JUST A FEW YEARS AGO, voters in Seattle seemed primed for a change. In 2021, they elected Ann Davison, a moderate and independent-minded Republican, as city attorney. Sara Nelson, a Democrat who had advertised her willingness to challenge the harm-reduction consensus, won a seat on the city council the same year and became its president two years later. With support from Davison, she passed laws cracking down on open drug use, prostitution, and dealing downtown, and substantially increasing the number of surveillance cameras in high-crime neighborhoods. Nelson persuaded the city council to redirect money to on-demand addiction treatment. “You can’t meet people where they’re at, because where



they're at is on death's door," she told me, adding that she believes many addicts can be saved only by a firm push toward treatment.

Nelson also asked pointed questions about what had become the received wisdom in Seattle, such as why the county government paid millions of dollars to supply kits to addicts with tinfoil, pipes, and instructions on how to smoke fentanyl. (Incongruously, these kits came emblazoned with an image of Martin Luther King Jr., the namesake of King County.) What harm was reduced, Nelson asked at a 2023 council hearing, by helping addicts get high? Amber Tejada, an employee of a health nonprofit that had partnered with the city, raised her hand to answer. "I know it can be a little controversial," she told the councilwoman, "but one of the key tenets of harm reduction that I see is that we want to be able to facilitate and champion autonomy of people who use drugs." Tejada added, "There are folks for whom abstinence is not something by which they measure their success in life."

Nelson was no hard-line conservative. She pushed to expand the number of treatment beds for addicts and talked openly of her own past struggles with alcohol. But in elections last November, voters turned out both her and Davison. Their replacements had concerns over the use of surveillance cameras and opposed laws that barred repeat public drug users from certain areas in the city. I spoke with Davison in her office shortly before her term was up. She wrestled with her sense of a job not completed. "It's really sad to watch the slow death of so many people," she said, adding later, "You cannot act like this is a victimless crime."

I asked Sandeep Kaushik, a Democratic political consultant who has lived in Seattle for decades, if he could explain the persistent attraction of radical harm-reduction policies in his city. Kaushik described himself as an "unreconstructed Obama Democrat," which he noted "codes me as a conservative in some circles here." He told me that local leaders "really believe the city should be on the leading edge of translating progressive ideas into policy." There is also a curious disconnect between the policies that political leaders put in place and the desires of voters. In many polls, Seattle residents list crime and illegal drug use as among their greatest concerns, and a *Seattle Times* survey three years ago found that 60 percent of respondents wanted police to arrest those who used drugs in public places.

Last year, the city elected a new mayor, Katie Wilson, a self-described democratic socialist with no experience in elected office. Wilson has signaled an openness to pulling back some harm-reduction policies. Before she officially entered the race, she wrote an essay for Seattle's alt-weekly, *The Stranger*, in which she cautioned fellow leftists against smugness. "The central weakness of the left narrative," she wrote, "is a habit of deflection that makes it sound, at best, as though we are in denial about the grim reality on the streets." The left, she continued, should not trivialize "what anyone who spends some time walking around Seattle's streets can plainly observe: People with acute mental illness whose behavior is disturbed and occasionally aggressive. People using drugs, often incapacitated or passed out on the ground."

Since she took office, Wilson has backed up her words by signing off on sweeps of large encampments in parks. Police and city workers have dismantled tents and carted away garbage. In

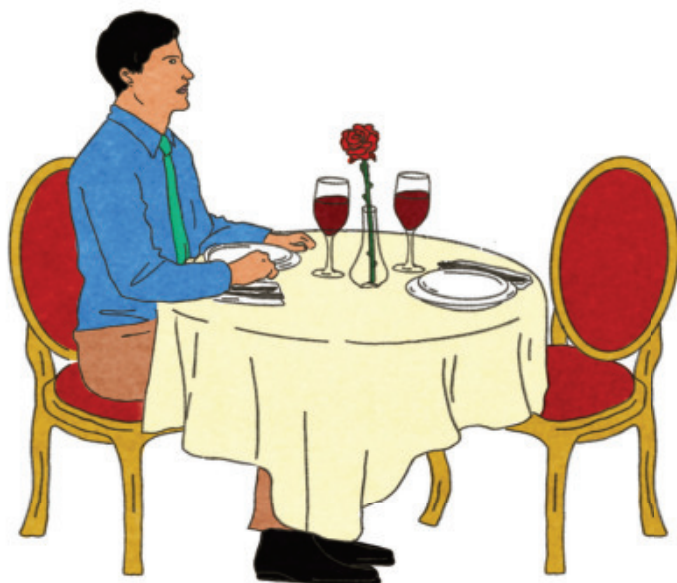
late June, the mayor emerged from what she described in a statement as a period of "deep listening" and promised to "disrupt the drug dealing" and "public disorder" that plague the city's Little Saigon and Beacon Hill neighborhoods. The police, she said, would commit more officers to those areas, and arrest users and dealers or press them to accept treatment. For a Seattle politician to argue that tolerating drug crime and disorder amounts to harm enhancement registered as something close to startling news.

Yet Wilson runs a political risk. By pledging to crack down, she has broken with many of her allies and supporters. Now she will be judged by her ability to clear the city's streets. Andrea Suarez leads a group, We Heart Seattle, that combines care for the homeless with a hardheaded insistence on legal consequences and addiction treatment for drug users. She was in Jose Rizal Park when police swept it one day in April, and watched users and dealers amble off into the woods or walk over to Little Saigon. They returned a few hours later, she told me. A day or two after that, the tents reappeared. "Everyone who lives in this park knows there is no consequence for being swept multiple times or doing drugs or vandalizing a park," Suarez said.

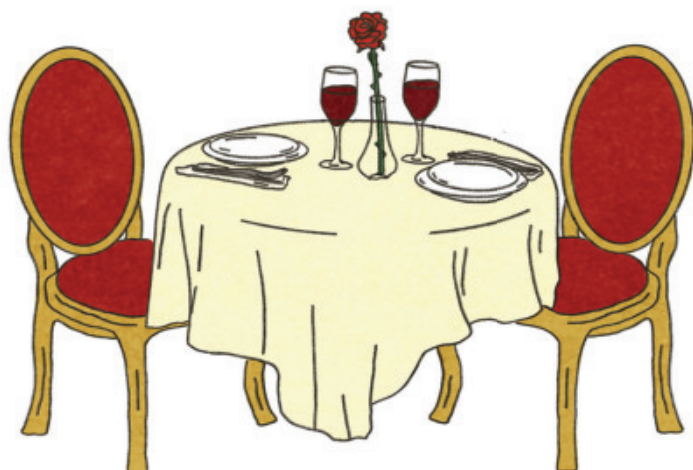
What's baffling is that none of this lies beyond the ability of city officials to address. San Francisco Mayor Daniel Lurie has instructed police to crack down on dealers and dismantle tent cities. Philadelphia Mayor Cherelle Parker has sent officers into drug-scarred neighborhoods and established a treatment court, which offers first-time felony drug offenders a chance to avoid jail if they enter a treatment program. San Jose, California, has put more police officers in targeted neighborhoods, built emergency housing as police dismantle homeless encampments, and increased fines for landlords whose abandoned buildings are used by dealers to sell drugs and guns. In Boston, Mayor Michelle Wu was once enamored of harm reduction and injection centers. But she has ordered police to clear street encampments, and her administration now puts more emphasis on pushing addicts into treatment, by detaining them if necessary. Wu has also dropped all mention of injection centers from her plans.

In Seattle, by contrast, efforts to reduce public drug use force afflicted neighborhoods to pay a high price. For years, when playgrounds and parks became drug hot spots, the city reacted by fencing them off, depriving families of access. In May, police and city workers returned to Jose Rizal Park and again booted out dealers and addicts, preparing the park for a renovation. As a first step, city workers dismantled the picnic pavilion where addicts smoked and shot up, its condition having deteriorated from all the misuse. Park officials do not plan on replacing it, acknowledging the obvious in bureaucratese: The park "has been impacted by activities not aligned with intended use." The bus shelter around the corner, where drug users gathered day and night, was also ripped out "because of an increase in loitering, littering and vandalism," a King County Metro representative told me by email. All of this felt like another admission of defeat—officials destroying Seattle in the name of saving it. *A*

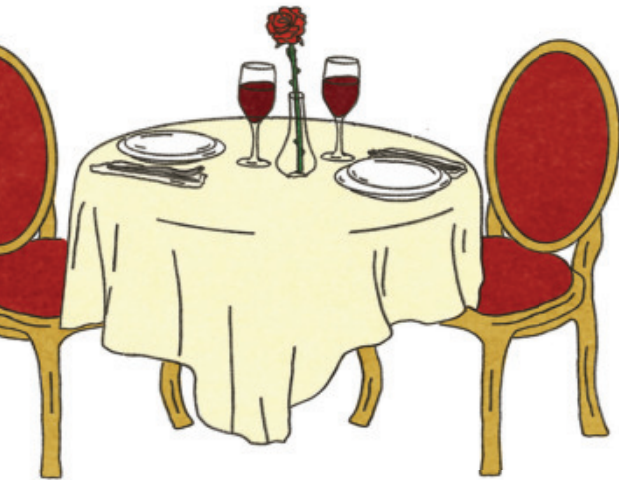
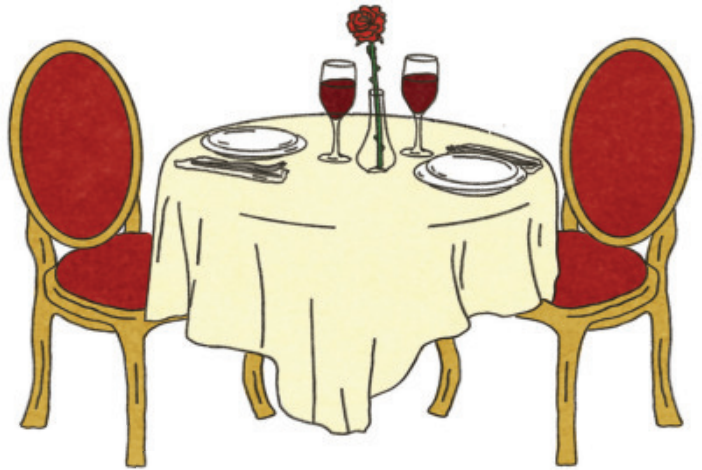
*Michael Powell is a staff writer at The Atlantic.*



# *The Great Romance Slump*







*Why are so few young people finding love?*

By Faith Hill



Illustrations by Kimberly Elliott

# A

About 90 seconds into a three-minute hug with a stranger, I began to think that dying alone might not be so bad after all. I'd come to a candlelit loft in Manhattan for a "mindful singles event" called The Feels, which was designed to be the opposite of the disembodied experience of dating apps. Participants, phones tucked away, paired up and attempted a series of "somatic awareness" exercises, including staring into each other's eyes, hugging, and holding a hand over each other's heart.

We'd been warned that discomfort is part of the process. A facilitator had reminded us that, as long as consent and respect are involved, a little uneasiness opens the door to vulnerability. Having paid \$100 for a process advertised as "better relating"—informed by Carl Jung and the Buddha and the body's "infinite wisdom"—participants were motivated to agree. And many of us, more by circumstance than by choice, were already experts in exiting our comfort zone. We'd spent years meeting strangers, opening ourselves to judgment, scrounging for conversation topics, worrying about our outfits, gargling mouthwash in the office—but we still hadn't found what, or whom, we wanted. We came ready to get to work.

The mere existence of The Feels, which hosts events in cities across the United States, suggests that we are living in a time of romantic plenty. In New York City, I could go to a dating event every night of the week. I could use a matchmaking service, or talk with a dating coach, or sign up for one of the many newsletters trying to bring back personal ads. Even if I didn't live in a major city, I'd have dating apps to choose from: not only Tinder and Hinge but a zillion others—platforms for farmers, gamers, single parents, cannabis enthusiasts, and members of the gluten-free community. I have four apps in my current rotation; as I write this, one of them has 317 message threads and 455 "likes" that I need to evaluate.

And yet, despite the bounty of possibility, we are living through a great romance slump. *Romance* is a broad term, of course. Traditionally, it manifests in the thrill of sex, the devotion of long-term partnership, or the ritual of courtship, including the act of hope that is a first date. But all of those manifestations are becoming less common in the U.S., especially among young people.

The proportion of 25-to-34-year-olds in marriages or cohabiting partnerships dropped steeply from 1980 to 2022—by almost 10 percentage points for college graduates and more than 20 percentage points for people without a degree, according to an analysis by the *Financial Times* data reporter John Burn-Murdoch. A shrinking share of young adults have a steady partner, and in 2019, 42 percent of single adults younger than 40 told Pew Research Center that they'd never been in a committed relationship. In a 2025 YouGov poll, 69 percent of single respondents said they "rarely" or "never" go on dates. And people are having less sex. From 2000 to 2018, the share of 25-to-34-year-olds who said they hadn't had sex in the previous year almost doubled.

It's not that people have lost interest in love. A majority of single young adults say they want lifelong partnership. But for a variety of reasons, fewer of them are finding it. Allie Hoffman, a former CEO of a digital-media company who launched The Feels in 2022, has observed "a collective *this sucks*" among romance seekers. She has expanded her offerings accordingly. At a "Level 2" Feels event, which costs up to \$215, you can be paired with people "at a similar stage in their awareness journey." A spot at a singles' weekend retreat starts at \$1,300; three matches based on a questionnaire and a phone call, plus six coaching sessions over three months, total \$4,750. In a romance recession, some people give up and some double down.

So here I was, doubling down, sweating in a strange man's arms. My neck hurt. I couldn't figure out how close to him I should stand. (Too near and you lose breathing room; too far and the whole enterprise falls apart.) For years I'd been in the same group chat with pretty much the same single friends. We'd labeled it the "Lonely Hearts Club," and it became a sanctuary for dishing about weird dates, complaining about getting ghosted, sharing links to TikTokers dishing about weird dates and complaining about getting ghosted. I'd received variations of the same "I'm not feeling a spark" text so many times that I started replying with a single emoji: 🥱 But at The Feels, I was trying to be open and optimistic. I'd stared into someone's eyes for three languid minutes, wondering if I was blinking a normal amount. I'd been moved, feeling another person's heartbeat beneath my palm, as anyone with a pulse would be.

The hug was the last round, though, and then real life resumed. We mingled, but the intimacy had disappeared. One man told me that he had high emotional intelligence and could tell that I did too—then he suggested that we travel together someday, handed me his business card, and walked away. I gave a few people my phone number, including one man who sent me a picture of his face the very next morning and another who texted me so much (even after a polite rebuff) that I had to block him. One date with another guy resulted, but I wasn't interested in a second. The perception of abundance had, once again, evaporated into nothing.

I don't mean to suggest that people need romance to be fulfilled. In truth, I don't believe that partnership is inherently better than singlehood. As a society, we've been moving toward this point for decades: where marriage is not a prerequisite for social and financial survival, where we have other sources of purpose and community, where there are many different ways to live a good life.

Yet now that we're here, the reality doesn't feel quite so triumphant. If the dream was more equal partnerships—born from love rather than necessity, freedom rather than convention—what many of us got was no partnership at all, and a feeling that it was eternally out of reach. Those getting ever closer to 40, especially, tend to feel a particular sense of impending loss. Those are the years when the average unpartnered person struggles most with singlehood, Geoff MacDonald, a University of Toronto psychologist, told me. ("It's like—*Everybody find a lifeboat*," he said.) It's a period of acute open-endedness, when people are trying to figure out what to prioritize, how to plan for the future, which dreams are worth pursuing and which have to be sacrificed. For



women who want to have biological children, it's also when time is running out.

One 39-year-old I talked with, a woman who works in film, told me she felt like she was on a “precipice.” She was weighing having kids and knew the clock was ticking. She'd had a great time on a Feels weekend getaway, and although she hadn't formed a lasting romantic connection, she'd made friends; they chat in a WhatsApp group about their dating highs and lows. Her life is full. Still, she said, “the world is burning. I would really like to be able to go through that with someone.”

I wanted that for her, and for myself. Or, at least, I wanted to understand *why* we weren't finding what we wanted. So I did what I know how to do: I reported. I interviewed dozens of researchers and single people across the country, endured a series of curious but fruitless dating events, and bravely subjected myself to some actual dates. The romance slump, I found, is a product of broader trends: souring gender relations, a transformed economy, the unevenness of social progress, and technology that both connects and isolates us. Millions of individual heartaches are rewriting the love story we've told ourselves for centuries.

**Just to be clear:** I'm not nostalgic for how things used to be. For much of human history, romance was incidental. Marriage was typically a practical arrangement: a way to unite families and consolidate resources. In the Industrial Age, young people began relocating to cities for work and enjoyed

newfound independence and leisure time; courtship moved from the family parlor to the dance hall. But women still didn't have many pathways, other than marriage, to financial independence—or to sex. The fact that my great-grandmother got pregnant before she was married, at the beginning of the 20th century, was such a source of family shame, never freely discussed, that my mother felt its dark shadow when she was growing up in the 1950s and '60s.

That was the peak-marriage era, when almost 90 percent of women in the U.S. were married before they turned 25. Even as second-wave feminism boomed, banks could still require a woman to obtain permission from her husband or a male relative to get a home loan or apply for a credit card. In 1965, birth control was legalized, but only for married couples. A few years later, my mother, who was living with her boyfriend at the time, wore a fake wedding ring—a plastic one from a gumball machine—to her doctor appointment to request the pill.

Beginning in the '70s, though, wider access to contraception and abortion began to curb shotgun weddings, and more women entered college and the workforce. Stigmas around singlehood and queer relationships loosened. The nuclear-family model, once such a source of gravity, lost some of its pull. The decline of marriage could also be called the rise of choice—especially for women. Philip N. Cohen, a University of Maryland sociologist, told me. “The 1950s family could not even reproduce itself for one generation,”

*I'm 31 now, and most of the people in my social circle are single; quite a few of them have never been in a relationship.*

he said. “They couldn't even convince their children that this was the right way to arrange their lives. So it failed immediately.”

I came along in 1995: a lucky moment, in many ways. Growing up in the 21st century, I daydreamed not about whom I'd marry but about what fabulous career path I'd choose. (In elementary school I made business cards that said PSYCHOLOGIST: GOT A PROBLEM? CALL ME! and distributed them on the playground.) When my grandmother was widowed in her 50s, her friends—all couples—stopped calling her; it wasn't proper for them to socialize with a single woman. When my mother got divorced in her 50s, she wasn't abandoned by her friends, but she was always aware of her single status in a social snow globe of married people. I'm 31 now, and most of the people in my circle are single; quite a few of them have never been in a relationship. I spent this past Valentine's Day on a beach in Mexico with two of my best friends.

And yet, for many people, singlehood is at once eminently normal and entirely unwanted. Even an unhappily single person, Cohen said, is a sign of progress; at least they haven't been forced to partner with someone they don't want to be with. But that's like telling someone with a cavity to be grateful for modern dentistry: completely correct and a little annoying.

In interviews, people kept saying they knew they ought to make time for romance, but then when would they see their friends or travel or exercise or get ahead at work? Dating has always entailed some hardship, but it used to be the norm to find love in everyday life—at the office, at church, at a party. People didn't need to choose what to step away from. Now many of the quirks of modern life have made meeting organically in person less likely. More people are tucked away at home, working remotely, streaming TV, and having food delivered to their door; approaching strangers feels fraught when so many of us are used to flirting via text with people who have already “liked” us. So we depend on the apps even as we resent them. Dating becomes another responsibility to squeeze in, “like you're scheduling a job interview,” Sarah Boyle, a 29-year-old public defender in Chicago, told me. “*Oh, let me pencil in this date for three weeks from now with this stranger from the internet.*”

Modern romance requires a toll, in other words, paid in energy, in sanity, in cash, in hours—and not everyone can afford it. One 2025 study—which, I feel obliged to report, is called “Making

(Enough for) Love”—found that the higher someone’s income, the more likely they were to enter into a relationship, or simply to feel ready for one. You might protest that coupling is actually a savvy financial move; indeed, it was once common for partners to marry first, then pool resources and work toward stability *together*. But sociologists today say that marriage is seen by many as a capstone—a trophy that people feel prepared for only after they’ve paid off debts, settled into a steady job, or saved enough to buy a house or have kids. Over the past 50 years, job security and stable hours have become scarcer, said Kristen Harknett, a UC Berkeley sociologist. That means traditional milestones are harder to reach—and tying your livelihood to someone else’s can feel like a liability rather than an advantage.

On top of all this, COVID-19 triggered a “pandemic dating recession,” according to the Stanford sociologist Michael J. Rosenfeld. From 2017 to 2022, the number of single adults in the U.S. rose by about 5 percent (more than 13 million people), mostly because young people weren’t meeting as frequently as before. Americans, mired in uncertainty, have lost faith that the old sources of stability—the economy, marriage, one another—will deliver them to solid ground. And mistrust and instability are bad for romance.

I talked with plenty of researchers about numbers and theories, but I wanted to hear how this really feels—and not just for my Lonely Hearts Club. So I created an informal survey to pass around to single people, asking how they approached dating (or didn’t), how set they were on finding a partner, how that fit in with other life goals, and whether they were hopeful about finding love. I heard back from men, women, and nonbinary people, queer and straight, ages 23 to 49, living in places such as Oklahoma City; Atlanta; Pittsburgh; Bowling Green, Ohio; and Portland, Oregon. I talked with people from different race and class backgrounds. And what I heard was that a lot of them are tired.

Dating is “just a series of constant blows to whatever self-confidence I had,” said Keith Causin, a 42-year-old straight man from Queens. “It’s low-key soul destroying.”

“People are very commitment-resistant and it’s contagious,” a queer 27-year-old from New Jersey said. “Being alone and lonely and wanting is safer than risking being put through emotional distress. I think romancing myself, treating myself kindly, doing nice things alone like taking myself on a date and treating myself, has yielded better results.”

“I’m a part of the generation of Disney girls who were groomed from birth that our Prince Charming was coming, and unfortunately, I still believe that,” wrote one 26-year-old woman in Los Angeles who’d been single her whole adult life, though she’d been diligently dating for years.

Olivia Medina, another 26-year-old in Los Angeles, said that, at the beginning of 2020, she’d been excited about a budding relationship with one of her college classmates. Then she had to spend her entire senior year online. By the time the world returned to relative normality, her priorities had shifted. “I had basically created a whole new hierarchy of what’s important,” Medina said. “And dating was so low because I had gotten so used to just spending time with my friends and doing things that I like, for me.”

When the need for romance is low and the toll is steep, some give up. Others hold out for a partnership dreamy enough to justify the search. Again and again, people explained that their lives weren’t lacking, and they would only carve out space in their days for someone who made them giddy. Having expectations this high is a magnificent historical novelty. The hard part is finding someone who can meet them.

F

**Joanna Davidson**, a Boston University anthropologist, was living in a village in Guinea-Bissau when she began to notice a particular kind of run-down house. *Kungomaku*, she learned, were the structures women moved into after their husbands died and their homes were torn down—a custom

among the Jola ethnic group predominant in the region. The widows either borrowed rice paddies or begged for food. Yet fewer and fewer of them were willing to remarry, she determined, and the number of *kungomaku* kept growing. “You sit and suffer under the punishment of your husband,” one woman told her. “When he dies, why would you go get punished by another man?”

When Davidson relayed all of this at an American Anthropological Association conference in Washington, D.C., the air felt charged with recognition. A room full of researchers could chart, from their own fieldwork, the depth of women’s dissatisfaction. So Davidson and Dinah Hannaford, a University of Houston anthropologist, sent out a call for contributions for what would become their 2022 book, *Opting Out: Women Messing With Marriage Around the World*. Their inboxes flooded with case studies from countries rich and poor.

In Botswana, they heard, many children are raised within networks of single women and their kin. (Only about 4,500 Botswanans married in 2024, out of a population of 2.5 million.) They learned about women in South Korea who had delayed marriage to take care of aging family members—then realized, looking around at the men in their lives, that they had no regrets. Hannaford wrote about women in Senegal marrying men who live abroad, or becoming a man’s third or fourth wife, in the hopes of evading both the public disgrace of singlehood and the practical, emotional, and sexual labor of a typical union. Nine out of 10 people worldwide, the anthropologists pointed out, live in a country with falling marriage rates. The specific challenges varied by location, but all over the globe, women were fed up. “Embedded throughout this volume,” Davidson and Hannaford wrote in their introduction, “is the seeming ubiquity of generally disappointing men.”

Call it a supply problem. Some researchers think that the great romance slump has been caused largely by a shortage of “marriageable men.” But, to be fair to men, the old standards of success have become harder to achieve. In the United States, steady, well-paying blue-collar jobs have been all but decimated, and fewer men than women are earning the college degrees that have become almost a prerequisite for financial stability. The



percentage of 25-to-54-year-old American men who are neither working nor seeking employment *quadrupled* over the past 70 years. A vanishing portion can single-handedly support a family, or offer a partner any sense of security. More college-educated women have begun marrying men without a degree, picking off the high earners among them. This means that women without a degree are, in turn, left with fewer prospects—and their marriage rates are plummeting, especially in areas where men face higher rates of joblessness and incarceration.

Meanwhile, a lot of men are feeling painfully inadequate. It's not that money is the only thing a man can offer; after all, fewer women need a breadwinner now. But researchers told me that the qualities women now value more than ever—sensitivity, openness, communication skills—are not typically ingrained in men from childhood. And although men strive to meet those modern expectations, the old standards haven't disappeared. Men are supposed to pay for dinner but also treat women as equals; to initiate flirty banter but never be creepy or aggressive; to be sturdy and masculine but also empathetic and thoughtful. Arthur, a 46-year-old in New Jersey who responded to my survey, said that he's dated women who think he's too nice. One explained that she broke up with him because he has "dad energy." ("I'm not 100 percent sure what that means," Arthur told me, "but I'm guessing it's not very sexy.") Another said she liked how sweet and supportive he was, yet also wanted him to

be more decisive—to be "the man" in the relationship, as Arthur saw it. He wasn't sure how to exhibit both traits at once.

Other men I spoke with felt like the romantic odds were stacked against them, especially on dating apps. They had the sense that women were drowning in matches, while they were sending "likes" into the void. "I feel like I'm being rejected by 4 million women at once," Causin, the man from Queens, told me. The guys I talked with described men as demoralized schmucks and women as thriving girlbosses—the rule-setters, the winners, *and* the prize. The ones who want romance but do not need it.

But that idea makes women sound a lot more powerful and liberated than they really are, as a whole. Women may be going to college at higher rates, but they still make less, on average, than men with a comparable education in the same field of study. In the typical married or cohabiting straight couple, women still do much more of the domestic labor—even when the woman is the breadwinner.

Kris Swiatocho, who ministers to single Christians, hears from many young women who are so exasperated by their search for romance that they are losing hope. They tell her versions of "I'm meeting a lot of guys who still live at home at 27. And they're gamers. And that's all they're interested in doing." Allie Hoffman has noticed that many of the younger men at The Feels events seem "relationally underdeveloped"—particularly Gen Z men, who have

grown up in front of screens. They want connection but, when confronted with women's expectations, they can feel underequipped and overwhelmed.

The women I interviewed didn't seem picky so much as pessimistic, and burned out on bad behavior. One had flown to visit a guy who was drunk for most of her stay, brushed off his neighbor calling her a "piece of ass," and then, soon after she returned home, texted her that they were "never going to be together long-term." Another woman had fallen for a co-worker with whom she was getting dinner two to four times a week—and who turned out to be seriously dating someone else. A lot of stories were less dramatic: tales of confusion and quiet disappointment, featuring men who couldn't seem to express or even decide what they wanted.

Most women, I think, know that good men are out there. But I don't blame them for growing cynical about the chances of finding one. The feminist progress of the past half century has been met with a virulent backlash of misogyny. Nearly 60 percent of Gen Z men say that their country has "gone so far in promoting women's equality that we are discriminating against men," according to a 2025 Ipsos poll of 30 countries, including the United States. Jessica Calarco, a sociologist at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, said that many of her students' brothers watch videos of the manosphere influencer Andrew Tate, who has argued that women are the property of their husband, and who has been accused of rape, assault, and human



trafficking (allegations he denies). If that's what they're seeing within their own family, why should they trust a stranger from an app?

Hannah Tessler, a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Michigan, has studied the factors that influence whether singles value romantic partnership. In interviews, she found that most young male participants hadn't considered in much detail how they'd split household labor if they married or had kids with a partner; they weren't really expecting to make sacrifices. Young women, meanwhile, were weighing their choices accordingly. Some wanted a partnership only if it was truly equal. "I don't want to sign up to be somebody else's, you know, caregiver, mom, maid, sex robot, nanny, therapist, etc.," Tessler summarized. Other women were willing to do just that, if it meant they could have a family.

Gigi Gayle, a 44-year-old in Chicago, has been considering these sorts of trade-offs. She's not someone you'd expect to be looking for a more traditional arrangement. She's a college graduate who owns a marketing company in the nightclub industry and co-owns a counseling center. But she got tired of relationships in which she worked full-time and split the bills—and the men wanted her to cook, clean, and generally act like a "counselor," as she put it, "giving them advice, building them back up." So now, she's decided to try leaning into being "more submissive." She wants a provider, someone who'll make her feel cared for. First, she'll have to find him—and she's not having any luck.

Gayle's story reminded me of something else I'd heard. Carrie Rappaport-Zaken, a Manhattan therapist, said that many of her single female clients have been reading *The Rules*, a dating guide that was published in 1995 (and was seen as retrograde even back then), because romance influencers are recommending it. "Don't overwhelm him with your career triumphs," the book advises. "Try to let *him* shine." Rappaport-Zaken finds it unnerving: all these smart, successful clients waiting for men to pursue them, trying to appear soft and undemanding—all in deference to a book so old that it warns women not to call a man's landline. But she understands why a blueprint like this is appealing. Plenty of her clients have tried going boldly after what they want, only to find that this turns men away.

I kept encountering the same weary nostalgia: for setups and meet-cutes, for steady jobs and gender norms. Some people I interviewed wished openly for more rules and fewer choices. When the present feels hostile to romance, and the future is frightening or unknowable, can you blame people for looking to the past?

**I**n the months following The Feels, I attended five other dating events across Brooklyn and Manhattan. I met countless jaded veterans of the New York singles' circuit—who regularly showed up to similar affairs, or frequented the same one. I chatted with a man who said he'd been to so many that he'd

had to institute a rule for himself: five months between each, so as not to lose his mind. Later, when I recounted my observations

to a friend, he said it reminded him of when he'd been looking for an apartment and kept seeing the same people on tours.

One event, at a dimly lit Tribeca bar, was smushed next to a happy hour for real-estate and land-use experts. Attendees were given glowing colored wristbands. "Purple talk to purple! Red talk to yellow!" the emcee called out, and then she spoon-fed us icebreaker questions such as "Who is your celebrity crush?" and "What's your dream date?" I went to two events—a straight one in the Financial District and a (better-dressed) queer one in Bushwick—where presenters used PowerPoint to pitch their single friends to the crowd. At yet another, in Williamsburg, people much braver than me pitched *themselves* to the room. One guitarist crooned a song she'd written about herself; another did a stand-up routine about how she's "American ugly," meaning only men from other countries find her attractive. The host joked that we were all too hot to need an event like this, so our personalities must be terrible.

At the self-presentation event, I sat with a man who shared a sprawling list of deal-breakers (pixie cuts and lack of physical fitness among them) and then proudly described himself as non-judgmental. During a speed-dating night at a diner-like bar in Bushwick, I held court at my assigned booth while men rotated through the spot opposite me. I had only three minutes with each—but as I'd learned at The Feels, three minutes can last a long time. When I gently pushed back against one man's theory about the romance slump—*The problem is that when women talk to one another about men, they start to hate them*—he changed the subject: "What's your favorite animal?"

It's hard to know when to get off the dating merry-go-round. Some people view the romance toll as an investment in their future self. On dating apps, you can always keep putting in the work, swiping and messaging and grabbing drinks and swiping again. The volume of potential matches is enormous, and so is the amount of time required to investigate each one, with no guarantees of success. The more you try, the more you want things to work out, and the less sure you become that they will.

Others refuse to pay the toll; they delete the apps and hope love will find *them*. Margot Bracke, a doctoral student in sociology at the University of Antwerp, said she no longer asks study participants if they are "actively" looking for a partner; the question that resonates more is whether they are "open" to a relationship. And many have simply made peace with not being in one, her colleague Elise 't Hoen told me.

In this last category is Treasure Saunders, a 39-year-old who spent years in a string of serious relationships, during which she worked full-time, handled the housework, and took care of her three kids. She always seemed to lose her sense of self. When she decided she was done, she needed "husband money," but without the husband. So she trained to become a technical engineer working on transportation infrastructure ("Lots of concrete and steel"). Then she used that salary to achieve a long-standing goal: purchasing a four-unit property, most of which she rents out. At first, without a partner, she was lonely. But she started spending time at a nearby union hall for construction tradespeople and getting close to her fellow UA Local 130 members—almost all men. "I have the big sweaters and the dirty jeans and the boots,



and my hair is always a mess,” she said. “I kinda just settled right on in.” And her girlfriends are so precious to her that she is, in a certain way, in love with them. They take one another out to sushi dinners. They travel together. “I’m romantically involved with my friends,” she said, adding with a hoot of laughter: “And I use men for sex.”

In a perfect world, Saunders said, she wouldn’t be single. But this is her reality. I heard similar sentiments in other interviews. Arthur, not beating the dad-energy allegations, has decided to focus on being a good guy, a good employee, and a good uncle. Dating kept getting harder and harder, he said. After so much rejection, opening up to new people feels like asking to get hurt. So he’s said goodbye to the partner he’d once imagined. “It was like I lost a parent,” he told me. “But it’s like anything else, you know—you move on.” He’s been getting back in shape, learning new languages, and spending time with relatives in their 80s and 90s. He thinks—hopes—he’s becoming a better person.

Hoffman, the Feels founder, also once had a specific vision for her future: a soul-mate, a brownstone, two kids. “I had it all figured out,” she said, “and then it didn’t happen.” In her late 30s, she realized that her dream life was just a dream; she could only know what was right in front of her. As she said this over Zoom, she started naming things around her—an orange, a water bottle—to indicate how literally she meant this. Her goal now is “total devotion to reality.” The Feels asks participants to be in the moment together, paying attention to their bodies and their breathing. If romance follows, great. But she’s often said that the events aren’t just about partnership—they’re about connection, “embodiment,” the chance to “emote.”

Hoffman acknowledges that this philosophy is a tough sell for women who want kids—especially those in their late 30s to early 40s. At Feels events, that’s the population that arrives with the most palpable anxiety. Because so many men date down in age, she said, women in that bracket are left with a “portion of the portion” of male prospects that is “excruciatingly small.” In my interviews, too, baby-longing was the great dividing line. The aspiring parents tended to feel most stressed.

I will confess, now, that I am among the ones with no chill. After searching for nearly a decade, I met someone at a wedding almost two years ago who made romance feel unexpectedly easy. We’re a nine-hour train ride apart, but I grew accustomed to the Amtrak caprese sandwich. We said “I love you” eight months in, which felt positively retro compared with my previous interminable, communication-free situationships. But he doesn’t want kids, and I’m pretty sure I do. So here I am in my 30s, in a long-distance open relationship with him and somehow also back on the merry-go-round: running straight from work to meet strangers in bars



across Brooklyn, prepared for another perfectly nice evening that will ultimately lead nowhere.

Of course, people have kids without a partner all the time. In 2024, 40 percent of all babies in the U.S. were born to unmarried women—eight times the share in 1960. A growing number of men are deciding to become single dads. Batya Novick, a therapist who works with people facing reproductive challenges, is seeing more single clients who want to discuss egg freezing or IVF; she hears so much about their romantic lives, or lack thereof, that she’s become a *de facto* dating coach. Solo parenting, though, is rarely Plan A. Raising a kid without a teammate is difficult, expensive, and sometimes lonely.

So some people are looking for creative Plan Bs. In 2011, Ivan Fatovic created a website called Modamily for people in search of a partner—not necessarily a romantic one—to have a child with. Fatovic was 35 when he realized that there might be demand for such a service; his female friends were starting to worry about their biological clocks, and their dating lives weren’t going anywhere. “Maybe the person that you have children with,” he said, “is not the person that you grow old with.” Modamily now has more than 120,000 users, and it’s led to more than 1,000 babies being born, according to Fatovic.

Through Fatovic, I got in touch with Zachary Sahuque and Amanda Lohse, who have two children together from IVF, and are considering using their frozen embryos for a third. When they met on Modamily in 2019, they were both single and antsy to have kids. Lohse was 40 and preparing to have a child on her own, but figured she’d give the site a shot. After vetting each other for a

few months, talking about God and ethics and parenting styles, they decided they could work well as co-parents. They'd both been through some painful romantic experiences and thought this way might be cleaner—avoiding the great rush of feelings and the disappointment when they fade. Sahuque hoped for what many of us consider a second-best-case scenario: “We’ll be like a happily divorced couple.”

In that sense, their dream came true. They’ve become close friends. With their two boys, they go on vacations, spend holidays together, and have the occasional family dinner. Sahuque is grateful for how dedicated Lohse is to the kids; Lohse is happy to have a co-parent at all, but especially someone so warm, who has never made their situation feel awkward. Listening to them, I started imagining that I, too, might find someone on Modamily.

But then I realized, with a sinking feeling, that as unconventional as Sahuque and Lohse’s setup is, they still follow traditional gender roles. They reside on his 55-acre ranch in Price, Texas, but she and the kids live in a mobile home on the property. He travels constantly for work, and she balances child care and a full-time teaching job. He’s dated since they had kids, but she rarely has the time. And although the women Sahuque has dated seem charmed by their unusual parenting arrangement, she told me, the men she’s met seem threatened by it. “There’s just something that draws women to men who are actively involved in their kids’ lives,” she said. But “a woman with two little kids is more of a burden than a benefit.” I felt like I’d burst through a new door only to find myself in the same room.

W

**e’re living in** a strange in-between time. Women have gained enough agency to work outside the home, but many still lack equality within it. Men could benefit from a new set of gender norms, but much of American culture embraces the old ones. People can do without romance, but what are they

replacing it with? The anthropologist Dinah Hannaford’s concern, after seeing women around the globe “opt out” in different ways, is that single Americans are encouraged to find meaning in professional gain, wellness, and self-actualization—individual pursuits rather than collective ones. In the past decade or so, happiness rates have declined precipitously for unmarried adults—regardless of education level—much more so than for those who are married, Yifeng Wan, a researcher at the University of Virginia, has found. In that sense, singlehood is getting harder, even as it’s less stigmatized. Perhaps that’s because faith groups, civic organizations, and other communities play a less central role in American life than they once did. These networks used to buffer against isolation and economic displacement—the thorns of modern life that make partnership more valuable yet love more difficult to find.

One of the things that makes us human, the anthropologist Joanna Davidson told me, is that we can envision alternative futures. But first, we must look frankly at the present. The women she and

*I kept encountering the same nostalgia: for setups and meet-cutes, for steady jobs and gender norms. When the present feels hostile to romance, and the future is frightening, can you blame people for looking to the past?*

Hannaford featured in *Opting Out* weren’t part of an orchestrated revolution against marriage. Most of them still valued romance; they didn’t experience singlehood as “unequivocally liberating,” the authors wrote. They simply made choices within their given constraints. This was Allie Hoffman’s credo, in a way: “total devotion to reality.” Yet when enough people veer from tradition—if only to inch their own life forward—a social movement begins.

I’m not sure where this one is leading us. But I feel hopeful when I think back to my first interview with Kris Swiatocho, the singles minister. (“Jesus was single,” she likes to remind congregants.) In her 20s, she said, she’d hopped from boyfriend to boyfriend; she was in debt, drinking and partying to try to fill “the well”—the empty place within her. Her parents’ church didn’t have any single members around her age. But then she learned about a group called Singles Offering Life to Others, or SOLO, and that’s where she found her sense of purpose. Now she tours the country teaching church leaders, who are mostly married fathers, how to engage the growing number of single people they need to fill their pews. “I do this,” she said, “because I see me everywhere out there.”

I found it curious, though, that despite living such a rich, full life as a single person, she urges congregants not to give up on romance. So I asked about the discrepancy. Swiatocho still believes in the beauty of partnership, she said. But she doesn’t think that she’ll find it anytime soon, and she’s content with what’s in front of her. She talks with single friends sometimes—half joking, half serious—about buying tiny homes, parking them somewhere, and making a DIY retirement village. Each night they would gather around a firepit, cook dinner, and talk about their day. It’s a tribute to reality and also an exercise in imagination. Sounds pretty romantic to me. *A*

*Faith Hill is a staff writer at The Atlantic.*



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# CONFESSIONS OF A TOKEN BLACK PROFESSOR



## *WHY I LOST FAITH IN ACADEMIA*



BY TYLER AUSTIN HARPER

*ILLUSTRATIONS BY ERIN JIA*







# A



As you cross the Androscoggin River into Lewiston, you pass on your left the waterfalls that once set the mills to humming. On your right, affixed to a pockmarked brick mill—now defunct, it had spun tens of thousands of bedspreads a week—a 30-foot-wide neon sign reads HOPEFUL.

And so I was. My wife and I drove by that unlit sign on the hot May afternoon when we moved from New York to the interior of Maine. It was 2020. The 100,000th American was about to die of COVID. And I was starting my dream job.

Arriving at Bates College, we passed the empty quad, took a left, and pulled our U-Haul up to our new home: a century-old colonial just off campus, ringed by a tangle of blooming lilacs and wild blackberries. Someone had just mowed the grass. As we began unpacking, alternating between unloading boxes and marveling at the house—twice the size and half the rent of our Queens apartment—an older man crossed the street and introduced himself as a retired faculty member. We made Norman Rockwell small talk. His wife, crouched in a shaded corner of her garden, waved with a pair of pruning shears.

The setting was impossibly idyllic. And it was not the first time in my academic career that I'd had occasion to reflect on my good fortune. My path to the professoriat had been a fairy tale. In 2014, I went straight from my bachelor's degree at Haverford to a fully funded Ph.D. program in comparative literature at NYU. Five years later, during my first season on the infamously brutal academic job market, I won a tenure-track position at Bates, teaching interdisciplinary humanities courses in the school's popular environmental-studies program. I got the email on December 23, 2019, a Christmas miracle. Topping off this epic run of luck, I signed my contract mere weeks before the country reported its first case of the coronavirus, meaning I was spared from the pandemic freezes and rescinded job offers that would effectively shut down academic hiring.

When I defended my dissertation on Zoom that spring, one of my advisers joked that seeing me with a tenure-track job in hand was like "watching the last dinosaur being born." It was at once a compliment and a grim acknowledgment of reality. I had won the lottery in an apocalypse. I was going off to the kind of secure,

prestigious, fairly remunerated academic job that was rapidly going extinct in a world where most people teaching college courses were stuck in the permanent underclass of contingent labor.

The summer before my first semester of teaching was bliss. I went for long runs along the Androscoggin and the pine-studded Lake Auburn. I arranged books in my sunny campus office and bought snake plants for the windowsill. My wife, who had spent years working at Glacier National Park during college breaks, was thrilled to again be living in a place with real, capital-*N* Nature. We drank hard cider at a hilltop orchard with views of the White Mountains, made blackberry pie from our own bushes, and posed for photos on the giant boot in front of the L.L.Bean store. Every effort was made to push New York City, with its money lust and vogueish pop-ups and puffy-vested financiers and pandemic chaos, far from our minds. We studiously applied ourselves to the task of becoming, if not true Mainers—that requires being born there—then at least credibly *Maine-ish*.

I believed in American higher education with the dewy fervor of a young missionary. I came from a long line of people possessed by the unshakable faith that college was a ticket to a better life. My grandmother, holler-born in the mountains of West Virginia, didn't finish high school. My mom made it through an associate's degree before I came along and she had to abandon her education. I saw my academic success as the culmination of several generations of familial sacrifice, paid for by the deferred dreams of others. And I saw American colleges and universities as embodying what was best about this country: the belief that an education is liberating, civilizing, a democratic good for all rather than a luxury to be gatekept. I imagined myself teaching at Bates forever.

EVERYWHERE IN LEWISTON, the signs of ghostly wealth, long gone, were visible—the grand factories, endlessly repurposed in the latest revitalization scheme; the paint-peeling mansions on the hill and the cars rusting in formerly stately yards; the addicts on the corners dozing off or holding cardboard signs that pleaded their case. To all appearances, it was a town that had gone bust. That is, until you arrived at Bates, a 133-acre Eden of manicured greens and august buildings smack in the middle of postindustrial purgatory.

Our neighborhood was an informal extension of campus: a mix of homes owned by current or former professors, as well as other properties, such as the faculty house we lived in, that the college owned and rented out. Another home on our street was occupied by a college administrator who was passionate about DEI issues, a woman of color whom I will call Ava. (I have elected not to name the faculty and staff in this story; my goal is not to single out individuals but rather to write about the problems I saw at Bates and in higher education more generally.)

Ava was bighearted and fiery, and seemed to feel some combination of neighborly obligation and professional duty to make sure that her new Black colleague and his nice white wife felt welcome in Maine. These overtures mostly took the form of evening drinks at her house—chairs set a COVID-safe six feet apart, a bottle of chardonnay on the porch between us.



As I got to know Ava, I was surprised to discover that she viewed central Maine as a Stephen King–esque hell, a place where ancient prejudices and violence lay just beneath the friendly college-town facade. She regaled my wife and me with stories of alleged racial offenses, both major and minor, and generally made it clear that she thought Lewiston—an island of diversity in an otherwise famously homogenous, if not notably reactionary, state—was a hub of white supremacy. One evening, Ava confessed to me that when she drove through town and spied the local “crackers” sitting on their porches (not unlike the very porch we were sitting on), she sometimes thought to herself that these townies would probably like to kill her.

I didn’t know what to make of Ava’s views. I won’t pretend that my sensibilities were inflamed by the word *cracker*, but the epithet also didn’t seem like one that a college administrator should be using—especially at a school that admits a not-insignificant number of white, working-class Mainers. I also had a difficult time taking seriously the idea that I had moved to a place with would-be Klansmen around every corner. I grew up outside Harrisburg, Pennsylvania—another deindustrialized, permanently revitalizing urban center—and Lewiston felt familiar to me. The people I met were nice, hardworking; they minded their own business. I don’t think it ever occurred to Ava that I could have come from a similar place and similar people.

But although I sometimes found the things she said classist and even offensive, I also genuinely liked Ava. She had a fast wit and a quick laugh. She watered our tomato plants when we traveled to Boston to visit family. We traded texts about the baby fox that scampered through the neighborhood’s yards in the morning and the oversize groundhog that pestered the dogs. I left freshly baked sourdough baguettes on her porch; we commiserated during power outages. Ava struck me as perhaps a touch paranoid, but she was also obviously smart. More important, she was a well-credentialed authority on racism, and I took such people seriously. Why wouldn’t I?

I’d never had great enthusiasm for identity politics; I’d been a socialist since my early 20s, and it had generally been my experience that liberals were as eager to talk about race as they were uneager to talk about class. Yet I also assumed that conservative complaints about “wokeness,” a term just coming into vogue as a pejorative, were essentially Fox News hysteria. Until I got to Bates, I had little reason to suspect that they held any merit.

At Haverford, the campus politics were of the earthy, stoner, peacenik variety—more focused on “late capitalism” and President Obama’s drone warfare than flamboyant identitarianism. At NYU, the students and faculty seemed more interested in enjoying the hedonistic riches of the city than anything that might reasonably be called “woke.” The new political correctness that was spreading on many elite campuses felt mostly like background noise, and seemed harmless besides.

That’s why, when Ava gave me anti-racist reading recommendations that first summer in Maine, I read them with an open mind. And when I found them disquietingly flimsy, politically bizarre, and, in their naked essentializing, even sort of racist, I assumed that I must be the problem. As a light-skinned Black guy who doesn’t

speaking African American English, I had rarely been subjected to acute prejudice in my life. I thought that perhaps I simply wasn’t Black enough—“authentically” Black enough—to understand the kind of racial pessimism that had become so mainstream.

Ava was hardly the only pessimist among my new co-workers. Around the start of the semester, I attended an informal orientation event for early-career Black faculty, where I assumed we would talk about our research interests or simply get to know one another. Instead, the gathering felt more like a combined therapy session and HR seminar. At one point, someone casually rattled off a series of local establishments to steer clear of, vaguely implying that they were filled with bigots. Alarmed by the notion that race relations were so bad in Lewiston that there were places I should avoid eating, I asked why one restaurant in particular had earned a reputation for intolerance. My colleague said that a student of color had worked there and not liked it very much.

The source of the most intense racial monomania on campus, I came to realize, was senior leadership. In one of my first encounters with the man who was then dean of the faculty, I mentioned how excited I was to be joining one of the few American colleges founded by abolitionists. At this, the dean—a white biologist who was an expert on sponges—frowned, as though my rosy view of the school’s antislavery history physically pained him. He conceded that, sure, it had been founded by the abolitionist minister Oren Burbank Cheney, but he pointed out that Benjamin Bates, the textile tycoon who had funded the college, had processed slave-picked cotton in his mills. I had come into Bates rather smitten with the idea that I was a Black academic joining the ranks of a faculty whose predecessors had agitated for Black freedom, but the dean seemed to feel that this was actually something to be faintly embarrassed of, a history that was best mentioned, if at all, only after layering on an array of caveats.

I found this kind of endemic self-flagellation to be eye-roll-worthy. But the charged atmosphere at Bates didn’t feel out of step with that of the country as a whole, at least initially. Yes, the college sponsored overearnest discussions of books such as *White Fragility* and *How to Be an Antiracist*. Yes, the president of the college bragged that 67 percent of new faculty hires that fall were “BIPOC-identified,” and, sure, it seemed likely that some racial-discrimination laws had been ignored to get that number so high. Yes, college leadership was constantly adding new letters to the sexuality acronym—LGBTQ became LGBTQAI2+ . And, yes, many of us in academia tacked pronouns onto our email signature with the righteous zeal of Martin Luther hammering his 95 theses to the church door. I certainly did. But none of this seemed all that unusual. Bates was weird in 2020. But America was weird in 2020.

That first year, I kept my head down and let the small oddities I noticed pass by without much reflection. Between teaching, grading, student advising, Zoom faculty meetings, twice-weekly COVID testing, wrangling a hyperactive rescue puppy, and trying to survive the Maine winter, I didn’t have much time to think about the college’s (or the country’s) cultural eccentricities. Ironically, that pandemic year turned out to be the sanest one I would experience at Bates.

THE REQUEST CAME a couple of weeks into June 2021: Would I co-chair the task force that organized the college's annual Martin Luther King Jr. Day celebration?

Before the start of their second year on the tenure track at Bates, professors are assigned service work by the Committee on Faculty Governance. Although they are technically handed their appointments, they can request assignments that align with their interests or aptitudes. I'd volunteered to serve on a committee that was focused on preparing Bates students for graduate school, which was something I really cared about. To make extra money while getting my Ph.D., I'd spent several years working as a freelance grad-school-admissions consultant, and I thought this experience would be an obvious boon. The committee, however, explained that my academic work in the environmental humanities would make me a good fit to lead the MLK Day celebration.

*You have got to be shitting me*, I thought. I texted a friend and fellow academic in a huff. "Say no," he shot back. "Or better, say 'who?'"

It was obvious to anyone with eyes that I'd been picked because I was one of the handful of Bates faculty members who didn't need to wear SPF 50 sunscreen. I admired King as much as the next person, but that wasn't really the point. The point was that I was getting saddled with Black-Guy Work for which I had no real qualifications. All I knew about MLK, I had learned at my Pennsylvania public high school a decade earlier—which is to say, not very much.

I'd like to tell you that I responded indignantly. Instead, I said yes. I did not want to develop a reputation for being difficult, and I thought (or hoped, anyway) that by agreeing, I might earn some goodwill and eventually get rewarded with an assignment I was excited about. I even began to wonder if I was being too sensitive. Maybe the powers that be really did want me to bring a more ecological perspective to Bates's annual celebration. And, anyway, was it really so bad if they needed a Black guy to be the face of America's most famous minority day? In this censorious racial climate, who could blame them?

A month after being asked to co-chair the committee, I received an email that left me further discomfited. This one, from a concerned faculty member, said that a white student of mine—let's call him Mason—had tried to lynch a Black student.

I read the email with my mouth agape. The professor who'd written it was someone whose academic work I thought highly of; surely she wouldn't make such an extreme accusation if it had no basis in reality. But I was rather certain that Mason—a crunchy-granola environmentalist type outspoken about his progressive politics—was not a virulent racist. He had taken my Climate Fiction course and written a paper critiquing the "Western colonial empire" depicted in a feminist science-fiction novel I had assigned. How, exactly, had he attempted a lynching?

Mason and several other white students had apparently gotten into a dispute with a Black friend they lived with. The white students had asked their Black housemate to leave, and had said they would call the Lewiston police and say he was threatening them if he tried to get his things. According to my colleague,

they had thus conspired to "weaponize state power to terrorize or kill" their Black classmate. "It is not an exaggeration to say their actions were an attempted lynching," she added.

The professor also accused several students who were evidently brought to tears during the unfolding drama of intentionally leveraging their "white womanhood" by crying. The email concluded by demanding that Mason and the other white students face serious consequences. It also demanded that professors of color be provided "protection" if any of the students involved in this "white supremacist incident" enrolled in their courses.

Someone mentioned that the college might be investigating the incident, but if such an investigation happened, to my knowledge nothing ever came of it. Even so, the email stuck with me.

Whatever had happened among those students, and whoever had been at fault, I was sure the conflict was not driven by racial hatred. I was also troubled by the evidence-free assumption that an encounter between a Black liberal-arts-college student and the police was so likely to end in death that calling 911 was tacitly homicidal. Although Black men are significantly more likely to be killed by the police than white men, the number of unarmed Black men who are fatally shot this way annually in America is minuscule—11 in 2021, for instance. And of course, most of those who are unjustly killed by the cops are not undergraduates at one of the most expensive colleges in the country.

I came to understand the Mason affair as emblematic of the kind of "politics" that dominated at Bates, a place where current and future elites paid—or were paid—for the privilege of cosplaying as radicals, victims, or both. In this upside-down, 133-acre world, an "attempted lynching" was a graver threat to Black undergraduates than student debt, and faculty needed protection from their own students. Some of my colleagues, it seemed, were engaged in an *Alice in Wonderland*-style reenactment of civil-rights-era struggles, in which glancing racial faux pas and willfully misinterpreted private encounters were treated with the solemnity of nooses swinging from oak trees.

IN RETROSPECT, it is no coincidence that wokeness blossomed at prestigious American colleges at the very moment when those schools were facing rising discontent over student debt and tuition costs. For the academic aristocracy, touting fealty to Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, trans rights, and other progressive movements served as a convenient distraction from the intractable economic and social issues that the colleges themselves were perpetuating. This allowed higher education to reclaim the moral high ground after Occupy Wall Street and the 2016 Bernie Sanders campaign—to say nothing of the anti-elite fury that gave rise to Donald Trump—had kicked mud all over academia's ivy-twined walls. Even better, embracing social-justice rhetoric and adopting schemes to boost faculty diversity were cheap. Cheaper, anyway, than lowering tuition or hiring more tenure-track professors.

Wokeness allowed elite higher ed to create a new model of inclusive exclusion: one in which tuition can continue to climb, acceptance rates can continue to plummet, endowments can continue to expand, and adjunct labor can continue to be exploited as long as the demographics of those paying the tuition and





those being exploited continued to get browner, Blacker, more LGBTQAI2P+. It also helped nurture the delusion that elite college graduates were being prepared for lives of civic virtue, and that their highly priced education would be deployed in service of the public good. Never mind the fact that, during my time at Bates, roughly a quarter of the school's graduates went on to jobs in tech, finance, or consulting—a startling figure that nonetheless pales in comparison to the nearly half of Harvard and Yale students who end up in these same career tracks.

All of this was the backdrop of the dean's announcement to faculty, in the fall of 2021, that the college's next major project would be to napalm the strangling weeds of bigotry that were apparently rooted deep in its soil. "Racism, sexism, ableism, classism are deeply embedded in society, in our fields of study, and in the spaces we occupy," he observed. "To eradicate these inhibitors, these retardants to progress and educational potential, these poisons," we were told, would require setting aside "self-censorship" and "dogmatic positions." Some of this "work" would focus on the individual: "Many of us, especially white faculty and staff, require explicit training." But as with all cultural revolutions, the real change would involve collective struggle.

The dean explained that every department and program at Bates was to complete a racism self-audit. The goal of this project, innocuously called Foundational Dialogues, was to identify areas where white supremacy, "colonial" frameworks, and other forms of bias might be lurking in curricula and major requirements. To facilitate this work, departments were required to bring in an external consultant. Each major would produce a "curricular transformation plan" and deliver the report to the dean's office.

To me, the whole initiative rang serious alarm bells for academic freedom: The faculty was being made to accept a highly contestable and expressly political conclusion—that racism was latent in every department and program on campus—and then sent on a treasure hunt to find evidence supporting that predetermined finding. Given that the transformation plan was mandatory, *We didn't unearth any white supremacy hidden in our astronomy courses* clearly would not be an acceptable verdict.

Even more disturbing was what the dean said would come next: "serious consideration" of a report from Bates's Curricular Working Group, a committee composed of faculty and students, which proposed that all students be required to take at least two courses "centering" race, white supremacy, colonialism, and "intersecting experiences of power and privilege" within their major. In other words, the report recommended that every single major on campus—not just those in the humanities and social sciences, but also physics, chemistry, biology, and the like—offer and require two such courses.

The report declared that enacting the proposal "will make our students of color feel safer," but it didn't say how or why. Moreover, much of the evidence it cited suggested that the proposal was acutely unnecessary. The committee noted that 94 percent of 2020 Bates graduates had taken at least one course that addressed race, power, privilege, colonialism, or white supremacy. It lamented, however, that "only" 21 percent of Bates courses overall touched on these topics.

The committee also wrote that it had looked at 32 other colleges to see how many had DEI-related course requirements. Although slightly over half had at least one required course, none of the schools placed that requirement within a major—a discovery that the committee seemed to find positively titillating. In the committee's view, the fact that no peer institution it surveyed had tried to force science majors to take chemistry courses on bigotry, for instance, was proof that the proposed requirement was "unique and transformative" (rather than, say, ill-advised and obviously deranged) and would help advance the goal of "distinguishing Bates from its peers." The committee even provided examples of hypothetical new courses that could fulfill the requirement, such as "Mathematics for Social Justice," which could help students understand "the role of mathematics as a gatekeeper and driver of injustice."

Yet even the report's most absurd curricular recommendations seemed harmless compared with those found in its "Accountability" section. Outside consultants, it proposed, should be brought in to "train faculty" and enact "the cultural shift we now require"; course-development funds might be restricted to only those professors creating classes about approved topics; it was strongly implied that teaching evaluations, an important metric in the tenure process, should be based in part on demonstrated allegiance to the new norms.

Most ominous was the committee's argument that an "external oversight group" should be created, one composed of faculty experts from Bates and beyond; college staff, including DEI administrators; students who had taken approved courses; and "community leaders and activists." The committee provided a list of outside organizations that could furnish the enforcers, including a social-justice-inflected arts nonprofit and a "virtual law firm" that appeared to specialize in selling online DEI seminars.

The whole document struck me as an Orwellian masterpiece, by turns insane and sinister. The only thing that gave me solace was the certainty that the proposal was so self-evidently unhinged that it would never get past the rest of the faculty.

All of this social-justice rhetoric also felt wildly hypocritical. The same October day that the dean promised to abolish "retardants to progress"—including classism—adjunct faculty and staff announced that they were starting a union drive, citing "low pay, and poor working conditions at the college." The union was intended to be "wall-to-wall," meaning that it would include not just non-tenure-track faculty but also people working in facilities, the dining hall, and other nonacademic roles on campus. The administration's skulduggery started almost immediately.

Just over a week after the unionization push became public, the student newspaper took down an article about it from its website when a college spokesperson requested that it do so, citing inaccuracies. (The student journalists denied being pressured by the college to remove the article and said that they wanted to ensure that it was accurate.) Shortly thereafter, a new version of the story appeared with talking points and edits suggested by said spokesperson. The college declared that it would not remain neutral during the unionization drive, and by November, Bates



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had hired the same consulting firm that was helping Amazon crush labor organizing on Staten Island.

I began to develop a case of political vertigo. There I was, joining my colleagues in sifting through our curriculum like anti-racist truffle pigs; assigning an Afro-Caribbean graphic novel, Marshallese ecopoetry, and the like to diversify my syllabi; and organizing a “Decolonization and Liberation”—themed MLK Day celebration meant to honor a civil-rights leader who had been assassinated while supporting sanitation workers agitating for basic labor rights. Meanwhile, the college was paying ungodly sums to corporate mercenaries to ensure that it could continue exploiting its most vulnerable employees. But if administrators felt the least bit sheepish about their hypocrisy, they didn’t show it.

I WAS IN A search-committee meeting, reviewing the scores of applicants who had applied for an open tenure-track position in the environmental-studies program, when a colleague from another department shared their thoughts on a candidate whose work focused on the African diaspora. “I’m worried his work will be too close to Tyler’s,” they said.

The comment left me dumbstruck. *Too close to Tyler’s?* This would have been a good point—it is routine to pass on candidates whose interests are too similar to those of faculty already on campus—except that my research and teaching were about 19th- and early-20th-century British literature, with a focus on science fiction and the history of science. Apparently, my colleague had assumed that, because I am Black, I must be an expert on the African diaspora.

Partway through the meeting, I sent an email to a friend recounting the incident. “All of these good white liberals are so racist,” I wrote. Minutes later, I sent another update. “Now we

just nixed a candidate who works on American environmental history and Edward Abbey,” I said, “because he did not ‘even acknowledge the profound whiteness of Edward Abbey.’” I did not know what “profound whiteness” meant, exactly. (Were all white people profoundly white, or was it possible, through hard work and good behavior, to become merely moderately white, or even mildly white?) But I did know that, whatever “profound whiteness” meant, it wasn’t good.

It had been obvious to me since my arrival at Bates that I was what conservatives like to call a “DEI hire”—that is, I likely wouldn’t have gotten the job were it not for the color of my skin. True, I’d gone to a top Ph.D. program, had prominent advisers, scraped together an above-average amount of teaching experience, and graduated with distinction. I was more than qualified for the job I was hired to do. But was I more qualified than every other candidate who’d applied? Probably not.

Because of the volume of people earning doctorates and the paucity of good jobs available, the country is flooded with talented scholars who have spent years bouncing from gig to gig, contract to contract, hoping to win a tenure-track position. This system pits people several years out of their Ph.D. program, armed with substantial publication records, against those straight out of grad school. I was in the latter camp. When I applied to the Bates job, I am certain, I was competing against applicants with more teaching experience, a postdoctorate fellowship or two under their belt, perhaps even a published book.

I knew being Black had given me an advantage on the job market—over the past decade, colleges and universities haven’t exactly hidden how desperate they are to hire minorities—but when I’d arrived at Bates I’d also assumed that this boost had been defensible and comparatively modest. I believed that affirmative action was about redressing historical inequalities, and I thought I knew how it was supposed to work: If you have an A– white candidate who is very polished, and a B+ minority candidate who has some rough edges but shows real potential, you hire the minority. After a few years at Bates, though, I began to see the version of affirmative action that I had defended in my head as a fantasy.

One of the first blows to my idealism about the academic meritocracy came in late 2022, when I was serving on another search committee, for an assistant professor in the sciences.

With the exception of educating young people, selecting new tenure-track faculty is arguably the most solemn responsibility professors have. Academia is one of the only fields in America where people are hired for jobs that are intended to be permanent, held until age or infirmity forces them to step aside. At small liberal-arts colleges, where each academic department might have only a handful of faculty members, these decisions are especially consequential.

After a monthslong search, we’d narrowed down the pool of applicants to a trio of finalists, two minorities and one white candidate: I’ll call them Sofia, Charlotte, and Sarah. During their campus visits—in which each of the three candidates put on a teaching demonstration, gave a “job talk” about their research, met with students, and sat for interviews with faculty members—it became clear to me that only Sofia was viable. She was wrapping up an impressive postdoc, had an original research program, and worked

on topics that would excite our students. The fact that Sofia also happened to be a woman of color didn't hurt. She was indisputably the best choice, and I was sure my colleagues on the search committee would agree. Initially, most of them did.

Yet as our deliberations wore on, the mood on the committee shifted. The objection emerged that Sofia, although a brilliant scholar, did not have much experience working across disciplines. There was also some worry that she seemed more focused on research than teaching—not a trivial matter. A small liberal-arts college like Bates is teaching-centric by design, and it did seem like Sofia would have been more at home at a high-powered research institution. I understood these reservations, and in fact shared some of them, but I also thought this put us in a bind.

The other two finalists had clear flaws. Sarah's trip to Bates had been lackluster to the point of disqualifying, while Charlotte's had been borderline embarrassing. The latter's research in biology was, even to my untrained eye, shockingly unsophisticated. "I have substantial reservations about Charlotte's ability to teach complex, rigorous courses," I said in my notes from her campus visit. I added that, as far as I could tell, her work didn't seem much more complicated than walking around and counting animals. As for the mock course she showcased for her teaching demo, it struck me as being pitched at the level of a high-school class. A scientist who had knowledge of her field told the committee that Charlotte's research was simplistic and 50 years out of date, and that her published work had appeared in middling journals. He questioned whether she was qualified at all.

Given our uncertainty about Sofia and the weakness of our two alternatives, I assumed we would return to our pool of applicants in the hopes of finding a candidate we might have overlooked. Instead, something incredible happened. The majority of the committee members slowly began to convince themselves that Charlotte was the right choice. She had extensive work experience, had a history of teaching interdisciplinary courses, and had developed DEI programs at her current institution. This was all true. But it also did not change the fundamental fact that Charlotte was a remarkably low-wattage academic. The fact that we would entertain giving her a job seemed mostly due to her pigmentation and her enthusiasm for DEI bureaucracy.

The committee's letter to the dean, who had final say over the decision, summarized the rationale for hiring Charlotte. It was a marvel of sugarcoating, describing her research as "primarily observational and centered on the distribution of species in different kinds of environments." (In other words, she walked around and counted animals.) It confessed that "we were uncertain whether her research program would develop into something that used some of the most modern tools." (Which is to say, we weren't sure if she was capable of abandoning her 1970s methodologies and joining 21st-century science.) And it noted that we were not confident she had the "ability to help our students develop skills that would be most helpful for going into the increasingly digital and computational workplace." (She might not be able to help our students develop the kinds of proficiencies that would make them employable.) Still, we made the case for giving Charlotte a tenure-track job at one of the most selective liberal-arts colleges in the country.

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Thankfully, the dean saved us from ourselves. Although he was a primary cheerleader for DEI on campus—and although he was afflicted with a degree of racial neurosis that would have made Rachel Dolezal blush—the dean was also a biologist, and he must have known that Charlotte had no business at Bates. He voiced "significant concerns" about her research quality, questioned whether she could meet tenure standards, and said he was "very concerned" by the idea that we would knowingly hire someone who lacked the ability to prepare our students for this millennium's job market.

In the end, Charlotte did not get the offer. But the entire episode left me distressed by what it seemed to suggest about the way many of my colleagues at Bates viewed scholars of color.

Did they really believe, however deeply in the recesses of their subconscious, that the only way to get "marginalized" faculty on campus was to lower academic standards to the subbasement? The idea made me irate, not only because it was racist, but because, selfishly, it made me look bad. Maybe I was not an academic rock star, but I thought I was doing quite respectably at Bates; by any reasonable metric, I was meeting, even exceeding, the college's expectations for tenure-track faculty. I was placing articles in well-respected journals. An editor at one of the top university presses was interested in my book project. I'd received glowing internal reviews from members of my tenure committee.

I had spent my entire adult life at college, in grad school, and now working as a professor, and I had never before been self-conscious about being a beneficiary of affirmative action. I had



always assumed that if I simply worked harder than the people around me—if I read more, went to more conferences, published more and in better venues—then nobody would question whether I deserved to be there. My experience on that search committee, though, disabused me of the notion that any of this mattered at Bates. The school's culture encouraged us to see professors of color as vehicles for achieving the college's diversity goals. The inescapable conclusion I arrived at was that I had been hired to be visibly Black first and a scholar second, if at all.

Even more upsetting, my experience on that committee changed how I viewed other newly hired minorities on campus. I sometimes found myself reflexively wondering whether Bates's professors of color were up to the job, or whether they were underqualified fodder for the school's social-engineering regime. I could not unlearn what I had discovered: that more than a few people at this elite little college seemed happy not just to move the goalposts for people like me, but to take them down entirely.

The dean, of course, happened to be familiar with Charlotte's research areas. But if she had been a sociologist or a historian, would he have deferred to the expertise of the faculty on the committee? How many other Charlottes had already been hired at Bates? And how common was this kind of thing at other colleges around the country? It seemed highly unlikely that I had landed at the only school in America so hell-bent on getting minorities through the door that it would make a mockery of academic standards if need be.

I never stopped believing in affirmative action in principle, but I slowly stopped believing in it in practice. I'd understood the spirit of affirmative action to be about recognizing that people from historically underrepresented groups often face additional barriers, about affirming that talented minorities who may be less connected and superficially less refined can nonetheless rise to the occasion if given the opportunity. It seemed to me that the Bates administration's push to diversify at all costs had led some of my colleagues on the faculty to internalize the opposite idea: that it is not especially important to find minority candidates who are capable of being held to traditional academic norms. Justice and anti-racism required a two-tiered system, a sort of woke Jim Crow, in which radically separate standards were applied to white and nonwhite candidates. In short, I came to see Bates College, self-styled beacon of progress, as an institution that was deeply, incorrigibly racist.

**ONE OF MY FRIENDS**, a Black software engineer, has a theory about navigating the 2020s job market as an African American. He jokes (but it is not really a joke) that there are "replaceable negroes" and "irreplaceable negroes." The goal, he says, is to become an irreplaceable negro: someone who is unfireable because they are too good at their job, because they work for a company that doesn't have a lot of Black people and can't afford to lose any, or, ideally, both.

By the spring of my third year at Bates, I'd come to the happy conclusion that I was an irreplaceable negro. I'm pretty sure that I had published more than any other tenure-track humanities professor in my cohort. I taught courses that were popular with

students, and, most important, two other Black, pre-tenure male professors had recently left the college. I reasoned that Bates couldn't afford to bleed any more Black guys, and because I was finding the atmosphere at the college more bizarre and stifling by the day, I resolved to begin speaking my mind.

I was angry about the culture at Bates. I was sick of being treated like a racial prop rather than a professor, which included being continually recruited to do Minority Work I found silly or degrading. In addition to serving on the MLK committee, which I did for several years, I had been asked to be on multiple committees related to the college's metastasizing diversity bureaucracy—work it seemed that my white faculty friends were rarely asked to do.

But more than this tokenizing, it was the disconnect between the college's progressive patter and its labor practices that was pushing me toward a breaking point. Environmental studies had lost several non-tenure-track faculty members since I'd arrived, each a fantastic professor. Watching this happen as the administration continued to spend most of its time bleating about social justice left me considerably less patient when college leadership made its next cartoonishly progressive move.

Bates's Academic Affairs Council was a small but powerful committee composed of the dean and four senior faculty members drawn from the humanities, social sciences, sciences, and interdisciplinary studies. In December 2022, the council circulated draft legislation for a version of the proposal that the Curricular Working Group had suggested back in 2021: the Race, Power, Privilege, and Colonialism requirement, or RPPC, as it came to be known. If the proposal passed a faculty vote, every major would be required to offer at least one course related to "race, power, privilege, colonialism, and their consequences." Students would be required to take two such courses, one of these in their major. That the council was composed of five white people, with nary a professor of color among its ranks, added a degree of bleak hilarity to the whole affair.

I found it less funny, though, that the council was determined to have its way seemingly regardless of broader faculty sentiment, which early polling had shown was thoroughly skeptical of such a plan. At a March 2023 faculty meeting, the RPPC requirement was put up for debate and comment. I commented.

Standing at the mic in a cramped auditorium, I laid out my case against the requirement: It was a clear violation of academic freedom. The burden for teaching these new courses would probably default to minority faculty members, who would be further pigeonholed into race work that they may not want to do. And asking professors in the sciences to teach courses on race and colonialism would likely be a disaster. Most Bates science faculty lacked any expertise in these areas, nor did they have much experience discussing fraught social issues in the classroom. I argued that pushing them to act as bigotry experts not only was of dubious educational value, but would likely do more harm than good, especially to students of color who would be subject to their fumbling attempts at teaching racially sensitive topics.

I leaned on this last point especially hard. If my time at Bates had taught me anything, it was that the most reliable way to get

progressive white academics to do what you wanted was to translate your concerns into the therapeutic language of racial harm. As if on cue, a professor on the council whom I will call Sandra hastened to assure me that she took potential trauma to minority students very seriously. She insisted that there would be ways to ensure that classroom dynamics did not become unpleasant for them; the key, she explained, would be to foster a “culture of repair.”

When I said that I had no idea what a culture of repair meant (really, I just wanted to see her try to substantiate her hollow jabber), Sandra gave a helpful example of what “repair” might look like in action. She suggested that perhaps there could be a system in which students of color could call out “oops” or “ouch” if somebody accidentally said something racist—as though these were not young adults with basic human dignity paying minor fortunes to be taught by ostensible subject-matter experts, but toddlers learning not to bite their friends when someone grabbed their toy truck. It took every last ounce of my already threadbare professionalism not to lean into the mic and say “Oops.”

I had long privately believed that the specter of student demand was being used as justification to pass legislation that only senior administrators and a few tenured radicals were excited to see put in place. A strange email I received a few days before the March 2023 faculty meeting appeared to confirm this. In it, a member of the student government not so subtly nudged me to support the requirement. When I wrote back explaining the various reasons I did not, she confessed that she and her peers had been asked by the council to encourage (read: guilt-trip) their professors to endorse it. I was disturbed that students were apparently being recruited for an influence campaign. The student told me, too, that she and her peers had been “blindsided” by the proposed requirement, but had been presented with an almost uniformly favorable faculty view of it.

I also got an email, after the meeting, from “oops, ouch” Sandra, who seemed quite anxious that a young Black professor with leftist politics objected to the committee’s vision. During our exchange, she noted that my views on academic freedom were also found among “faculty with libertarian leanings”—as though the mere fact that my opinion was shared by professors who were not liberal progressives was proof that the opinion was illegitimate. She added, “I do have some suspicion about white people using arguments like this to avoid addressing systemic racism.” To me, it seemed obvious what she meant: Did I, a Black man, really want to be on the same side as people who didn’t want to Do the Work?

I told her that I saw Bates’s new scheme as simply the liberal mirror image of what was already happening in places like Florida, where the state government was policing curricula to advance a racist, homophobic agenda. “I’m not willing to support violating intellectual freedom in higher education just because it happens to be my team that’s doing it,” I wrote.

Sandra seemed stuck: Some minority professors supported the requirement, while others, like me, did not. In my observation, woke white academics—who are largely acculturated to defer to the “lived experience” of their Black and brown students and colleagues—had next to no ability to make decisions

when confronted with minorities who disagreed with one another. Encountering “marginalized” people with opposing views tended to create a kind of cognitive paralysis in some of my white co-workers, and I noticed that, in such cases, they usually followed the recommendation of the most recent minority they’d spoken with about the issue. With my friends, I jokingly called this the “last Black person I talked to” problem.

But this problem was also an opportunity: If you could manage to be the last minority voice that a white professor or administrator heard before they made an important decision, they’d often just do what you told them to. With Sandra, apparently, it worked. My rebuttals to the RPPC started to land, and she asked if I could support a version of the proposal that would still force students to take two courses on racism without requiring every major on campus to furnish these courses.

I told her that I could. Although I still privately disliked what seemed to me a naked politicalization of our curriculum, my core objections had always centered on the faculty’s academic freedom, and the absurdity of making chemists teach courses on white supremacy. If the requirement could be fulfilled with classes that were already being taught, or voluntarily added, that compromise seemed worth making, especially if it meant that students would be less likely to be subjected to “Mathematics for Social Justice” slop. Sandra said she would suggest this modification at the next Academic Affairs Council meeting. Less than two weeks later, a new version of the legislation was distributed, now with the major requirement removed. The vote to pass or kill the legislation would take place at the April faculty meeting.

I thought, briefly, that my side had won. Yet a week later, a counterproposal came across the transom, this one buoyed by a small but vocal corner of the faculty that was especially militant about social justice. It restored the original demand that every major create required courses on racism.

By some act of cosmic mercy, I had an unexpected personal matter crop up days before the vote, which meant I would be out of town on that fateful April Monday. I alerted a few colleagues who also opposed the legislation. “I won’t be at the meeting,” I told one, “but honestly that’s good, as I think my head would explode.”

I later learned that professors in the Africana program, one of the centers of performative radicalism at Bates, stood outside the meeting distributing flyers that announced they would effectively hold the curriculum captive if they didn’t get their way. They informed the rest of the faculty that they would not allow their classes to count for the requirement if the less aggressive version of the legislation passed. This would have made any implementation logistically challenging, leaving students to fight over spots in a smaller number of courses that could fulfill their obligations. In what seemed to be an even more cynical manipulation, a number of students—many of them minorities—were brought to the meeting by a white faculty member, apparently as visual aids; they audibly cheered for the counterproposal.

Perhaps some professors were uncomfortable striking down an anti-racism requirement in front of the students, or maybe they recognized that Africana’s threat had put everyone in a difficult



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spot. It's possible, I suppose, that the light of truth and progress had simply warmed their frigid hearts. Whatever the reason, Bates's faculty relented: The vote was 73 percent in favor of a measure that only a small minority had originally supported.

**THE VOTE AND** all that preceded it finally pushed me to speak up in a forum that was more public than a faculty meeting. It didn't help my less-than-rosy outlook that, just a couple of weeks before the April faculty meeting, the union effort had officially failed. That June, I published an op-ed in *The Boston Globe* titled "I Am the Wrong Kind of Black Professor."

Voicing the frustrations that I had long kept mostly private was cathartic. I was also about to begin a yearlong break from Bates, a combined research sabbatical and parental leave. I convinced myself that I could stick it out when I got back. I still adored my students, and loved sharing books and films I cared about with them. And even if my views frequently differed from those of my colleagues in environmental studies, they were kind and open-minded people.

The year that I was away, I tried to find humor, sometimes dark, in the glimpses of Bates madness that blipped on my radar: an email sent to the entire faculty to complain that a campus "Scholar Tea" event was appropriating "Black Queer Southern traditions." A Martin Luther King Jr. Day meeting I attended where a white social scientist argued that putting a silhouette of a farmer on a poster was problematic—that year's MLK theme was "Food Justice"—because farmers "default to whiteness" and "tractors reflect whiteness." The Center for Inclusive Teaching and Learning hosting a "DeStress Fest" for faculty featuring a "Lunch & Play" (Play-Doh, LEGO, "other fun 'toys'"), arts and crafts,

and "a soft bunny in the next room to pet." It was incredible to learn that I worked at an adult day care.

But nothing seemed as humorous after I came back to campus.

My leave had started just a few months after OpenAI's breakthrough model of ChatGPT was released, leaving dazed professors and administrators flailing in their response to a technology that seemed poised to make the college essay obsolete. I assumed that by the time I came back in the fall of 2024, Bates would have a strategy for dealing with this existential threat to American higher education.

Yet upon my return, I found that, even as Bates faculty panicked about AI-enabled cheating, many of my colleagues seemed to have little collective will to do anything about it. Nor did the administration seem especially concerned that our students now had at their disposal a tool that could do their reading, writing, and thinking for them. I was distressed to find that safeguarding the basic tenets of liberal arts, or providing students with an experience that might still be recognizable as an education, seemed to be a low priority at Bates.

A search committee I joined that fall compounded my disillusionment. By this point, I had mostly lost the capacity to be scandalized by the administration's questionable DEI policies, or by those policies' deep tension with the college's labor conditions. During this search, however, that tension became impossible to ignore. One of the many "diverse" candidates in our search pool was a non-tenure-track professor—I'll call her Mia—who had been teaching at Bates for multiple semesters. Her research was exciting, her courses were compelling, and she was a hardworking and thoughtful colleague.

Further, it is routine for colleges to give tenure-track jobs to non-tenure-track faculty members: These "internal candidates" have the advantage of being a known quantity, and departments are often eager to do right by a co-worker who has been stuck in career limbo. The path to becoming a tenure-track professor can be grueling—the system asks people to spend the prime of their life moving from low-paying job to low-paying job, from one state to another to another, all in the hopes of one day getting a permanent position. Because many universities cap the number of courses that adjuncts can teach (to avoid having to comply with federal health-care mandates), many of them have to teach half a dozen or more per semester spread across different local colleges—a practice known as "freeway flying"—to cobble together a living. One in four non-tenure-track college educators relies on public assistance. One in three earns less than \$25,000 a year.

Mia's position at Bates was about to expire, and so I assumed that we would take the rare opportunity to hire her onto the tenure track. Once again, I watched a committee talk itself out of an obvious choice.

On a cold morning a few days into 2025, the group arrived at its final decision: We would not be hiring Mia, a result that made it likely that this would be her last semester at Bates, and perhaps her last semester as an academic. If Mia had been a mediocre teacher or scholar, that would be one thing. But the committee agreed that she was absolutely qualified. There just happened to be another "diverse" candidate who was judged to

be a marginally better fit, and who did more to expand our curricular offerings. I had watched the college chew up and spit out enough non-tenure-track professors that Mia's fate shouldn't have come as a surprise, but it did.

I saw clearly now what should have been obvious all along. Bates was not a good place to work, nor a moral one. And the problem went beyond a single college: Bates was a node in a higher-education system that offered teenagers an uncertain future in exchange for often unpayable debt, and that asked scholars—enticed by the tweedy dream of a kind of faculty life that has long since been clubbed to death—to keep waiting for the real job that would surely come after the temporary job, and the next temporary job, and the next.

I had been spared all that. And I was on the cusp of getting the very thing I had wanted since I was a 21-year-old English major in my modernism professor's wood-lined office, declaring that I would like to do her job one day. My senior colleagues in environmental studies talked about my tenure as if it were a foregone conclusion and openly discussed how I was next in line for program chair. The same January morning we decided not to hire Mia, Bates's president announced that I was one of four professors—and the only non-tenured faculty member—whom my colleagues had voted onto the powerful Strategic Planning Steering Committee, a body composed of the president himself, various vice presidents, and a member of the board of trustees. I was on the inside track of an inside track, but it felt hollow.

Sitting in that last search-committee meeting, deliberating the fate of a person who, like me, had spent years chasing after a career that felt more like a calling, I was unexpectedly gripped by a granite certainty. I did not want to keep doing this. My academic Stockholm syndrome—*You do not leave the tenure track*—subsided in a rush. Five years after my adviser had likened me to the last dinosaur, I decided to walk my academic career into a tar pit rather than wait for the asteroid. I sat in my car after the deliberation about Mia ended and sent an email to a confidant explaining that I intended to leave Bates.

**THE STORY OF** elite higher education's hiring and labor practices and the story of its decades-long creep toward progressive extremism are not separate or even contradictory. They are the same story. In 1969, a survey of 60,000 professors found that 27 percent identified as moderate, 28 percent as conservative, and 46 percent as liberal or left. Now, at some of this country's top universities, only single-digit percentages of faculty identify as conservative. A 2025 survey of Harvard faculty placed that number at 9 percent.

How this happened is no mystery: The very system that was designed to protect the faculty's right to free thought collapsed. By 1980, as many as two-thirds of American college professors were tenured. Today, only about a quarter are. We went from a world where most faculty members could say what they think without fear of being fired to one where most people teaching college courses have to worry that their contract won't be renewed if they cause intellectual offense. It is not surprising that a professoriat disproportionately composed of contract workers would also be one that could be pressured into groupthink.

In a consultant-led meeting I attended near the end of my time at the college, one month into Donald Trump's second term, the small group of professors and senior administrators present was asked to share what it saw as Bates's greatest strengths and weaknesses. One of my colleagues said that the college's greatest strength was its commitment to DEI. Another said that the college's greatest weakness was that it could be even more committed to DEI. Someone lamented that our ties to the Wabanaki Nations could have been stronger.

As snow turned into slush, I walked by a flyer pasted to a campus building announcing the college's annual sex week. The technicolor poster proclaimed that Bates would be hosting a game of "dildo ring toss" and would provide "exploration tables" replete with sex toys. Once, I might have seen in that poster a symptom of everything wrong with the college—money wasted on weird bullshit, organized by bureaucrats whose jobs nobody could explain. Now I found it all oddly refreshing. What was Bates if not a place devoted to risk-free ideological masturbation? For a week, at least, we could be honest about it.

Months later, I joined *The Atlantic* as a full-time staff writer. I was busy enjoying my first fall free from academia when I heard the news: At the November faculty meeting, Bates professors would vote on whether to suspend the Race, Power, Privilege, and Colonialism requirement, which was set to begin in 2026. Cooler minds at the college had evidently judged that, given the political climate, now was not exactly the best time for mandatory courses on the physics of white supremacy or the chemistry of colonialism; such a nakedly politicized curriculum, in fact, could make Bates a target of the current administration. The new legislation proposed that implementation of the requirement be paused until 2029—not coincidentally, after the next presidential election.

I thought I'd feel vindicated. I had argued all along that the RPPC was pointless, unworkable, mad. Now it was dead. Yet, unexpectedly, I was disappointed. Here was one last sign that it had all meant nothing. I recalled the dean's faint embarrassment, years earlier, when I'd said that I was proud to join a school with an abolitionist past. Although the dead cannot speak, I must assume that embarrassment runs both ways.

Bates was founded in 1855 on the principle that a man is a man wherever he is found and whatever color his skin. In the decade that followed, the college furnished from its ranks 173 students willing to spill their blood for the cause of the Union and human liberation. One of these abolitionist-educated men was Holman S. Melcher, who left Bates to join the 20th Maine Regiment. A year later, at Gettysburg, he helped lead the bayonet charge down the hill at Little Round Top and into the maw of an advancing Confederate force.

Now this same college could not find the spine required to simply stand by a curricular change that its faculty and administrators had breathlessly, earnestly, performatively insisted was an imperative because it was nothing less than a matter of justice.

The vote was unanimous. *A*

*Tyler Austin Harper is a staff writer at The Atlantic.*



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# Culture & Critics



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OMNIVORE

## Not Quite the Vineyard

*How the hit series Widow's Bay channels the horror and comedy of the times*

By James Parker

What genre are we living in, living through, today? Epic? No chance. Farce? Sometimes. Porno-pastoral? Holistic satire? Digital picaresque? All of these, sure, but only in spasms. No, the big one, the all-encompassing super-genre of where we are right now (did you read/watch/inhale the news this morning?), is obvious: horror-comedy.

Horror (screams) is over here, and comedy (laughs) is over there. And exactly where we find ourselves on the dial that ticks between the two will vary from moment to moment. But the distance that separates them, in 2026 America, is not great; that's the point. The ludicrous abuts the terrible. The ghastly now sits down heavily next to the hilarious, and breathes.

Which brings us to *Widow's Bay*, currently riding high on Apple TV, by the former *Parks and Recreation* writer Katie Dippold. Not only does this show successfully blend the genres of horror and comedy; it reminds us that they are kind of the same thing—that horror was always wrapped around comedy, and vice versa, because they share the same brain stem. Sitcom-style no-exit environments; slapstick violence; the alternating rhythm of anxiety and release. The jump scare, the punch line. The existential whiplash. And what greater monster, what deeper bump in the night, than the possibility that all of this is, you know, just one big joke?

*Widow's Bay* is an island off the coast of New England. It has a diner called the Driftwood, some nice beaches, some craggy old fishermen, no cellphone service, and no Wi-Fi.

APPLE; STEPHEN SAKS PHOTOGRAPHY



The lack of hooked-upness feels important: It is as if the island's imagination, absent the usual distractions and numbing agents, has gone into blooming-and-festering psychotic overdrive. Everywhere you look there's a curse or a mystery or a bottomless backstory, and the whole place creaks and slithers with that special Stephen King-like aura of hexed quaintness, of bed-and-breakfast menace.

Widow's Bay has a mayor, Tom Loftis, who wants to turn it into the new Martha's Vineyard. Loftis, played by Matthew Rhys, is a figure of quietly fanatical secularism and non-ghost-ism. Clear out the cobwebs and crank up the cappuccino machine. But it is his one-man campaign of gentrification and municipal enhancement that will activate the demons of the island. He whose blundering-about like Michael Scott will bring in the evil fog. He whose desire for summer visitors—and impatience with any kind of supernatural nonsense—will wake up the killer clown and the lurching slasher and the dripping, lank-haired sea hag, who follows you home and sits horribly and brinily on your face until you're dead. "You refuse to accept our history, to accept the truth!" rails Wyck the fisherman, the wild-eyed town doomsayer. "Do you know what I think?" says Loftis. "I think there are some people who want to be miserable."

Rhys as Loftis is expertly cast. Bloodless complexion, inky hair—a great silent-movie face, I've always thought, a melodramatic black-and-white face, with something nervously mobile and Chaplin-esque flickering around the mouth, the bared-teeth smile. The tonal coherence of *Widow's Bay* depends to a large extent on Rhys, on his ability to ride the current between goofy startlement and raw terror. Loftis lives with, and glumly rinses out the cereal bowls of, his rebellious stoner son, Evan—an extraordinary performance by Kingston Rumi Southwick, full of hazily disruptive rhythms and long, glossy, bullshit-detecting gazes. "I didn't know we were swearing now," he says placidly, having provoked his father into a burst of addled profanity.

Then there's Patricia, played by the English actor Kate O'Flynn. Awkward, traumatized, alarming on the dance floor, doggedly writing her poems and trying to make friends, in horror she's a victim and in comedy she's a heroine. So on the horror-comedy island of Widow's Bay she's both, embellishing how she almost got murdered during a spree by the aforementioned lurching slasher. Remember all those fake memoirs from the early 2000s, by all those writers pretending to be addicts and gangsters and Holocaust survivors? Patricia could have written one of them. "I still sleep with a dresser in front of my door," she insists. "But he murdered teenage girls," Loftis says helpfully. "You're in your 40s; you'll be

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fine." "Beach Reads," the episode in which Patricia organizes a cocktail party based on the guidance of a slightly sinister self-help/etiquette manual ("Feeling like you could die tomorrow and no one would notice? Well, that could be. But the right party can change that."), is a stand-alone classic: When the veil of hallucination lifts, the manual is revealed to be a *Blair Witch*-style grimoire.

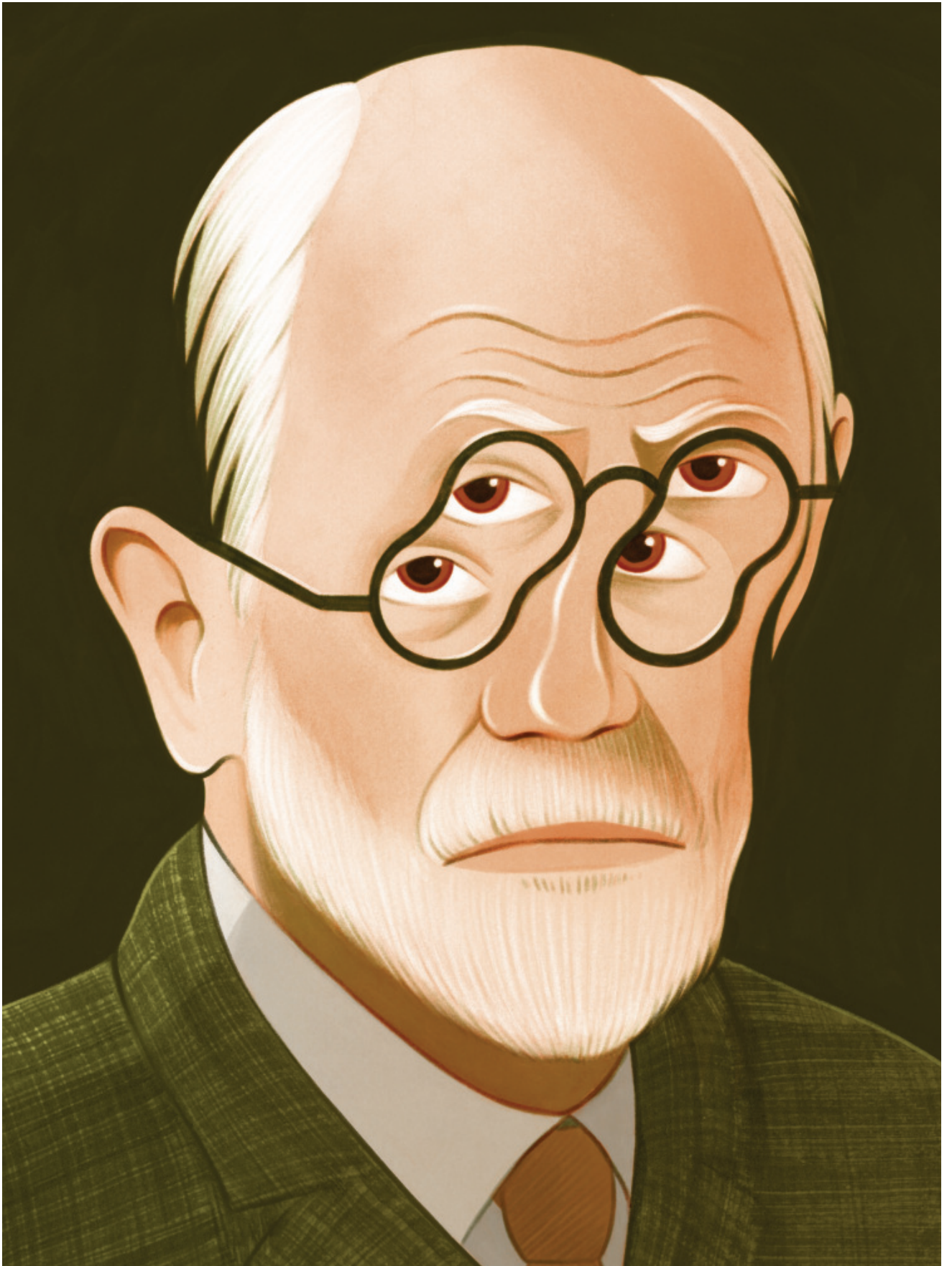
It's very well-made, *Widow's Bay*. The soundtrack—by the frequent Hans Zimmer collaborator David Fleming—is a delight, a polyphonic mood board of ghost-clangs, spooky bassoons, lyrical electro-motifs, and sighing sea themes. And some of the images are indelible: A close-up of Rhys prone and horror-rigid in his bathtub, the watery essence of the sea hag hovering over his face, will not soon be dislodged from my mind.

The risk, though, with horror-comedy—with dinging from chuckles to shrieks and back again—is always an evacuated center. A lack of feeling at the core.

The masterpieces of the genre have the means to overcome this. Edgar Wright's *Shaun of the Dead* is more chuckles than shrieks, but it makes a serious metaphysical statement: If you let your life drift, if you sit in the pub all day, if you don't self-actualize, the zombies are going to get you—the zombie tide will take you down. Jordan Peele's *Get Out* is more shrieks than chuckles, but some of its creepiest moments occur within a brilliantly observed comedy of manners, as Chris, a young Black man, is introduced to his girlfriend's preeningly progressive white parents, and begins to be drawn into the sticky web of their whiteness. ("So how long has this been going on?" leers the dad about his daughter's relationship. "This—this thang.") As for *Twin Peaks* ... Well, *Twin Peaks* is *Twin Peaks*. Nobody does it like David Lynch, bringing such a pressure of seething strangeness to bear on both the chuckles and the shrieks that a third element was created, a third genre: the Lynchian.

Season 1 of *Widow's Bay* does not operate at this level. The final showdown with the island's dark past gives you not catharsis but that more familiar groggy, post-binge, hunched-over-your-laptop feeling, your brain glutted with narrative and your antennae drooping. But a second season is in the works, with the potential to deepen the action, and the world will reliably continue to keep us in the mood: more horror, more comedy. Nobody's getting off this island yet. *A*

*James Parker is a staff writer at The Atlantic.*





# What if Freud Was Right?

*A neuroscientist dares to argue that old-fashioned psychoanalysis holds the key to curing mental illness.*

By Scott Stossel

To announce that you are embarking on a course of psychoanalytic training today is tantamount, in many quarters, to admitting that you plan to treat your patients using astrology or by parsing the entrails of a goat. To say that you are undergoing psychoanalysis as a patient is to reveal that you are entrusting your mental health to a witch doctor. So if I were to tell you that a respected neuroscientist has undertaken to exhumate Sigmund Freud and make a case for both his theory of mind and his psychoanalytic method as the best—indeed, the only—approach that can cure emotional disorders, you would likely rate that a quixotic project, and its author perhaps a candidate for serious therapy himself.

Freud's cultural and scientific influence crested some 70 years ago, and much of psychiatry's history since then has consisted of a renunciation of the man, his concepts, and his therapeutic techniques so comprehensive as to have an edge of savagery, even vengeance, to it. He has been deemed a sexist, a misogynist, a bully, a narcissist, a homophobe, a pervert, an addict, an opportunist, a plagiarist, a fabulist, and a scientific fraud, as well as a disloyal friend and a credit-stealing protégé. Not to mention a bungling, incompetent therapist—"a dogmatist who browbeat his patients and consistently failed to mark the crucial difference between their fantasies and his own." (So sums up the flap copy on a collection of Freud-filleting essays by 18 psychiatrists, philosophers, historians, and others compiled in 1998 by Frederick Crews, a literary critic and onetime devout Freudian turned virulent heretic.)

If coroners were to pin an actual time of death on Freudianism, they might specify 1963. That year, the philosopher of science Karl Popper held up psychoanalytic theory as the archetypal instance of what he called "pseudoscience": Worse than mere bad science, psychoanalysis was, in being untestable, simply *not*

science. Based in large part on the highly speculative interpretation of imperfectly recalled dreams, of all things, psychoanalytic theory was impervious to real scientific inquiry. In presuming to explain everything, Popper pronounced, psychoanalysis explained nothing at all.

SO WHO TODAY would dare attempt a rehabilitation of Freud? And why? To take the second question first, here's one reason: What has followed Freudianism has not been, by many reckonings, any better. In the 1970s, the mental-health profession fled from such squishy psychological concepts as transference and countertransference, the death drive, and seduction theory—as well as more outlandish ones like penis envy, castration anxiety, and the Oedipal complex—and leaned instead into "biological psychiatry," which had emerged from the drug discoveries of the 1950s and '60s.

Physiological notions took hold, such as the "catecholamine hypothesis of affective disorders," which attributed anxiety and depression to deficits of the neurotransmitters norepinephrine and dopamine. Three decades later, in the 1990s, the "chemical-imbalance theory of depression" arrived, tying depression and other mood disorders to dysregulation of another neurotransmitter, serotonin. Psychoanalysts' highly subjective assessments gave way to the ostensibly more objective measurements provided by neuroscientific instruments that can capture brain activity, such as EEGs, PET scans, and fMRIs. Doctors turned to genetic testing to help identify various temperament types and emotional predispositions, and relied on standardized questionnaires assessed for their validity in diagnosing mental illness.

In repudiating Freudianism and touting the field's proper medical grounding, science-based psychiatry confidently predicted that measurable success was soon to come. That's not what happened. Biological psychiatry "overreached, overpromised, overdiagnosed, overmedicated," as the Harvard medical historian Anne Harrington put it in 2019. Which raises the question of whether psychiatry has simply exchanged one form of witchcraft for another.

The champions of so-called anti-psychiatry and critical psychiatry—now emboldened by Secretary of Health and Human Services Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and the MAHA movement—certainly think so. So do some leading figures in biological psychiatry. As the head of the National Institute of Mental Health from 2002 to 2015, Thomas Insel tried to root America's approach to mental-health care more firmly in brain physiology and the emerging understanding of genetics than in the nebulous concepts of Freudianism. But in 2017, when he looked back on the \$20 billion he'd spent on

the endeavor, his verdict was bleak: “I don’t think we moved the needle in reducing suicide, reducing hospitalizations, improving recovery for the tens of millions of people who have mental illness.”

What biological psychiatry once promised seemed revolutionary; from the suffering patient’s perspective, what it’s delivered has been marginal. Still, reverting to the nostrums of a disgraced Victorian quack seems a little like saying *This modern medical technique isn’t working so well—let’s go back to using leeches*. Well, as it happens, leeches have become an important part of the modern reconstructive surgeon’s tool kit, for use in skin grafts after surgeries, among other things. Might Freudianism be psychiatry’s leech, resurrected for the astonishing health benefits it contained all along?

**THE PLATONIC IDEAL** of the person who might dare to make this case would look a lot like Mark Solms, the author of the new book *The Only Cure: Freud and the Neuroscience of Mental Healing*. He is a South African neuroscientist armored with a sturdy résumé and hundreds of articles in scientific journals, along with half a dozen books and counting. His lab discovered the specific pathway in the forebrain responsible for stimulating dreams, and he disproved the notion that dreaming is dependent on REM sleep. He’s also done extensive research into the science of consciousness.

Solms is a practicing psychoanalyst as well; he treats neurological disorders (stroke, Parkinson’s, dementia) in addition to psychiatric disorders (anxiety, depression, psychosis). He’s coined a term, *neuro-psychoanalysis*, to describe his clinical work, because he buttresses traditional psychoanalytic techniques—free association and dream interpretation, among other methods of probing the unconscious—with the more recent findings of neuroscience. Much of his research has involved trying to use modern technology to demonstrate the scientific underpinning of certain Freudian concepts and theories. For instance, Solms says that the pleasure-seeking drive (the source of Freud’s “pleasure principle”) is located in the brain networks that communicate via dopamine, and he has mapped the superego onto a region of the prefrontal cortex involved in emotional regulation.

A neuroscientist who is also a practicing psychoanalyst is a rare bird. But Solms is rarer still, having spent the past 29 years completing a revised translation of the complete works of Freud. Twenty-four volumes were published in 2024, and an additional four, consisting of his writings on neuroscience (including some that have never previously been published in English), are due out in 2028. Making available previously overlooked writing has given Solms a chance

THE ONLY CURE:  
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Mark Solms

PEGASUS BOOKS

to correct the misimpression that Freud was homophobic. In a letter to a woman who had asked him to “cure” her son’s homosexuality, Freud writes that being gay “is nothing to be ashamed of, no vice, no degradation; it cannot be classified as an illness.” (This last bit is ironic in light of the American Psychiatric Association’s official classification of homosexuality as a “sociopathic personality disturbance” or “sexual deviation” until 1973.) Freud goes on to note that some of the most accomplished figures in history—Plato, Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci—were gay, and ends by saying that although psychoanalysis can help her son become happier, less neurotic, and more productive, none of that will have anything to do with his sexual orientation. I suspect more than a few Freud detractors will be surprised to read this.

By Solms’s own estimation, there might be “nobody alive who has spent more time with Freud than I have.” But Solms is no doctrinaire acolyte, as guardians of the Freudian flame have tended to be. Ernest Jones, an influential early director of the International Psychoanalytical Association, believed his role was to create a secret committee “like the Paladins of Charlemagne” to protect Freudian theory against heresy. Solms, in contrast, embraces some major criticisms of Freud, calling the death drive, for example, “an egregious error.” As for Freud’s rather “idiosyncratic” theories about sex, Solms writes, “I don’t think there’s any getting around the conclusion that Freud had this stuff seriously muddled.”

Part of Solms’s premise in this book is implicit and inarguable: Despite the attempts to purge Freudianism from psychiatry, its tropes, terms, and concepts—the unconscious; the id, ego, and superego; sublimation; defense mechanisms; the obsession with sex; the importance of early-childhood experiences—have seeped so deeply into our cultural limbic system that they live on in the shared metaphors and terminology we use to discuss personality and mental health: *Frank is “anal”; Mary is “repressed”; Donald Trump is a “narcissist” and an “egomaniac”; Jill Biden was “in denial.”* When Freud died, in 1939, W. H. Auden wrote that he had become “a whole climate of opinion / under whom we conduct our different lives.”

But the two explicit arguments Solms makes on Freud’s behalf in *The Only Cure* are astonishingly ambitious—and contentious. The first is that Freud deserves credit for neuroscientific prescience. A recent history of neuroscience states baldly that “Freud had nothing novel or insightful to say about how the brain worked.” On the contrary, according to Solms: Many prevailing theories about how the brain functions were first worked out by Freud. For instance, Solms writes, Freud effectively identified the way that short-term memories get consolidated into long-term



ones, and did so more than half a century before the neurochemical mechanism for this was discovered. (To bolster his case here, Solms marshals the very man who identified that particular mechanism, Eric Kandel, who won the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine for doing so, and who agrees with Solms that psychoanalysis is “the most coherent and intellectually satisfying view of the mind” we have, and that neuroscience is the “new intellectual framework” that can reinvigorate psychiatry.)

Or consider Freudianism’s key concept, the unconscious. Freud argued that our personalities and behaviors are governed by a maelstrom of hidden drives and motivations mostly unknown to our conscious selves. What we experience as our “conscious life” is in fact only a post hoc rationalization of things we are doing for other reasons, a devastating blow against not just human rationality but even free will.

For years, evidence of the unconscious seemed inaccessible to objective science. How can you prove the existence of something that none of us, by definition, can be subjectively aware of? But technologies unavailable to Freud have demonstrated that much of what happens in the brain is in fact unconscious. Studies using fMRI machines have revealed that when frightening images or angry faces are shown to people too fast for them to consciously perceive them, their brains nevertheless register the fear stimuli: The machines detect a flare of activity in the amygdala, which is followed by a surge in heart rate, blood pressure, and stress hormones, among other responses. The feeling of fear in the body then breaks into consciousness, and the brain makes decisions in response to that. It has become hard to deny that, at least in basic outline, Freud was right about the unconscious.

**SOLMS’S SECOND** explicit claim is, if anything, even more provocative. There is abundant evidence, he writes, that psychoanalysis and its offshoots “are astoundingly effective”—in some cases, he argues, “as dependable as, say, insulin is at managing type 1 diabetes, or as the HPV vaccine is at preventing cervical cancer. These treatments are so well proven that it would strike most doctors as—to use a technical term—crazy not to deploy them by default.”

Solms’s unqualified endorsement of psychoanalysis is startling after decades of criticism. In support, Solms cites a number of studies and papers from the past 40 years to show that psychoanalytic-style talk therapy is more effective than antidepressants or electroconvulsive therapy for depression, or than antipsychotics for schizophrenia. He also cites research demonstrating that psychoanalysis has a robust “sleeping effect”—that is, symptoms continue to improve long after the treatment has ended.

*Technologies unavailable to Freud have demonstrated that much of what happens in the brain is in fact unconscious.*

These results are so striking that I decided to look at the underlying studies, and some other relevant ones. I found that Solms is highly selective in what he cites, and elides a lot of nuance (and sometimes directly contradictory evidence) in service of his case for psychoanalytic-style therapy and against other forms of therapy, especially pharmacotherapy. Cherry-picking is not unusual (especially when dealing with studies that are hard to compare), but the conclusions that flow from it are usually accompanied by a degree of circumspection.

Solms’s verdicts are categorically blunt: “Nearly every psychiatric disorder listed and defined in the standard diagnostic manuals is best understood and treated, not pharmacologically, but psychologically.” And: “There are, as things stand, no physiological cures in psychiatry.” And perhaps most bracing: “The mainstay of modern psychiatry—psychopharmacology—is for the most part a *defence* against facing the facts about what our patients really need. It is a way of suppressing symptoms instead of asking what they mean and fixing that.”

Solms’s position aligns him, probably unintentionally, with the public pronouncements that RFK Jr. has issued about SSRI antidepressants in his role as HHS secretary, which made the American Psychiatric Association convention in May jangly with tension. Antidepressants are useless, Kennedy has said at various times; they are more addictive than heroin, result in “brain damage,” and could be partly responsible for school shootings. None of this is true. But one reason demagoguing against medication has been easy is that the biological model of psychiatry—although filling the coffers of pharmaceutical companies—has delivered no panaceas, instead fueling cycles of disenchanting overreaction. (Today, one in six Americans takes an antidepressant; no wonder APA attendees were on edge.)

Solms does concede that while no physiological cures exist in psychiatry, physiological *treatments* can remediate symptoms. That Advil doesn’t “cure” pain doesn’t stop people from taking the drug to alleviate it. Still, his broadside against pharmacology seems overbroad: Although it is surely true that many of those who take SSRI antidepressants do not need, and should not be on, them, it is also true that many others would be debilitated, if not dead, without them.

Before Freud became a psychiatrist, he himself was a neuroanatomist. Some of his early research was on the gonads of eels and the nervous systems of crayfish. But given the tools available to him in the 1890s, he kept bumping up against the limits of what the physical brain could reveal about the functioning of the mind. Frustrated and in need of money, he put aside the microscope, opened a private practice, and began focusing instead on clinical observation of patients, and

of his own mind. Studying consciousness—and the unconscious brain that lay beneath it—from the inside was how Freud constructed psychoanalytic theory. He sometimes expressed embarrassment at this approach. “It still strikes me myself as strange that the case histories I write should read like short stories and that, as one might say, they lack the serious stamp of science,” he reflected in his foundational *Studies on Hysteria* in 1895.

Freud never abandoned his quest to link physiology and psychology. “We must recollect that all our provisional ideas in psychology will presumably some day be based on an organic substructure,” he wrote in 1914. In 1938, not long before his death, Freud was still at it: “The future may teach us to exercise a direct influence, by means of particular chemical substances, on the amounts of energy and their distribution in the mental apparatus.”

Solms has picked up the baton, but he is adamant that we have not reached the future that Freud was forecasting. Rather, his view is that we need to go back to Freud’s true aim: to treat the soul, not by ministering to the brain, as modern biological psychiatry does, but “by accepting that the ‘soul’—construed as the experiencing, active, living ‘I’—is a part of nature.” And he has company, even among clinicians who came of age during the rise of biological psychiatry: Patients with psychosis are “too fascinating and complex to be reduced to the blockade of dopamine receptors,” the psychiatrist Pesach Lichtenberg wrote in the 2023 book *Psychopharmacology Reconsidered*. So what kind of map does Solms provide?

*“Psychoanalysis is a cure wrought by loving your neighbor as yourself.”*

**YOU KNOW** Chekhov’s famous stipulation that if you introduce a gun in the first act, it must be fired in the third? Well, here’s a corollary: If you introduce a penis on the first page of a book about psychoanalysis, it will go off, or fail to, or both, very soon. In his second paragraph, Solms ushers in a depressed physician named Teddy P, who gets dumped by his girlfriend after struggling with both premature ejaculation and erectile dysfunction (perhaps a bit on the nose for a book about Sigmund Freud).

When Teddy’s case becomes acute—in addition to depression and sexual dysfunction, he develops insomnia, headaches, brain fog, seizures, and evidence of possible dementia—Solms takes him on as a patient. He determines that Teddy’s underlying disease is psychological, not neurological (the seizures had made that an open question), and attributes much of what ails Teddy to the cascading effects of drugs and treatments he’s being given for his depression, anxiety, insomnia, and pain. Solms weans him off his medications and embarks with him on a course of psychoanalysis. Then he puts Teddy aside, leaving the reader in suspense for 258 pages before resuming the account of his fate.

For all his extensive neuromedical training, Solms makes a point of describing the work of psychoanalysis as “less like science and more like a practical trade. Long experience leads to familiarity with many different kinds of glitch and suggests many different kinds of fix.” Some people—and by some people, I might mean me—derive a certain solace from understanding their anxiety and depression as, in effect, mechanical failures, not moral ones: a snag in the temperamental wiring here, an unfortunate genetic variant there, a dysregulation of neurotransmitters not unlike the problems with insulin regulation in a diabetic’s pancreas.

But Solms’s contention, drawing from Freud, is that those mechanical problems can be fixed only as part of a wholesale realignment of unconscious drives and emotional needs. That worked for Solms: He had been plagued by a severe death anxiety since he was a little boy, when his older brother suffered brain damage in a freak accident, but was cured by a course of analysis on the couch of Clifford Yorke, a British World War II veteran who had helped care for survivors after the liberation of Bergen-Belsen.

Teddy recovers. (This is no spoiler; readers could hardly have been expecting otherwise.) After four years of arduous work with Solms, revisiting early-childhood experiences and his relationship with his mother, his depression and anxiety lift, his sexual and romantic-attachment issues abate, his growing conscious awareness frees him from damaging unconscious compulsions. He becomes an outstanding doctor.

The treatment involves all kinds of unexpected twists and turns, and Solms deploys a lot of Freudian tools—dream analysis, free association, breaking down defense mechanisms, recovering buried memories, transference and countertransference, and elaborate (too elaborate, if you ask me) feats of interpretation by the analyst. To someone with my firmly materialist leanings, it all seems a bit much.

But I was struck by two things Solms writes in different places earlier in the book. One is that the aim of psychotherapy, at its core, is simply “to help our patients find better ways of meeting their emotional needs.” Whatever you think of the whole complicated Freudian edifice, who could take issue with that? The other is: “Psychoanalysis is a cure wrought by loving your neighbor as yourself.” Solms has set out to complete the Freudian project by giving it a neuroscientific basis—but maybe the more important accomplishment is to have restored to psychiatry its humanity. *A*

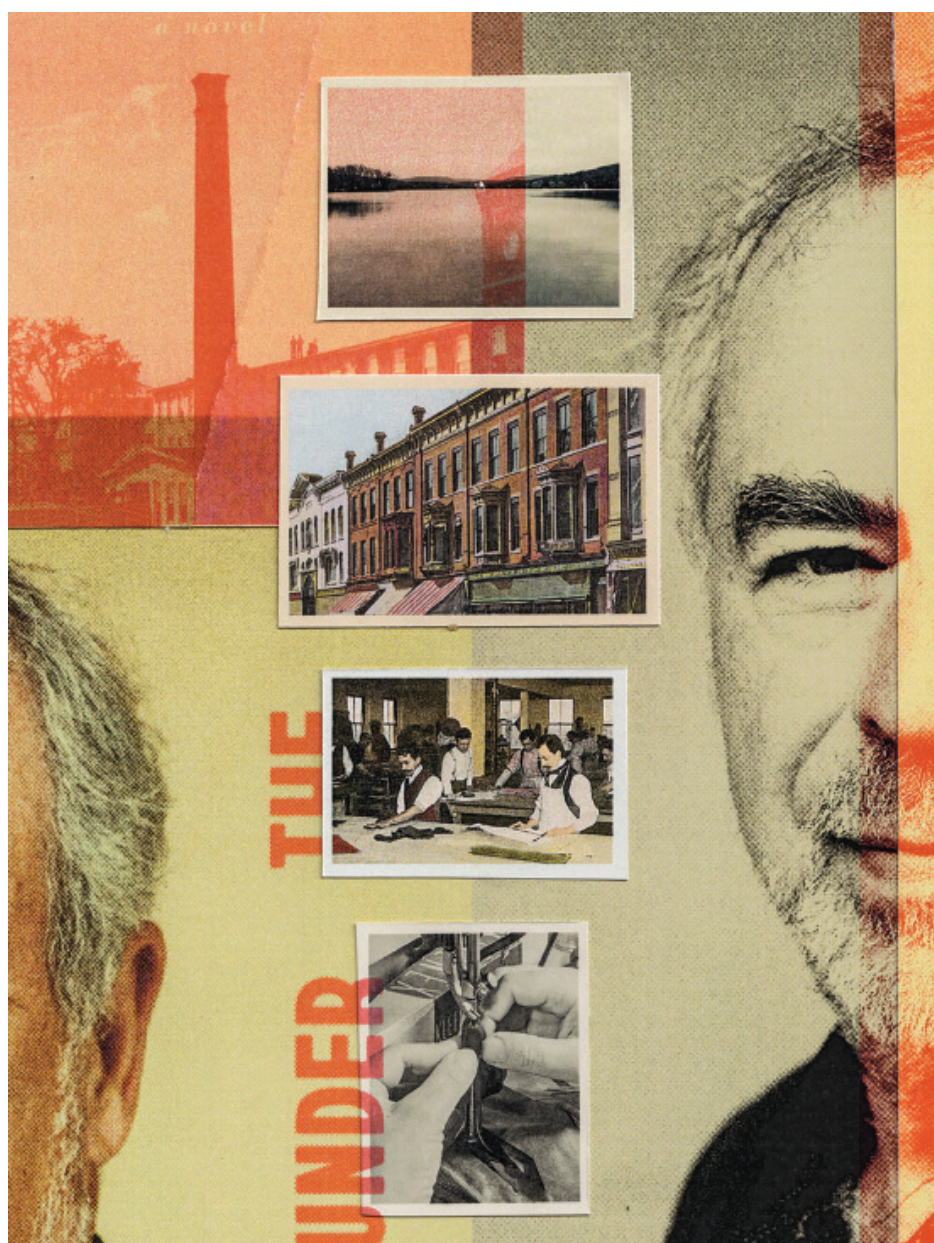
*Scott Stossel is the national editor at The Atlantic and the author, most recently, of My Age of Anxiety: Fear, Hope, Dread, and the Search for Peace of Mind.*



# Bad Luck, Bad Choices

*Richard Russo is America's portraitist of left-behind people in hollowed-out towns.*

By Mark Oppenheimer



KNOFF / ULF ANDERSEN / GETTY; DAVID TRONCOSO / GETTY; CHRONICLE / ALAMY; BETTMANN / GETTY

"I'm the first writer in the family," the novelist Richard Russo once said, "but I'm not the first bullshitter in the family." That honor belonged to his divorced father, Jim, a highway worker with no interest in books and an only intermittent interest in his son. Jim's strongest connections were with his buddies at the bar. On summer breaks from college, Russo returned to Gloversville, in upstate New York, and his dad would get him on the road crew. When work ended, they would head home, hitting pubs along the way. At each stop, Jim would regale the regulars with a story about something that had happened on the job that day.

"He would pay attention to what worked in Roadhouse A," Russo said in 2025, "so that when he got to Roadhouse B, he would remember what got a laugh and what didn't, and so he would change the story." Jim would tell the same story over many days, cutting and shaping, finding the beats. "There's a word for that," Russo said. "It's called revision."

*Revision*, a refined term that Jim would never have used, is a staple of M.F.A. programs, such as the one his son attended at the University of Arizona. When Russo graduated in 1980, the experimental fiction of William Gass and Kurt Vonnegut was in vogue, but he much preferred the shambling shaggy-dog novels of Twain and Dickens, whose humor arose not from formal innovation but from the foibles of flawed characters (like his dad), many of them poor and unlettered (ditto). Early on, Russo threw in his lot with Tom and Huck and Jim, with David Copperfield and Oliver Twist—characters whose humble beginnings offer a vantage from which to see the absurdity of an unjust world.

Beginning with the 1986 publication of his first novel, *Mohawk*, Russo has filled 10 novels, plus many essays and short stories,

with portraits of men born with few gifts save their wits, making their way in an economy not set up to reward their kind. The bulk of his fiction is set in New York, in towns like Gloversville, where the good jobs have vanished (the glove-making trade there—once responsible for 90 percent of gloves sold in America—was by the 1950s already being replaced by imports). In these places, it's unclear who is slinging more bull, the semi-employed men in bars or the educated civic "leaders," such as mayors and bankers, promising that good times will return.

In Russo's best work, especially his classic trilogy, set in fictional North Bath—*Nobody's Fool* (1993), *Everybody's Fool* (2016), and *Somebody's Fool* (2023)—his characters' banter, crude and self-knowing, reminds us that the worst effects of the modern economy are present not in the landscape but in the soulscape, the fractured lives and identities of obsolete workers. Their barroom bravado is a front, masking inner hurt, or just bewilderment. In the novelist's business of exploring what's inside people's heads—the way we all think more than we can say—Russo is the peer of Jonathan Franzen and Meg Wolitzer, even if his characters think in fewer syllables.

At 77, Russo has published a new novel, *Under the Falls*, that at first seems to be a break with his past work. The characters are young, mostly in their mid-30s, and the protagonist, Tyler Sinclair, is honest-to-goodness rich. After high school, he left Stone Mountain, another of Russo's fictional upstate hamlets, riding his guitar to stardom. When he blew out of town, he left behind a toxic love triangle and a paralyzed buddy, the victim of a near drowning that many blamed Tyler for. In the years since, he has milked the town, and a Mellencamp-like image as a boy from the sticks, for songwriting material. Now Tyler has come back to a place he never wanted to see again. Stone Mountain's denizens feel the same way about him. At his much-ballyhooed return show, he and his band are pelted with eggs. On the way out of town, the band's limousine is mysteriously driven off the road, and during his convalescence in Stone Mountain, Tyler gets caught up in local intrigue involving dope dealing, manslaughter, and police corruption.

*Under the Falls* is a short potboiling book, lacking the finer-grained mind reading and social texture that Russo excels at (the acknowledgments note that it began as a TV-pilot script). Yet in the Russo tradition, it's about a boy whose hometown has mired him in grief but also given him the stories that will lift him out of it. And tucked into its harebrained (if thoroughly enjoyable) plotting is a line that could well be Russo's artistic credo. Tyler is relieved, and a bit amazed, to see how Doc, his paralyzed friend, has

made a decent life for himself, with his own trailer, wheelchair, and car (a hearse tricked out with hand controls), funded by his "vast criminal enterprise." "As an artist," Russo writes, "Tyler has more than once wondered whether, under the right circumstances, or maybe the wrong ones, simply living life might qualify as art, and it occurs to him that his duty here is simple: to surrender his reservations and simply admire the man."

AMONG ALL the hard-luck men in these hard-scrabble towns, the ones who compound their bad luck with bad choices interest Russo the most. His emblematic figure is Donald "Sully" Sullivan, the star of the North Bath trilogy, a saga about one man surfing the arc of the 20th century that invites comparison to Richard Ford's Frank Bascombe books and John Updike's *Rabbit* quartet, also anchored by troubled male protagonists. But Sully, whom we first meet in late middle age as a handyman with a bum knee—flashbacks fill in his tortured boyhood, his high-school-football career, his World War II service, his failed marriage—is on the opposite side of the class divide from those men. Bascombe is a writer, then a real-estate agent, and Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom dies rich, fat on sales from the car dealership he inherited from his father-in-law. Sully never has a penny extra until his old age, when he has some luck with the ponies and then inherits his landlady's decaying house—and discovers how disconcerted he is by the taste of middle-class life. "He'd always suspected that life's deck was stacked in favor of those with means," Russo writes. Now what? For Rabbit and Bascombe, the American dream is real, or real enough. For Sully, the idea that he was "now and forevermore insulated against adversity" just doesn't compute; it feels like a cruel joke.

And for Russo, the place that Sully inhabits is at least as interesting as the man himself—a signature of his fiction, which specializes in ensemble novels. "One of the good things about small towns," Russo writes in his Pulitzer Prize winner, *Empire Falls* (2001), set in a postindustrial Maine hamlet, "was that they accommodated just about everyone; the lame and disfigured were all your neighbors, and seeing them every day meant that after a while you stopped noticing what made them different."

The important thing is how they're alike on the inside. In his sad-sack locales, characters face their predicaments with a mix of resilience, disappointment, and humor. They want love or connection, but they need money. Equipped with mostly meager educations and varying degrees of sophistication, they bounce off one another like bumper cars, everyone's actions affecting everyone else's. Gainful employment

UNDER  
THE FALLS

Richard Russo

KNOPF



is in short supply; vices take hold, whether ugly addictions or minor gambling habits; and in *Under the Falls*, the criminality moves beyond small-time hustles. Russo's townsfolk do one another the courtesy, when necessary, of pretending not to see what's in front of them; they also fight, make up, make love, and, above all, tolerate one another.

We tend to think that, in hollowed-out towns such as the ones Russo writes about, those left behind are left behind in the apocalyptic sense: The chosen ones got raptured out, to better places with more work, more Starbucks, more Subarus. But Russo shows how anyplace is good enough if you've chosen it, or can tell yourself that you have. Class and cultural divides are sources of tension, but also of local cohesion, as Tyler discovers in Stone Mountain—and as Sully has known all his life. Just because Sully never went to college doesn't mean he couldn't have hacked it. North Bath is always suffering intruders, from downstate and especially from nearby Schuyler Springs—an obvious stand-in for Saratoga Springs, which has the college (Skidmore), the racetrack, the tourist season, and hence the money that Gloversville lacks.

Sometimes these interlopers want to buy and rehab a house, and that's where Sully is indispensable. He and a partner do the fixing up on fixer-uppers. They just want to be paid, with money and perhaps a modicum of respect. After Miles Anderson, a university professor from downstate, keeps him waiting for an hour to talk about some repairs on his new property, Sully gets huffy, leading Anderson to ask, pissily, if Sully wants the work or not.

"Look, Mr. Anderson," Sully said, "I need the work. I'm just too old to jump up and down, okay? Inside, I'm all aflutter. Trust me." (The "af flutter" is a nice touch, hinting at the elevated vocabulary Sully can deploy when he wants to.) "Hmmm," Miles Anderson mused. "Well, I was also told you were insolent, though I suppose that's to be expected. The gruff, frontier independence of the American blue-collar worker and all that."

The only thing worse than new wealth threatening to intrude is old wealth that has fled, leaving desolation. In *Empire Falls*, there are perennial rumors about what might become of the old mill—is it true that investors from Boston have plans for it? The prologue to *Under the Falls* features a moving paean to the long-shuttered Stone Mountain Amusement Park. "Remember what amusement parks were like before they became corporate," Russo writes, "before there were special lines for people who have more money than you do."

For Russo, amusement parks, with their rides and buffets and dining-room windows "left open to capture the breeze off the lake," were once the great levelers, places where, for a day, "you're not poor; you're

rich." Stone Mountain Amusement Park offers an echo of the Ultimate Escape Fun Park, planned by Texas money men, that the town banker in *Nobody's Fool* hopes to lure to North Bath. But the Texans, after flirting with North Bath, ultimately choose a more prosperous site, near Portland, Maine. It seems they were full of it all along.

Russo never intimates that his bullshitters in the roadhouse are better men than the ones in the C-suite, or the ones with tenure, or the rock stars. (He is especially withering, though, about the tenured bullshitters, the professoriat. His most beloved book may well be *Straight Man*, a campus satire in the tradition of Kingsley Amis and David Lodge.) There's good and bad everywhere, and Russo is alert to self-serving delusions wherever they surface. "I made a man's mistakes," Sully's absentee father, "Big Jim" (obviously named for Russo's own father), says at the end of his life.

That has the ring of nobility, until we remember that his manly mistakes included beating his family, cheating on his wife, and drinking away his pay. Nor is it lost on the reader that he got away with his malign hijinks because, as a big man in a small town, he knew everyone, was enabled by everyone: cops, neighbors, co-workers. In *Under the Falls*, the town sheriff knows about, and indirectly profits from, Doc's drug running. He doesn't approve, but in a small town, complicity is hard to avoid.

Here's what characters like Sully come to understand about hometowns, at least in their wiser moments, and what Tyler has to learn: Achieving escape velocity is one of those aspirations, like being "now and forevermore insulated against adversity," that is forever out of reach. "It kind of feels like you're on the clock," Tyler reflects about his unexpected wealth and success. "Like any day now somebody's going to notice there's been a mistake, after which you'll go back to being poor."

Which doesn't mean you should simply stay put. Russo found Gloversville claustrophobic, as did his eccentric mother, whose mental illness—the subject of his 2012 memoir, the aptly titled *Elsewhere*—was surely exacerbated by being a dreamy, literate soul in a town of Babbitts. The two of them had to get out (Russo's overattached mom followed him to college in Arizona), only to realize that the fight was never with the town but with themselves. After years of attempting to make a life elsewhere, she returned to Gloversville. So did her son, of course. He never really left. *A*

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*The men who compound their bad luck with bad choices interest Russo the most.*



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BOOKS

## A Book That Wasn't Meant to Be Read

*Why does J. D. Vance's Communion exist?*

By Matthew Walther



J. D. Vance's new book, *Communion*, answers a question no one had thought to ask: What would Augustine's *Confessions* have looked like if the saint's greatest literary influence had been Hillary Clinton's immortal classic, *Hard Choices*?

One of the best-selling nonfiction titles of 2014, *Hard Choices* runs to more than 600 pages, many of which consist of factoids copied and pasted from Clinton's old speeches. It is possibly the least introspective book ever written. Her ghostwriters' modus operandi was to take a bunch of platitudinous abstractions from her time at the State Department ("The strategic fundamentals of our relationship—shared democratic values, economic imperatives and diplomatic priorities—are moving us closer to an understanding and a trust that reflects the convergence of values and interests") and switch the tenses ("The strategic fundamentals of our relationship with India—shared democratic values, economic imperatives, and diplomatic priorities—were pushing both countries' interests into closer convergence").

Vance's book never quite sinks to this level, but it does make me wonder why it was published, and for whose edification. Even by the standards of faith-driven airport nonfiction, *Communion* is not very interesting. Despite what the jacket copy suggests, the book is not "the story" of Vance's conversion to Roman Catholicism, which had already been recounted in an essay published six years ago in the journal I edit, *The Lamp*. (Unaltered passages from it appear in the present volume without acknowledgment.) If anything, the book, from its Methodist-church-emblazoned cover on, seems oddly squeamish about the Catholic Church, couching most of its arguments concerning religious questions in a generically Christian register. When Vance does address specifically Catholic subject matter, his language is in some cases awkward and in almost all curiously unidiomatic. At one point, he describes himself attending "a Mass mourning Christ's passion," a phrase so theologically defective that it could be the subject of an entire ecumenical council.

Like *Hard Choices*, *Communion* is full of what might loosely be described as anecdotes. Take the one about Vance's future wife, Usha, recommending Joan Didion's memoir *The Year of Magical Thinking* while they were students at Yale Law School. Usha said she found it "cathartic," prompting Vance to look up this unknown word in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. As one does? Until I stumbled onto this passage, I would have guessed that the middle of the Venn diagram of "people who use the paywalled *OED* rather than Dictionary.com" and "people who don't know what *cathartic* means" is empty, like the Strategic Petroleum Reserve. I'm not saying that Vance's story is impossible. I'm just saying that if it did happen as described, it

*For every  
ludicrous  
snippet of  
fanfic, there  
is at least an  
equal number  
of conversations  
so boring  
that they must  
be true.*

would be like somebody discovering this Beethoven character in his well-thumbed set of the multivolume *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*.

If random disclosure of common-sense-defying detail is your idea of a searing, poignant journey into the light of faith, there's more where that came from. *Communion* includes what is almost certainly the *ne plus ultra* of a new rhetorical trope—the posthumous invocation of Charlie Kirk to justify whatever the author or speaker wants you to believe or do. You know what I mean: the thing where a conservative podcast host assures his audience that a week or a few days or possibly just minutes before the man's death, Kirk shared the secret gnosis about Israel, which is inevitably followed by a riposte from a Mar-a-Lago influencer insisting with equal stridency that milliseconds before (or perhaps even after) the shooting, she received private confirmation via text message of Kirk's established public position. In this case, however, the spirit is summoned to explain why Usha had become pregnant again; specifically, we learn that Kirk's widow, Erika, told Vance's wife that she regrets not having more kids with Charlie, and that this moved Usha deeply and—*Marvin Gaye needle drop*.

People decide to have children for every possible reason or none. But until recently, the actual circumstances leading up to their conception were generally a private matter. If a dead friend inspired me and my wife to renew our acquaintance with the facts of life, I would probably not feel comfortable immortalizing his influence in my spiritual memoir slash campaign manifesto. But over and over again in these pages, Vance gives the impression that his book is meant to provide some kind of quasi-evangelical impetus to aspiring parents. If the right-wing dads of America start using "Let's do it—for Charlie!" as a come-on, the U.S. birth rate is going to drop below that of Vatican City.

This oversharing of small details exists uneasily alongside a surprising lack of reflection on the book's ostensible themes. A memoir that begins with criticism of anhedonic ambition becomes the chronicle of a man who, in less than a decade, is elected to the Senate and becomes vice president of the United States. Does everything that Vance says about the perfunctory pursuit of empty honors (he gives the example of Supreme Court clerkships) apply to his own rapid ascent to the office memorably described by John Nance Garner, one of its former holders, as "not worth a bucket of warm piss"? If not, why? Vance skates around this question—not, I think, because he is actively trying to do so, but because it actually seems not to have occurred to him.

There is one interesting exception here to Vance's lack of reflection on his political career: a two-page apology for his remarks about "childless cat ladies."

For what it's worth, I think he is protesting too much. When these comments came up again during the 2024 presidential campaign, my sister was a childless cat lady, a fan of Vance's writing, and a Trump voter; she joked about his remarks with her husband, a naturalized citizen born in Mexico, and voted for Donald Trump again. Now the two of them are the proud parents of a beautiful baby boy. Only in America! At any rate, for me, this pang (*OED*: "a sudden sharp feeling of mental anguish or intense emotional pain") of conscience was oddly precise in its calibration. If Vance now recognizes his comments as churlish, lacking in charity, and utterly unlikely to persuade voters, much less witness to the sublime truths of the Christian religion, good for him. But what about those Haitians in Ohio who, it turned out, were not barbecuing Lassie? Does he consider those dog whistles at least equally ill-conceived? Or was the issue simply that dunking on DINKs is a riskier gambit for graduates of Yale Law School than race-baiting?

I could go on. But to what end? I have said that after reading *Communion*, I was left wondering why it had been published. This is not as cutting a remark as it might sound. Even less interesting than a deeply mediocre book is a reviewer taking such a book too seriously. There is not a single person in the United States whose desire to read (or purchase) it will be affected by my opinions.

Could Vance have written a better book? Could *Hard Choices* have been better? Come on. When I say that *Communion* is a complete waste (of time, paper, the resources of the vice presidency, etc.), I really mean it, but I would say the same if I had been asked to review, say, Kamala Harris's *107 Days*. Here is a sample from what her ghostwriter expects us to believe is an actual conversation:

"I'm fully behind you, Joe," I told him. "But if you decide not to run, I'm ready. And I would give it all I've got, because Trump has to be beaten."

Dialogue is always stilted in these books. But for every ludicrous snippet of fanfic like this, there is at least an equal number of conversations so boring that they must be true. Early on in Jill Biden's *View From the East Wing*, the former first lady recounts a conversation that begins "Let's have lunch," to which her husband replies, "Okay." A few sentences later, the repartee continues, with the couple addressing a perhaps invisible server whose existence we are simply meant to infer (unless, of course, the Bidens were talking to themselves).

"Chardonnay, please," I said.  
Joe said, "I'll have a Diet Coke."

COMMUNION

J. D. Vance

HARPER

Before we'd even looked at the menu, I said:

"This is it, Joe. You have to make up your mind.

Are you going to run or not?"

"Yes, I want to run," he told me, matter-of-factly.

At last, clarity.

"Okay," I said.

Okay. On what possible scale involving literary merit, human interest, or historical value is it even possible to evaluate a text containing these sentences?

At times the book reads like a bold linguistic experiment, an attempt to discover the absolute minimum level of evocation that can be achieved by what are technically grammatical English sentences. Don't get me wrong, though. *View From the East Wing* would not have been improved if it had been more lyrical. The single worst thing about the book is that every few pages, we get a high-toned quotation, or at least an attempt at one: "The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard said, 'Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards.'" He didn't.

The only thing harder than envisioning the end of capitalism is trying to imagine a readable book written by (or attributed to) a contemporary American political figure. These books are not meant to be seriously reviewed, for the very simple reason that they are not meant to be seriously read. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that they are not meant to be read at all. They exist to be announced breathlessly, advertised, embargoed, analyzed via leaks and scooplets, discussed on podcasts—but their final end is to collect dust in the free pile outside used-book stores. For a laugh, go to the books section of a Salvation Army or a Goodwill and see how many copies of Bill Clinton's *My Life* you can find. My personal record is 43, sitting side by side in their glorious order and array, like the blessed angels in heaven.

The problem here extends beyond books by politicians (and their wives). Already so much of what publishers find room for is "current affairs" slop that is basically indistinguishable from the kind of bad writing I am talking about, save for the fact that the authors are television stars or podcasters or—(*shudders*)—political reporters rather than elected officials. Only readers can stop this madness, by turning their attention elsewhere. Read about the past. Read about far-away places. Read Macaulay or Sylvia Townsend Warner or Santayana's letters. Read a real book. *A*

*Matthew Walther is the editor of The Lamp, a Catholic literary journal. He is writing a biography of John Henry Newman.*



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## BOOKS

## Invisible Men

*Gay Jamaican men struggle for survival in Marlon James's new novel.*

By Stephanie Burt

The Jamaican writer Marlon James won international fame with *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, which was awarded the Booker Prize in 2015. That title misled—the book describes dozens of killings, not just seven, and it is by no means brief—but its premise delivered. The 700-page novel, his third, revisits the Jamaican election of 1976 and the assassination attempt on Bob Marley that year; the gang truce of 1978; and the violence that preceded and followed, first in Kingston, then in New York City during the 1980s and early 1990s. Lots of Americans, myself included, learned some pivotal Jamaican history and some Jamaican English and patois from its many troubled narrators.

Most of those narrators seek political power, bloody revenge, wealth, or journalistic glory. The sole woman in the

array—the only consistently sympathetic narrator—wants instead to disappear: “Shut everybody out. Shut everybody down. Just go.” She even pores over *How to Disappear Completely and Never Be Found* (it’s a real book). “Whether on a plane or in a box,” she muses, “I was going to leave this place.” James, who grew up in Kingston and now splits his time between New York City and Minneapolis, has said the same about himself: “Whether it was in a plane or in a coffin, I knew I had to get out of Jamaica.”

*The Disappearing*, James’s new novel, shows why. *Brief History* studies men who want to rise, to dominate, to become stars; this one focuses on men who try not to be seen. It’s James’s most clearly autobiographical work. Of its five main narrators, two share his age, background, and interests, and one of those misses out on the worst of Jamaica’s violence and ends up, as James has, in a stable job with an advanced degree. It’s also James’s first realist novel since *Brief History*—he published two long works of complex, bloody, mythological fantasy in between.

This time, he writes about Jamaican men who have sex with men (only some would call themselves gay). Eight of them assemble in a Kingston home in 1988 for rehearsals of the Canadian playwright John Herbert’s 1967 prison drama, *Fortune and Men’s Eyes*, under the direction of Havelock, a confident, queenly émigré who’s returned from England. Speaking in Jamaican English, as most of the characters do, he explains that it’s “a gay play about men loving and sexing and rule over other men.”

None of the men who gather at the house on Lady Musgrave Road is a professional actor. All responded to flyers or heard about the play through word of mouth, and the five central narrators take turns admitting us into their minds. Eddy, a bookish university student and one of the James-like pair, combines his literary interests with a craving for porn; his passion for indie rock and *X-Men* comics alienates him further from his peers. Jordan, who lives in his car and hustles to survive, becomes almost a doppelgänger for Eddy: He likes comics and alternative rock too, and reads the same sort of literary books as Eddy.

The group also includes a mysterious half-Chinese businessman whom Eddy can’t help finding hot; wealthy Omar, who funds the rehearsals; and three other actors. All discover, during and after rehearsals, some imaginative refuge—a space for people who, as Eddy puts it, “can’t leave but can’t stay.” They chat and flirt and grumble about what parts they’re assigned. One actor objects to playing a drag queen. Men feel they have to protect their manhood, even in this private space.

Then the violence descends. A posse of men finds the house and beats almost everyone bloody

or worse, using blackjacks, nunchucks, knives, fists, a crowbar, a cricket bat. James depicts the aggressors’ thoughts in a short Faulknerian fugue. At least one of the attackers is closeted: “Kill it in them, kill it in me.” Two are cops. Another’s a reggae star whose big hit “Batty Is Not Pussy” advocates killing gay men. (*Batty* is Jamaican slang for “rear end,” and *battyman* is an insulting term for gay men.) James’s made-up star recalls the real musician Buju Banton, whose breakout track, “Boom Bye Bye”—which he’s since repudiated—also extols gay-bashing and murder. The mayhem leaves one actor dead, another blinded, and the rest hoping to rebuild, or more likely flee, their prior lives.

The remainder of the novel follows the survivors as Jordan and Eddy attempt, separately and together, to track down those among them who have gone missing. Parts of interlocking stories unfold in the narrators’ divergent voices. Havelock writes delightfully ornate letters to his former lover in England. Jordan and Eddy relate their own travails through recorded interviews with a journalist named Petra, but also describe, in the first person, their days and years. Jordan ends up with the most eventful character arc, ultimately tracking down perpetrators too: He wants them to pay, or at least not to disappear.

**BRIEF HISTORY** looks at power in a place of violence and examines what secrets it hides. Now James has written a book about people whose whole lives feel like secrets. And he has a thesis: Those who grow up learning that they are bad and do not deserve to exist—people who might get raped, maimed, or murdered for trying to be themselves—almost inevitably organize their life around attempts to disappear, escape, or else retreat to the margins, becoming (like Eddy) figures who observe others, themselves unseen, or (like Jordan) agents of vengeance who stick to the shadows.

“There is a Jamaica underneath this Jamaica,” Jordan tells Eddy, whose more sheltered and luckier life means he might not know. It’s a metaphor, except when it’s not; the drag queens, trans women, and unhoused youth who live in Kingston’s gullies, below street level, have made it literal, as Eddy and Jordan, in flight from another mob later in the story, show us. James makes the gully dwellers and their fragile world a compelling side story, intent on presenting a panorama of Kingston’s gay life, from those who occupy the economic heights (also literal hills) down to “all of them queens and freaks and fishboys and battymen” who “cannot and will not pass.” The survivors of Lady Musgrave Road flee to totally closeted respectability, “a safe place filled with disappointment,” where several remain for years; or else to

*“Whether it  
was in a  
plane or  
in a coffin,  
I knew I  
had to get  
out of  
Jamaica.”*



opportunities off the island, or religious rebirth, or a near-invisible secluded life “at the top of a mountain.” We might see the whole novel as an attempt to create a stage, a space, where gay Jamaican men can honestly and fully appear, at least in retrospect.

Like *Brief History*, *The Disappearers* offers a big, modernist assemblage of contrasting styles, personas, and points of view. It, too, is a work of classic realism, touring the social layers in a changing Kingston as its characters earn and lose money, rise and fall. But unlike *Brief History*, which includes gay characters but mostly isn’t about them, *The Disappearers* also belongs with those earlier chronicles of gay America that Jordan and Eddy name-check, especially John Rechy’s *The Sexual Outlaw*. And so it’s full of gay sex: ecstatic, conflicted, reluctant, a desperate secret or an open secret.

James acknowledges occasions of sweet, mutual, that’s-how-it-should-be sex—but those happen largely offstage. Most of the on-page couplings instead mix, alarmingly, sex with violence. Some people seek humiliation; some want to inflict it. Some get hurt by their tricks. James manages not to kink-shame anyone, but he’s less interested in kink education than in displaying a sexual world where every hookup comes with scary risks: assault and battery, for example, or public exposure, or HIV in the age before retrovirals. Living in fear of “the AIDS” entails its own “long set of disappearing acts”—not just sickness and death, but shame and denial and an inability to mourn.

Those risks do not keep most of James’s survivors from pursuing, or becoming, hookups and rent boys and hate-fucks, with and without proper lube and enemas, which the novel—appropriately, even necessarily—describes: Responsible writing about anal sex has to mention those things, and James does. He wants to bring his gay men’s sex lives into the light. The men, however, keep trying to “erase themselves,” learning how to “make yourself into the kind of person nobody wants to see.” Early on, Eddy claims, “I don’t think about it a lot,” and yet he’s never unaware of being “part of an us that people just want to beat to death.” Or bury alive.

THE NOVEL opens up many pleasures for literary readers, in its pacing, in its observations, and especially in the ventriloquism of Havelock’s old-school prose (he even writes one letter in the obsolescent gay slang Polari). But it’s not, mostly, a book about pleasure: These lives are often—realistically—scary or sad. We should not label them tragedies, though, because that implies a controlling divinity, or at least a fixed fate. As Havelock insists, “We need to stop calling atrocities tragic.” *The Disappearers* is, among other things, one novel responding to many atrocities.

THE  
DISAPPEARERS  
Marlon James

RIVERHEAD

When you grow up surrounded by people who hate you for what you are and whom you love, it’s tough to disentangle their hate from self-hate, and either one from a wish to die. And it’s not just the cast from Lady Musgrave Road that conflates self-destruction with self-fashioning, death with destiny. So does the music of Kurt Cobain, the most important among the cultural touchstones that give Jordan and Eddy alternatives to Kingston. They listen to Nirvana, and to the rock bands that Cobain recommended—“music that people who hate me don’t like,” Jordan says—more than to “Peter Metro and Admiral Bailey” and other hit-makers from the island.

Major characters also find allies in older gay novels, like Rechy’s, and in comic books. “Come to think of it, my life is exactly like *X-Men*. I served a world, in this case the world of cool boys,” Eddy decides early on, “only to have those same boys abuse and brutalize me.” The heroic mutants of Marvel Comics—Nightcrawler, who looks like a devil; Storm, whom one gully queen resembles; and the rest—promise one way to survive the Kingston experience, even though, in the particular issue of *X-Men* that Eddy covets, the X-Men literally disappear.

Renaissance writings—Shakespeare’s sonnets and *King Lear*, Christopher Marlowe’s *Edward II*—give James additional scaffolding for his stories about attachment and found family, literal torture and tortured love. The strongest subplot links the fate of Eddy’s half-Chinese crush back to the sonnets, as well as to Herbert’s play. The weakest subplot turns Jordan into an obsessive, predictable avenger, less like one of the X-Men than like a Jamaican Joker, with a twist that’s no twist at all if you’ve seen horror films. Yet up to that obvious final act, the Eddy-and-Jordan pairing works elegantly, showing two sides of the same damaged face.

Still, any reader will feel for Jordan when he exclaims, late in the novel, “My ghost suffering makes me want to scream.” He means both that, compared with people dying of AIDS, he isn’t genuinely suffering (though he is), and that he feels like a disembodied outcast, a kind of ghost. *The Disappearers* ends up as a violence-driven protest, a scream of rage—like Nirvana’s final album—against a world that keeps trying to kill people like him and then pretends that they asked for it, or that they never existed. The novel is a superbly fashioned instrument for showing what felt wrong, what went wrong, in Jamaica in the late 1980s and ’90s, and what’s still wrong in other places, too, where people who grow up marginalized get blamed for their own persecution, or else celebrated as brave exceptions when, against the odds, they succeed.

The fantastic unfairness—especially if it’s as brutal and direct as what James depicts—might make you a vanisher or an avenger (like Jordan). Or it might instead make you a chronicler (like Eddy and Petra), a maker of memorials, even a rescuer for people who want to be rescued—people who get sick of trying to disappear. And some do: Most of the survivors from Lady Musgrave Road, however wounded, find a way to forge on. Some (like Havelock) even keep trying at “building something—I don’t know, a safe place, a room of one’s own and world so you can let your hair down so to speak?”

In James’s wildly patriarchal Jamaica, the struggle to live as a gay man means a struggle to become and remain some kind of man, whatever you like to do in bed. Life is, or seems to be, all about men: Women appear in the book but never narrate (as one does in *Brief History*), and barely say how they feel. That’s part of the point of *The Disappearers*, in which the same men who persecute gay desire want women to disappear. As in any binary opposition, men learn to define themselves against their supposed other: “Nothing more shameful for a man than to be treated like a woman,” one character thinks, an idea all too familiar in the contemporary United States as well.

Among the seven people who survive the Lady Musgrave Road assault, James traces some future for all but one: outside or inside Jamaica, in sham marriages that fail or desk jobs that allow them to subsist, and even in fragile, comforting, long-delayed reunions. As for that one actor who just drops out of the plot, maybe he died. After all, his “own family prefer him gone.” Or maybe that person was never a man in the first place and built a solid life elsewhere as an adult woman, her boyhood deleted for good—what trans people in earlier generations called “woodworking” (fading into the woodwork).

Within *The Disappearers*, that’s one character’s speculation, dismissed as soon as it’s raised. But it’s also another hint of hope. And this novel, which ends in 2005, does offer hope: not just for gay Jamaican men but for trans teens, nonbinary adults, and anyone else since then who’s felt as though their society has kept asking them to hide, or lie, or die, or just go away. *The Disappearers* is a harrowing book, to be sure, but never nihilist, or defeatist, or cynical. Its joy in ultimate survival comes through. *A*

*Stephanie Burt is the Donald and Katherine Loker Professor of English at Harvard and the author, most recently, of Taylor’s Version: The Poetic and Musical Genius of Taylor Swift.*

## Stance

By Deborah Garrison

Summer he was 9  
going on 10, suddenly  
he had one:  
chin tucked  
into the leading shoulder,  
the body at once lifted high  
and crouched;  
something in the thighs  
was attached  
to the ground  
yet there was an upward  
determination in the elbow—

a boy could be pulled  
skyward and earthward at once,  
could be, like the bat,  
expectant, not quite still,  
quivering with intent  
to circle and strike a note;  
his hands fused to the wood  
and wrists braced as though  
screwing tight or about to  
unscrew the lid of a jar  
(love in the wrists  
was part of the stance)

and when the swing broke  
and the ball whistled long  
and everyone was moving, calling—the throw’s to second—  
I wanted to study the stance again  
in that suspended life  
before a play happens,  
before memory carried it away.

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*Deborah Garrison, the editorial director of poetry at Knopf, is the author of two poetry collections, A Working Girl Can’t Win and The Second Child.*

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## ESSAY

Music's Most  
Mysterious  
Profession

*What conductors  
actually do*

By  
Matthew  
Aucoin

The conductor is a con artist. Or: The conductor is God. Musicians frequently encounter both of these extreme views of music's most mysterious profession. It's not surprising that conductors elicit suspicion as well as adulation. The very act of conducting—waving a wand to summon ravishing or ethereal or earsplitting sounds—can look like either









inexplicable magic or embarrassing nonsense, a kind of tuxedoed air guitar.

With most kinds of musical performance, the listener can sense, in their heart and their gut, how demanding the musician's task is. To possess the infinitesimally sensitive fine motor skills required to make a violin sing, or the poise and breath control needed to coax beauty out of a trombone, is to be not only an artist but an Olympic athlete in command of invisible muscles. There's a reason that a primal scene of countless anxiety dreams is the musical

performance for which you are unprepared, the audience coughing impatiently and the grand piano awaiting you in a pool of light, like some kind of gleaming, jet-black armored tank.

Conducting is different. I would bet that practically everyone who's seen a conductor leading an orchestra has had the fleeting thought *Come on, anyone could do that*. They're just waving their arms! Aren't they? And if not, then what exactly are they doing? Plenty of people—plenty of musicians, even—mistrust the abracadabra mysticism that

Previous page: An 1846 caricature of the Romantic composer Hector Berlioz, known for his love of big, loud orchestras.

Above: Herbert von Karajan, 1970.

so frequently surrounds practitioners of this elusive and slightly dubious art.

At the other end of the spectrum is the equally inaccurate notion that the conductor is an infallible being with almost supernatural powers. People who hold this view tend to assume that the orchestra would be utterly helpless without the sage guidance of the baton-wielder; they forget that any good ensemble is made up of dozens of experienced, intelligent musicians, each of whom is capable of autonomous musical thought. Listeners inclined in this direction will sometimes marvel that the conductor seems, somehow, to know every note of everyone's part. If they attend a rehearsal, they might swoon over even a simple request from the maestro—for example, to play a passage more lyrically—as if it were a commandment from on high.

I'm mainly a composer; I'm at my happiest confronted with a blank sheet of staff paper. But I am also a conductor, of both my own music and other music. And the mystery of conducting has fascinated me since long before I picked up a baton. Orchestral musicians don't need a conductor in order to execute the core tasks of music-making. And yet, with an exceptional conductor on the podium, an electricity can flow through the ensemble, an extra energy that helps dozens of musicians breathe and speak as one complex, multifarious organism. Conducting is, above all, a profound exercise in trust: the orchestra trusting the conductor to keep a hand on the throttle, the conductor trusting the orchestra to soar.

**CONDUCTORS AREN'T** always necessary, of course. For someone to stand up and wave their arms at a trio or quartet would be superfluous, not to mention insulting. Communicating is easy in a small group, where the musicians can face one another, like friends in a booth at a restaurant, and have a musical conversation. Everyone can hear every other part clearly; the players can meet one another's eyes, breathe together.

This kind of interaction can turn cumbersome, however, once a gathering reaches a certain numerical threshold. A group of four or five friends can decide,

on the fly, where to go for dinner. But a group of 70 or 80 people? Any given member of the group probably doesn't know every single other person, and holding one conversation without some kind of agreed-upon structure would be all but impossible. In such situations, even the most independent-minded adult can yearn for a competent event planner. One of the conductor's core functions is to be that helpful, sheepdog-like presence.

Conducting, as a distinct profession, only emerged in the mid-19th century, an inevitable result of converging musical and technological developments. The Industrial Revolution left its imprint on music as on so much else, enabling the invention of newfangled instruments: the tuba, the saxophone, the celesta. Instruments that had been around for centuries got upgrades; the addition of piston valves to trumpets and French horns, for example, made them louder and more precise. In turn, these technical improvements made possible the roaring, oceanic modern orchestra, an ensemble capable of producing the rich, polished sound that we might call "cinematic" today.

Many composers made gleeful use of the new coloristic possibilities available to them. Now they had brass sections whose burnished, gleaming tone could rattle the listener's ribs, and string sections so large and lush that they could lull their audience into a narcotic stupor. Orchestras got bigger and bigger, ultimately evolving into the musical counterpart of the mighty steamboats and freight trains of the Industrial Age. And like those boats and trains, these ensembles were unwieldy enough that they needed conductors to steer them.

The aristocratically sponsored court orchestras of earlier centuries tended to be small enough that they didn't require a conductor. Those ensembles often performed in intimate halls, for exclusive audiences, and they were typically led by the first violinist or a keyboardist, who would mark time with their bow arm or their head while playing. But throughout the 19th century, in both Europe and the United States, musical organizations sprang up that, rather than being housed at royal courts, were founded by private

citizens. These new orchestras were civic institutions, and they were intended to be available to as many people as possible. To accommodate this bigger audience, many cities built formidable new concert halls, and the size of the ensembles onstage grew too.

The solitary, magus-like figure of the conductor was also an ideal emblem of the Romantic age, a period that valorized the lone artist endowed with mystical gifts. Composers had once tended to think of themselves as craftsmen, not so different from woodworkers or shipbuilders or shoemakers. Regardless of whether a church composer was feeling especially inspired in a given week, his job was to write new music for every Sunday service.

The Romantic composers had a very different conception of the artist's relationship to the world. The creative artist was a singular, almost divinely inspired fountain of imagination, a spirit blessed (or cursed) with the capacity to gaze into the heavens and the abyss. Composers such as Hector Berlioz and Richard Wagner dreamed up wild, intricately phantasmagorical works so challenging for musicians of the time that both composers had to take up the baton themselves to make their musical cosmos a reality. The conductor, and especially the composer-conductor, was the Romantic figure par excellence, the visionary who faced a sea of musicians, like some figure out of a Caspar David Friedrich painting, and summoned storms.

**ONCE ORCHESTRAS** reached this grand scale, the conductor became a practical necessity. Logistical and spatial issues intrude when you have 90 or 100 people onstage. With an ensemble of this size, someone at one end of the stage is going to find hearing exactly what's going on at the other end extremely difficult. If you're a trombone player, sitting way in the back, are you really going to notice if the first violins speed up a hair, way down in front? If the formidably loud colleagues who surround you—trumpets, tubas, timpani—happen to be playing their heart out too, they're probably the only people you'll hear. How, then, are you supposed to coordinate what you're doing with





Arturo Toscanini, circa 1955

people playing much quieter instruments at the other side of the stage? How can you tell whether your sound is balancing and blending with people you can't even hear properly?

And how would you synchronize your playing with theirs, especially given the fluid sense of rhythm that's integral to the performance of so much orchestral music? If you mainly listen to contemporary pop music, you're probably accustomed to hearing a steady beat; a lot of pop music today is even recorded to a "click track," or a preset electronic pulse that provides a string of beats spaced with absolute, inflexible evenness. In such music, the performer's first task is to lock into that easily audible pulse. If a steady beat is present, getting through a piece without a conductor is no problem for a group of musicians, no matter its size. Even an orchestra of 100 players would do fine on its own if it were simply playing along with a very loud drummer.

The trouble is that in most orchestral music, no such beat exists; absolute metronomic steadiness usually isn't the goal. Time can flow with the changeability of a river current. It might be swift and free at one moment, and then a second later turn halting and trickling, as if navigating around boulders. Even within a single phrase, a performer might feel an impulse

to slow down and caress an especially tender change of harmony, and then to surge forward again once the moment passes. One of the thrills of orchestral performance is that the pacing is flexible and volatile; the same piece might move somewhat differently from one evening to the next. In a given performance, if the violins bring an extra dose of voluptuous beauty to a certain section, the whole ensemble might want to slow down more than usual, to wring every drop of expressive power from the music.

This is the conductor's essential task: to embody, guide, and react to the current of the music. A responsible conductor understands that they must both lead and serve as listener in chief. They should have a clear plan for how a performance will be shaped, but they must also be prepared to respond to their colleagues' music-making as it happens. If a particular player or section is doing something magical, the conductor should know how to absorb that energy and reflect it back to the ensemble. Last year, when I conducted performances of my piece *Music for New Bodies* at Lincoln Center, I remember being so stunned by the oboist Joseph Jordan's beautiful sound that his solo sections expanded and stretched in ways I hadn't anticipated, even though I wrote the music. The transference of

musical ideas between conductor and orchestra is a two-way street.

And although conductor and orchestra alike are guided by a score, a single piece of music can be performed countless ways. There can be as many interpretations of a phrase in a Mozart symphony as there are members of the orchestra. Should a given moment sound joyous, wistful, irreverent, sarcastic? What is its emotional temperature? What should the quality of sound be—dark or gleaming, soft-textured or biting? The risk, when an ensemble performs without a conductor, is that everyone's different musical ideas can get averaged out, that everyone can gravitate toward the median interpretation rather than the most daring.

But the fact that small or medium orchestras *could* play without a conductor means that the bar for what conductors offer ought to be set very high. Both orchestras and audiences have a right to ask: Is this performance stronger and more expressive thanks to the person waving the baton? Orchestral musicians have a bone-deep instinct for this; they can usually tell within the first minute of the first rehearsal whether a given conductor is likely to make their life easier or harder. If the orchestra is playing a familiar piece—say, a Brahms symphony—and the conductor's cue results in a first chord that sounds hesitant or scattered, the conductor may already have lost the orchestra's trust, within five seconds. And if the conductor talks too much at the start of the rehearsal, attempting to tell the musicians how things should sound rather than physically showing them, that's another immediate yellow flag.

Any orchestra that plays together week after week shares a collective unconscious, and in that unconscious is a finely calibrated autopilot system. This autopilot engages if the conductor isn't sufficiently clear or interesting. If a conductor is unhelpfully flailing around, the musicians don't even need to say a word: The autopilot turns on, and the players instinctively react primarily to one another rather than to the person on the podium. The bodily intelligence of an orchestra is formidable; the musicians always know when it would be safer to

ignore the lunatic in the cockpit. Some conductors are painfully aware of when they're being ignored. The more clueless ones think they can take all the credit, even when it's the orchestra that is calmly guiding the plane back to Earth.

**THERE IS** an abiding tension between the profession of conductor, with its persistent whiff of old-world autocracy, and the workplace culture of most contemporary American cities. We are a long way from the days when Arturo Toscanini could arrive at the Metropolitan Opera House and shriek that “the orchestra play like pig!” or when Herbert von Karajan could pause a rehearsal, ask a violinist near the back of the section to stand up and play a passage by himself, and then—unsatisfied with the result—show that violinist the door and announce that he never wanted to see him again. If a conductor attempted such a move today, the musician's union would have them drawn and quartered. Conductors are now more likely to speak of their orchestra as a family, and to emphasize how collaborative and friendly their working relationship is.

Yet I'm not always convinced by these sometimes-cloying assertions of free and easy collaboration. Even if most conductors have softened their affect, the fundamental power dynamic has not shifted. “I think we're still dictators but we smile more,” the conductor Stéphane Denève said, with refreshing candor, in a 2011 interview.

For the most part, Denève is right. In rehearsals, except for occasional moments when orchestra members might request clarification on a particular point, the conductor is typically the only person who speaks, deciding what to rehearse, how many times to repeat a section, whether to stop and tune a complex chord in the winds and brass, and so on. For a clarinetist to suddenly start holding forth about something would be an unthinkable

breach of protocol. In economic terms, too, conductors occupy a singular position within the orchestral hierarchy, by which I mean they're radically overpaid. A conductor can make 10 times as much as the highly trained virtuoso musicians they claim to treat as equals.

It's true that if a conductor serves as music director of an orchestra, they have institutional responsibilities beyond conducting concerts, especially in the United States, where public funding is scarce and fundraising is a perpetual necessity. An orchestra's music director hears auditions, plans the repertoire for future seasons, and generally serves as an ensemble's recognizable face, its ambassador to the public. But it's also true that the music director might be present for only a few months a season, whereas the instrumentalists are required to perform with the orchestra all year round. I've always been impressed by the unusual example of the Dutch conductor Frans Brüggen, a co-founder of the Orchestra of the Eighteenth Century, who insisted on economic parity with the instrumentalists in his ensemble. “I earn the same as the second clarinet,” he said simply, in a 2008 interview. Some conductors might bridle at Brüggen's approach, but I doubt they'd enjoy having to articulate why their work is so much more valuable than that of the musicians whose task it is to bring sound into the air.

**AT ITS BEST**, the musical connection between an orchestra and a conductor is a profound and mysterious thing. In those rare situations when an orchestra and a conductor understand each other completely, the relationship is neither democratic nor autocratic but symbiotic; it becomes impossible to tell who is doing what, who is leading whom.

Consider the question of how orchestras respond to a conductor's beat. A conductor gives the downbeat—but when, relative to the visible gesture, does the orchestra's sound speak? It can't be literally instantaneous. The conductor provides a physical impulse, which the players react to. And there is always a slight delay between the visual signal and the audible response.

Here's the odd thing: This delay is subtly different from orchestra to orchestra, occasion to occasion. No two orchestras react the same way to a conductor's gesture; the same orchestra might respond differently to different conductors, and even with the same conductor, the nature of the reaction will be different depending on what music is being played.

Who among the participants could explain exactly how this works? No one. Not the musicians of the orchestra, and not the conductor. If you were to ask any of the players, “How long, exactly, is the space between the visible gesture



*Stéphane Denève, 2013*

and the sound?,” I doubt you’d find one who would say, “Oh, our policy is that it’s about an eighth of a second.” Even the most basic action (how do we all know to start together?) is deceptively hard to account for.

Picture yourself sitting with your instrument in the middle of the orchestra, poised to make the evening’s first sound, to break the ice of that fraught pre-performance silence. Breaking a silence can be scary, and an orchestra’s ability to do so with confidence depends on a deep shared instinct for when it’s safe to jump. I have a colleague who played for a long time with the Berlin Philharmonic, a mighty ensemble whose addictively rich sound speaks with a special kind of roar that seems to well up from within the Earth. Each musician visibly digs deep, drawing on some shared inner reserve; the string section rocks and bobs as if steering through a high wind.

This tremendous effort tends, understandably, to cause a slight delay in the orchestra’s reaction time. At my colleague’s first rehearsal, when the conductor gave the downbeat, he played immediately; that was what he’d been trained to do in other orchestras. Embarrassingly, he was blatantly ahead of everyone else. A kindhearted fellow musician turned to him and said, in effect: *Don’t look for where the beat is. Feel it with us. Just trust it; you’ll figure it out before long.* And within a few rehearsals, my colleague found himself—in a way he couldn’t explain—reacting in tandem with the rest of the orchestra.

The conductor Carlos Kleiber, a wizard of the craft, exploited this ineffable psychological dynamic in a 1970 rehearsal, filmed with an orchestra in Stuttgart, Germany, of the overture to Carl Maria von Weber’s opera *Der Freischütz*. This piece begins with an ominous unison C-natural in the strings and winds, a note that swells from nothingness into velvety saturation before

leaping up an octave. Kleiber summons that initial note with the gentlest of gestures: First, with benedictory grace, he spreads his arms, leading the musicians to perhaps expect a generous downbeat. But at the crucial moment, after bringing his hands close together, he pauses for an instant, then tilts his hands barely—just barely—downward. There is no downbeat

*A great conductor  
can help unleash a  
communal musical  
power that no  
individual could  
achieve in isolation.*

to speak of, just this microscopic tilt, like a diver leaning slightly forward on a diving board without jumping. The musicians start to play, and Kleiber stops them almost immediately. The texture isn’t quite right; the sound has poked its head too abruptly out of the silence. In this situation, most conductors would offer a straightforward remedy—“Start softer,”

for instance, or “Take more time with the crescendo.” But Kleiber says something gnomic: “Let the others start. Always let your colleagues start.”

This is a paradoxical instruction. Kleiber asks every member of the orchestra to not play until the other musicians play. If everyone took this directive literally, no one would make any sound at all. But in reality, what he’s asking the musicians to do is to listen with absolute focus to their shared unconscious instinct. To say “Don’t play until your colleagues play” is to say *Don’t play until we all feel, as a collective, that it is impossible not to play, that we’re all playing at the behest of a will not our own.* He himself can’t be sure exactly how the sound will speak, but his job is to create conditions under which that subterranean intelligence, wiser than any one individual, can take hold. He restarts the piece, once again making only the subtlest of physical gestures, and this time the sound surges forth with the liquid force of a geyser.

At its best, this is what conducting can be. A great conductor can help unleash a communal musical power that no individual could achieve in isolation. It’s this kind of subtlety that refutes the all-too-easy comparison between conductors and demagogues. No doubt conductors, like despots, are required to possess a degree of charisma; in both cases, the leader’s success depends on rousing the collective energy of the people they oversee. But in music, unlike in politics—certainly unlike in American politics—that potent communal force can be channeled only if everyone involved knows how to listen with every cell of their being. When an orchestra and a conductor work together in this way, the power they summon might be described as the opposite of violence. *A*

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*Contrejour in the  
French Style*

David Hockney,  
etching, soft-ground  
etching, aquatint, 1974

By Susan Tallman

David Hockney, who died at 88 in June, became famous as a young artist for imbuing 20th-century life with the formality and stasis of early Renaissance painting. His sharp-edged figures stand by the pool or sit by a coffee table in spaces as orderly as those in a Fra Angelico annunciation. The real world does not look so tidy, symmetrical, and enchanting. Except, very occasionally, when it does.

*Contrejour in the French Style* depicts a window at the Louvre that Hockney encountered shortly after moving to Paris in 1973. With its shade partly drawn, shutting out unwanted sunlight while giving a glimpse of garden, it was, he thought, “a picture in itself.”

Working from a drawing and some photographs, he rebuilt the found scene—tugging here, flattening there. His pathways and parterres are a streamlined echo of the nearby Tuileries, just as his balustrade is a compass-and-protractor enactment of the elegant original. The way the two receding diagonals intersect the wall, window, and walkway to converge at the tree line is an almost perfect diagram of single-point perspective. Hockney used visibly different etching techniques in different territories of the image—soft mats of color for the window blind, meticulous linear hatching for the floor, and splotchy, translucent color for the surrounding wall.

The formal garden, the parquet, the deep window setback, and the dappled wall (a nod to the pointillism of Georges Seurat) all wave the flag of “French Style,” with its distinct history of rules developed in the pursuit of beauty. Soon after *Contrejour*, Hockney’s own style shifted toward fragmented space, expressive brushwork, and episodic motion. This print, however, still exerts its wistful invitation to bask in quiet emotional weather, and notice the pictorial machinery he was about to dismantle. *A*

*Susan Tallman, an art historian, is a contributing writer at The Atlantic.*

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HAUSER & WIRTH

**MAX BECKMANN**

SELF-PORTRAIT ON GREEN WITH GREEN SHIRT, 1938

Max Beckmann, Selbstbildnis auf Grün mit grünem Hemd (Self-Portrait on Green with Green Shirt), 1938, oil on canvas, 65.5 x 50 cm / 25 3/4 x 19 5/8 in © Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.  
Courtesy Private Collection, Germany. Photo: Gina Folly