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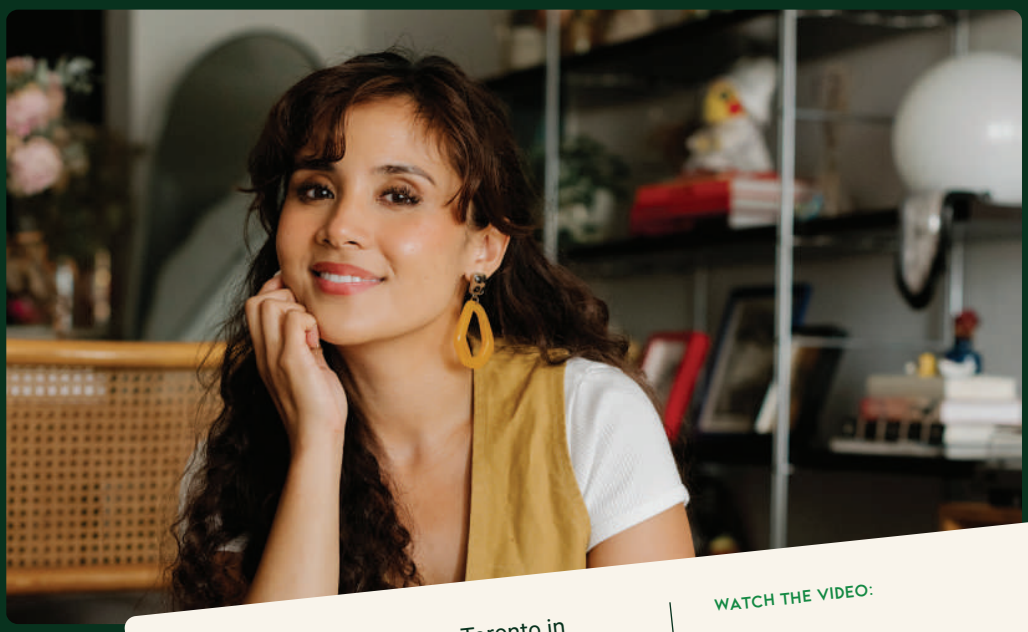


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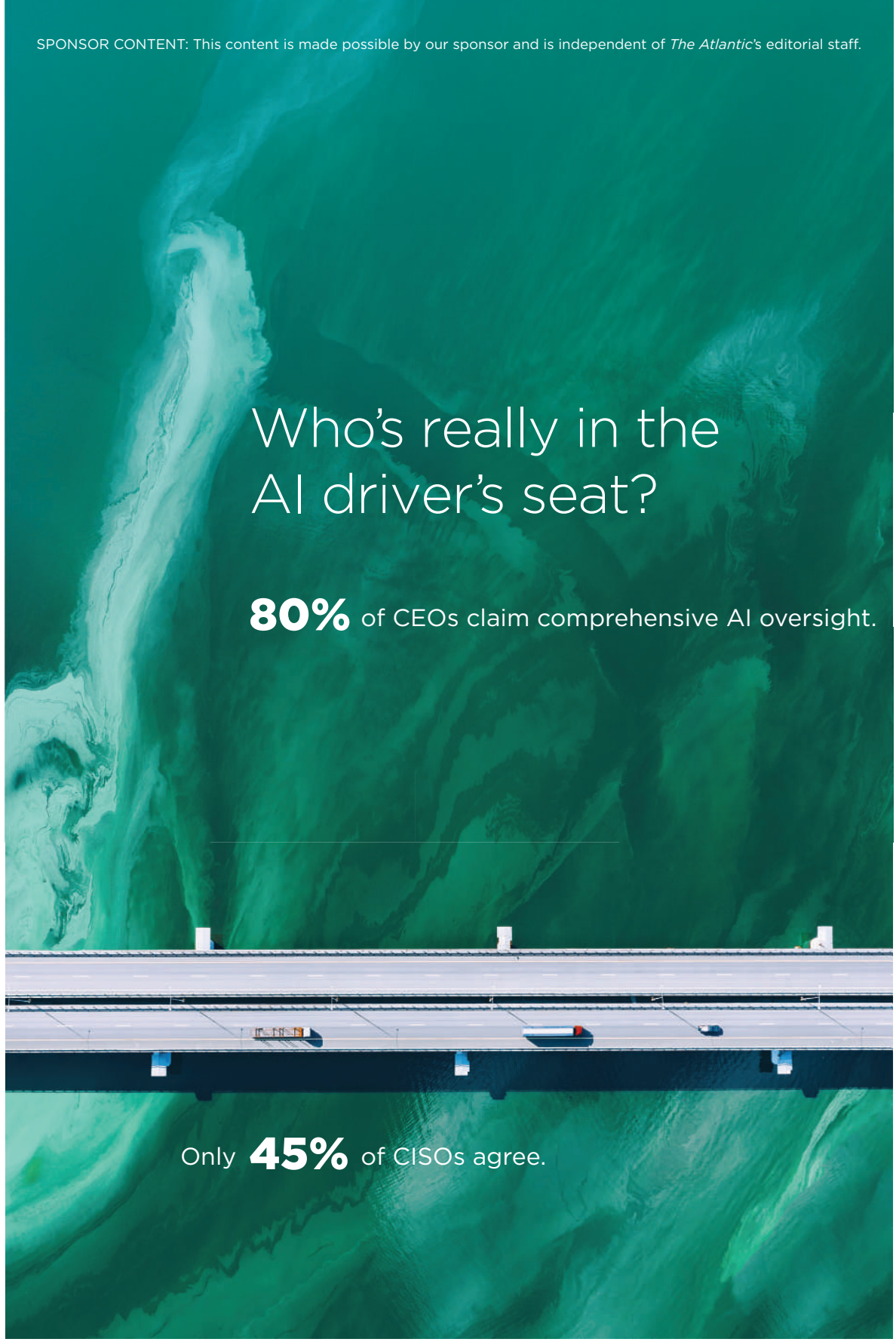
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Atlantic Re:think ×

Behind the Cover: In this month's cover story, "The Geo-Located Generation" (p. 26), Sarah Zhang explores how technologies that allow parents to track their children's whereabouts have changed parenthood and childhood alike. These tools promise to assuage parents' fears, Zhang writes, but they often generate new anxieties—and curtail the independence that young people once took for granted. For our cover image, the illustrator Miguel Porlan took a familiar image of parental care, a swan looking after a brood of cygnets, and gave it a modern twist.

— Liz Hart, *Art Director*

THE

The Age of Reading Is Over

In the August issue, Rose Horowitch considered whether civilization can survive our postliterate era.

Letters

Rose Horowitch's "The Age of Reading Is Over" is devastating. The comparison between our present moment and the long, undramatic decline of the Library of Alexandria is apt: We are witnessing a gradual failure of will and attention.

I am a conductor, and I was struck by the parallel with musical literacy. A score, like a serious book, demands an ability to hold a complex structure in your mind and resist the urge to skim. When that capacity atrophies, music becomes background, atmosphere, content. The difference between reading *Doctor Zhivago* and reading a romantasy novel is not unlike the difference between listening to a late Beethoven quartet and letting a playlist wash over you.

David Woodard
Tampere, Finland

While I appreciate Rose Horowitch's deep dive into the decline of literacy, I take issue with conflating concern about reading in general with concern about the specific kinds of literature people are reading. Though well-meaning, the story was full of judgmental rhetoric about graphic novels, audiobooks, and works of fiction with shorter and simpler sentences. One series I love, "The Empyrean," was among those ridiculed in the article.

Years ago, I absorbed such judgments subconsciously, and it caused me to take a decade-long break from reading. I started reading for pleasure again only when I gave myself permission to ignore what I thought I "should" read. I'm a Millennial mom of three kids, ages 10, 7, and 3. I take them to the library weekly and read to them every day. Raising them, I've learned to resist the urge to judge books as the "right kind" or "wrong kind." Regardless of what they're reading, my kids are using their imaginations, learning new concepts, exploring new perspectives, and strengthening their attention spans. Most important, they're learning to follow their innate curiosity, laying the groundwork for a lifelong love of reading.

Faigy Gilder
Fair Lawn, N.J.

One detail in Rose Horo witch's article made me chuckle. Harvard's assistant director for humanities and social-sciences support tells her about a student who "was struggling to read a book written in Old English": Anthony Burgess's 1962 novel *A Clockwork Orange*. That novel, however, is narrated in an invented futuristic slang that draws on Russian words. A sentence on page 1 begins: "Our pockets were full of deng, so there was no real need from the point of view of crasting any more pretty polly to tolchock some old veck in an alley." It's worrisome that Harvard students now find books hard to read, but, in their defense, some books actually are.

Lawrence Levi
Brooklyn, N.Y.

Rose Horowitch's assessment of the decline of reading reminded me of a passage in "The Prelude," by William Wordsworth. In it, the narrator dreams of a Bedouin frantically riding across the desert on his dromedary ahead of a rising deluge that will drown the world. He carries a stone and a shell—the stone represents knowledge (symbolizing Euclid's *Elements*), and the shell, imagination. The rider searches for a place to bury them so they are not lost forever in the flood.

It feels like a perfect analogue for our moment. Those of us who understand the importance of the long sentence are clutching our books and pens as we race ahead of what can seem like a drowning of critical thinking and the academy itself. I am not optimistic that we will find a safe place to hide them all before generative AI washes across the sands.

Art Casale
Kernersville, N.C.

COMMONS

DISCUSSION & DEBATE

Rose Horowitch's "The Age of Reading Is Over" is a fascinating and disturbing account of the decline of sustained reading. But I wonder whether "postliterate" is the right description of where humanity is going.

The philosopher Ernst Cassirer called us *animal symbolicum*—the symbol-using animal. Long before widespread literacy, human beings communicated complex ideas through speech, gestures, pictures, music, numbers, and other symbols. Alphabetic writing was an extraordinary development in that history, but need not be our final form of communication.

Horowitch rightly distinguishes reading words from the higher-order abilities of comprehension and synthesis. But must those abilities always depend on long-form prose? A composer can communicate through musical notation. A mathematician can compress an elaborate argument into a handful of symbols. And we communicate more and more through combinations of words, diagrams, photographs, and videos.

I recently gave a group of Japanese business executives a 5,000-word English-language article for discussion. Rather than spend our meeting reading it, I used AI to reduce its argument to 16 slides. We absorbed the argument in about 15 minutes and spent the remaining time doing something distinctly human: questioning it and debating one another.

Perhaps, then, we are witnessing not the death of literacy but another stage in the evolution of symbolic communication. The question is whether *Homo literatus* can give way to *Homo symbolicum* without losing the habits of thought that reading taught us.

Dan Considine
Tokyo, Japan

The love of reading, even the necessity of reading, was a gift from my mother. She was a child of Depression-era deep poverty in East Texas, and for lack of clothes, adequate food, and family support, her education ended after eighth grade, despite her having been the spelling-bee champ that year. Yet somehow, she kept her love of reading alive.

Years later, she was a stay-at-home mom raising three daughters on my father's wages as a heavy-equipment operator—enough for food, basic clothing, and a roof over our heads, but not much more. Still, every few weeks, she would scrape together the taxi fare to take us to the library in downtown Garland, Texas.

For me, that library was a secret door to another world. I was still in elementary school, but wandered the history section, reading about World War II and the Holocaust, and struggling through the novels of Thomas Hardy. Heady stuff.

At home, we had few books, but we did have a blue-bound set of the *Britannica Junior Encyclopedia*. My mother had bought it from a door-to-door salesman on a monthly payment plan, with little prospect that the payments would ever be made. I kept those books through moves from Texas to Michigan, back to Texas, and finally to California.

Barbara Jean Calfee
Larkspur, Calif.

My name is Aviya, and I am 9 years old. My grandparents subscribe to *The Atlantic*, and just a few minutes ago, I finished "The Age of Reading Is Over." It was so interesting, but it also made me angry that there is a need to write about this topic! I wanted to let you know: There is still hope. My friends and I are avid readers and writers. Not to speak too soon, but my teachers still encourage us to read whole books.

I have read many classic works of literature, such as the *Little House* series, by Laura Ingalls Wilder, and *Anne of Green Gables*, by Lucy Maud Montgomery, and I plan to start *The Hobbit*, by J. R. R. Tolkien, very soon. I am not getting my own cellphone until eighth grade. I love to write and draw, and many people I know do too. And I don't know about you, but I'm pretty sure I still have plenty of white matter in my brain!

Aviya Perlman
Cresskill, N.J.

ROSE HOROWITCH REPLIES:

I'm aware of the irony of publishing almost 9,000 words about how little we read, so I'm grateful to everyone who took the time to get through the story and reflect on it.

Many of your letters point to a tension that runs through the article. The arrival of our postliterate age is not due to any one person's actions. I, too, often read short, simple works; listen to podcasts; and go days without opening a book. The broader cultural shift we're seeing has emerged from millions of us making these same choices, day in and day out.

Yet the stories shared by Aviya Perlman and Barbara Jean Calfee show the enduring effects of an individual's love of reading and learning—and how that commitment can lead to a powerful resurgence of the practice in others.

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

Correction: "The Babies Left Behind in America" (November) misstated the name of Eber's caregiver. Her name is Estela Díaz, not Estela Garcia.

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DISPATCHES

OPENING ARGUMENT

HOW CASTRO'S CUBA ENDS

The people no longer believe in the revolution—and no longer fear their government.

BY ROBERT F. WORTH

A priest led me up battered stairs to a tiny room at the top of a church. From the window, we gazed down at the decayed colonial villas and scattered trash fires of eastern Havana. He pointed to the yellow wall behind us, where someone had sketched a meticulous map of the local street grid.

"They posted armed guards here, to watch over us," he said.

Cuba's Communist government, the priest said, took over the convent, cloister, and school of Los Escolapios after the revolution of 1959, expelling the nuns and setting up a guard post—one part of the regime's sprawling apparatus of surveillance and control. The church downstairs was virtually closed, the congregation mostly exiled or jailed in accordance with Communist Cuba's atheist principles.



Children play on a street in Santiago de Cuba, Cuba's second-largest city. Like the rest of Cuba, the city experiences shortages of food, medicine, and fuel.

The guards are gone now, along with the portraits of Fidel Castro and the secular schoolteachers who commandeered the convent's lower floors after the revolution. The church is in the process of reclaiming the magnificent 18th-century cloister from the state, which left it in ruins. The priest, Iván Guerra Álvarez, made clear he believes that history is approaching another turning point, and that the Communist regime will soon be gone. "The Church will play a big role in the transition," he told me. "We are the biggest institution in Cuba outside the government."

No one can say when or how that transition will happen. Donald Trump may or may not have "the honor of taking Cuba," as he boasted after imposing an oil blockade on the island earlier this year. The Cuban regime has stifled any viable domestic opposition. But the withering of the state—a process that has been under way for decades—has accelerated, and is shocking to see up close. The ration cards that used to guarantee basic foodstuffs for every Cuban had been blank for weeks when I visited in August. Police and soldiers were once ubiquitous throughout the country, but I saw hardly any.

In far-eastern Cuba, I met a fisherman who told me that he and others like him, who lacked electricity for refrigeration, have gone back to traditional methods of drying and salting fish. The average monthly salary



for public-sector employees in Cuba—including doctors and teachers—is about 6,500 pesos, which is less than $10 and far below the cost of a subsistence diet (a single carton of eggs can cost up to 4,700 pesos). Even getting small amounts of cash can be a trial: Banks sometimes limit withdrawals to 1,000 pesos (less than $1.50) per person per day.

The government still purports—on faded billboards, in party speeches—to meet all of the material and spiritual needs of its citizens, but it is now bankrupt in every sense. Almost no one believes in the system anymore, and many, especially outside Havana, behave as if the government simply does not exist. As in the Soviet-dominated Eastern bloc during its final years, destitution is leading people back to older faiths. Afro Cuban Santeria and Catholicism have flourished, and "house churches" have proliferated, often evangelical and sometimes consisting of nothing more than a dozen folding chairs in someone's living room.

Guerra Álvarez led me down from the church tower to the main sanctuary of Los Escolapios, an atmospheric shift he half-jokingly likened to a trip from North to South Korea. We found ourselves in a noisy crowd of more than 100 schoolchildren and worshippers. A teacher dressed as an angel, with a white beard, wig, and gown, was giving Bible lessons in the dimly lit nave. Afterward, volunteers handed out lunches of rice and beans. To see so many people looking so cheerful was striking; Cuba is now a country full of empty streets and abandoned buildings, having lost as much as a quarter of its population to migration in the past few years.

The expanded role of the churches is partly an outcome of American policy: The U.S. government has long favored the Catholic Church as an intermediary. When the Trump administration approved a $100 million aid package for Cuba in May, it was on the condition that the funds be distributed by faith-based groups and humanitarian organizations. But the rise of religion in Cuba is also a measure of the state's withdrawal—and perhaps a hint at the island's future direction.

I CAME TO CUBA expecting to see suffering. What I did not anticipate was the near-total collapse of the state. This was evident even in Havana, where all-day blackouts are routine, but things are much worse in the eastern half of the island, which has long been poorer and less developed. Cuba's religious revival has burned brightest there, especially among Pentecostal churches, whose traditions include faith healing and miracles.

I drove to the east with the photographer Moises Saman, an 18-hour journey that sometimes made us feel as if we were traveling back in time. Weaving slowly among enormous potholes, we passed few other cars. As we got closer to Santiago de Cuba, Cuba's second-largest city, we saw almost as many horse-drawn carts as motorized vehicles.

Poverty is not new in the country, but the number of street beggars I saw shocked me. On the seafront in Santiago, a mother and daughter approached me, both of them skeletally thin, to ask for money. The mother, a white-haired 76-year-old, told me that their only means of support had been her son, who had worked as a security guard and died of cancer last year. Now they spend all day begging and collecting plastic bottles in the hopes of trading them for a few pesos, she said. They get nothing from the state. Later, I visited their home, a filthy ground-floor room where they sleep on metal bed frames topped with cardboard instead of mattresses. When I asked whether there was any electricity, the mother said that they did not even have a bulb.

The failure of Cuba's health-care system may be the most damning indictment of its Communist regime. Castro once held up the country's network of local clinics as a model for the world, visible proof that socialism could triumph where capitalism had failed. He sent hundreds of thousands of doctors overseas, an "army of white coats" to bolster Cuba's image and generate money for the state. (It later emerged that the doctors had been given little choice and many were victims of what has been called forced labor.)

Some doctors are still being sent abroad, but more have simply fled Cuba. On Cayo Granma, an island at the entrance to the bay of Santiago, I found a single nurse caring not only for all 870 residents but also for many people from the neighboring coastal areas. She no longer knows how many people she is responsible for, because doctors have been leaving the region so fast that she cannot keep track of the patients forced to seek new care.

Her name is Clara Luaces, a woman of 55 with a direct gaze and an air of brisk competence. Her clinic was a room the size of a large closet, hot and crowded with patients when I arrived; outside, it was almost 100 degrees. A 12-year-old boy with a fever sat on a bench, an IV drip in his arm; a girl with a skin infection sat nearby with her mother.

"We have to work miracles here," Luaces said, answering my questions as she checked the boy's pulse and adjusted his IV. The government had stopped piping water to the island three months earlier, she said, and the resulting lack of

Opposite page: *Teens receive bread and drinks at a Catholic church in Havana.*

Below: *A faded and rusting roadside effigy of Che Guevara above the revolutionary slogan* HASTA LA VICTORIA SIEMPRE—*"Until victory always"—in Guantánamo province.*



clean water had led to a sharp rise in bacterial fevers and skin infections. "Even young people are dying on me," she said. She was chronically short on medicine and had very little money of her own to supplement the clinic's supply.

The boy began moaning, and Luaces comforted him, putting a pillow under his head and calling him "sweetheart." "I'm not going to retire," she said, looking up at me, "because there is no one else to take this on."

Luaces did not want to talk about politics. She confined herself to saying that she had been a student during what Castro dubbed the "special period" in the 1990s, when Cuba went through a severe economic crisis after losing its Soviet patron and the regime seemed on the brink of collapse. What is happening now, she said, is "much more special."

Others lashed out directly at the state. Not long ago, the country bristled with informants working for the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution. But when I asked people about the CDR, some laughed, and few seemed worried about being overheard. One evening on a beach in Baracoa, a man in his 30s asked me what I thought about Communism. He was lying in a hammock talking with four other men, drinking cheap sugar cane rum from a plastic bottle; they had been complaining about the ever higher prices of rice, beans, and other basic foods. I told him I thought Communism was a lousy way to run a country.

He looked squarely at me and said, "I shit on Fidel Castro's mother." The other men laughed. He uttered a few more obscenities. Then, suddenly, all of the humor drained from the man's face. His voice went taut with anger, and tears welled up in his eyes.

"Cuba is frozen in time!" he shouted. "There's no hope. It's a sad thing to be born a Cuban. That's what I think, and I don't care; they can send me to prison if they want." The other men had gone silent.

Here is another measure of Cubans' anger at their government: During nine days of travel around the island, I did not meet a single person who blamed Donald Trump or the United States for their situation. I sometimes reminded them about the blockade Trump had started earlier this year, cutting Cubans off from the cheap oil that Venezuela had been supplying before the U.S. military captured Nicolás Maduro in January. Hadn't things gotten worse since then?

"I don't see any change since January," a retired engineer named Guillermo Almeida told me. "That oil from Venezuela wasn't reaching the people anyway." He and others said that the more important turning point was the coronavirus pandemic, which destroyed Cuba's tourism industry and shrank the value of remittances from family members abroad that many Cubans depend on, exposing more fully a state that had long been depleted. Another man put it differently: "It seems to us that the real embargo is inside of Cuba."

THE CHURCHES HAVE taken on much of the Cuban state's old role in keeping people alive. In Baracoa, I met Raul de Jesus Muñoz Munder, a Pentecostal pastor who has been evangelizing in the area for 32 years. He had seen hunger and deprivation, he said,

MOISES SAMAN FOR *THE ATLANTIC*



including during the years he spent in a tiny church in the mountains, but nothing as bad as the present.

Muñoz Munder described his work almost as if it were a military operation. Every week, he said, he meets with a team of associate pastors at his church, and each man reports on the situation in his home neighborhood: who is sick and needs medicine, who needs food, and how to get it to them. The pastor's congregation has about 1,100 regular members, but he provides aid to a much larger group. His denomination, the Assemblies of God, has expanded from two to 40 churches in the Baracoa region over the past three decades.

The growth of the evangelical movement is hard to quantify in Cuba, where the Catholic Church was once almost universal. No independent numbers on religious affiliation exist—the government has long had a lock on surveys. But everyone I spoke with, both inside and outside the country, agreed that the evangelical presence has surged in recent years.

In Baracoa, I stumbled upon several different evangelical services one Saturday evening, each of them loud and raucous, the congregation on its feet and clapping along. These kinds of scenes are still a little jarring to many older Cubans. They tend to associate church with more orderly Catholic rituals, and grew up without seeing much of the flamboyant evangelical religiosity that has become common across Latin America. But the island is changing. I heard a fair amount of God talk even on the street. One afternoon in Camagüey, a beautiful, decaying city in east-central Cuba, an elderly woman in a wheelchair called out to me as I passed her open front door.

"We have to tell people that God exists," she said, in an urgent tone. "God's word has to be fulfilled in its entirety."

One of her children had left the country, and the other one, a high-school teacher, was in prison; she said he'd been given a 14-year sentence for accusing a high-ranking official of corruption. The old woman was living alone, and the only thing she had left was her faith.

In Havana, I visited a nursing home owned by the Catholic Church that was full of former civil servants and military officers. In one room I found a dozen old men, their beds lined up about a yard apart. Each had a single narrow locker for all of his earthly possessions. A nurse gave me permission to speak with residents but cautioned me that they were "very sad." Many of them, she explained, had had distinguished government careers but had found themselves abandoned by both the state and their family at the end of their life. In many cases, their children had left the country.

One of the men, a wiry 65-year-old, had fought for two years in Angola, where Castro had sent hundreds of thousands of soldiers in the 1970s and '80s to support a Communist-aligned government. The former soldier had once been a fan of the revolution; you could tell because he had a big tattoo of Che Guevara on his right arm. He'd gotten it when he was 18. He showed me several scars left over from battles in Africa, and I asked him how he felt about the situation in the country.

He answered with an expletive. I asked him what should be done to make things better. Cuba needed to be bombed, he



Soldiers perform a changing-of-the-guard ceremony at Santa Ifigenia Cemetery in Santiago, where Fidel Castro's remains are entombed.

told me. Specifically, Raúl Castro, Fidel's brother and successor, should be bombed. And Raúl's daughter Mariela. And the prime minister, Manuel Marrero Cruz.

Again and again during my travels on the island, people told me: *Cuba is not like this*. They didn't just mean the hunger and sickness and lack of electricity. They meant the anger, the emptiness, the absence of music and laughter.

There used to be a musical group on every corner of Santiago, an 81-year-old man who had spent 45 years as a singer in a band recalled. Now there were none.

AFTER THE 1959 revolution, Fidel Castro enshrined atheism in the new state, exiling many prominent Catholic figures and sending believers to reeducation camps. But in a sense, he did not so much banish religion as create a new cult, with its own rituals and holy martyrs. That cult staggers on today in a weird half life, abandoned by most of its people after decades of misery and repression, yet somehow defying a final collapse.

The only immaculately clean place I saw in all of Cuba was the Santa Ifigenia Cemetery, where Fidel's ashes are held, in Santiago. The grass there is green and mowed to razor-perfection, the walkways carefully swept; not a single visitor was in sight when I went there.

As I stood looking at the rounded granite boulder that marks Fidel's tomb, patriotic music began blaring from invisible loudspeakers, and an honor guard of soldiers in neatly pressed uniforms began goose-stepping in unison, rifles pointed skyward. They marched to the mausoleum honoring José Martí, Cuba's great nationalist hero; presented arms; and relieved a group of similarly uniformed compatriots, who marched back. They do this changing of the guard every half hour, all day long, I was told.

Watching those perfect soldiers, you could believe for a moment that you were in another place—perhaps that far-off country Castro had dreamed of, where socialism is triumphant, no one is sick or unhappy, and everyone aspires to follow the heroic example of the man who led a glorious revolution. Then a breeze swept across the grass, carrying the acrid stench of burning garbage, and I remembered where I was. *A*

Robert F. Worth is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

MOISES SAMAN FOR *THE ATLANTIC*

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THE MOST CURSED TEAM IN AMERICAN SPORTS

Why Buffalo Bills fans are convinced this is finally their year

BY KAITLYN TIFFANY

The mythical story of the Buffalo Bills could be told like this: Their fans are crazy and live in the snow. They shovel this snow out of their stadium to help their godforsaken football team, which, until recently, was most famous for losing the Super Bowl four times in a row in the early 1990s. According to one theory, those failures fed into Timothy McVeigh's derangement before he planned and executed the Oklahoma City bombing. The franchise was an utter disaster, for the most part, until the 2018 arrival of an otherworldly quarterback named Josh Allen, who has exhibited many heroics. But he has yet to bring his team to the Super Bowl.

Four of his playoff runs have ended with haunting losses to the quarterback Patrick Mahomes and the Kansas City Chiefs. The others were cut short in unromantic fashion—most recently by one of the sloppier performances of Allen's career, against the Denver Broncos.

From the outside, you might ask: "Can he really do it?" But in Buffalo, the words *Josh Allen* come out like "Good morning." On a Sunday afternoon in September, I sat down in an ancient tavern near the Buffalo River to eat chicken wings and watch the Bills' division rivals, the New England Patriots, play the Pittsburgh Steelers. An older man joined me and asked, unprompted, if I liked Josh Allen. "Who doesn't?" I said. He revealed that he was wearing a Josh Allen shirt under his sweater, said that he would get another one for me out of his car, and then did.

KEVIN SABITUS / GETTY; BRYAN M. BENNETT / GETTY; RIC TAPIA / GETTY; JUAN ALEJANDRO BERNAL / SHUTTERSTOCK; QUINTIN SOLOVIEV / WIKIMEDIA

ILLUSTRATION BY PAUL SPELLA

Josh Allen is everywhere in Buffalo. He appears in murals and on billboards; road signs are doctored to feature his name and face. At the grocery store, you can buy Josh Allen Crunch Time cereal and cantaloupes grown on the Allen family's farm, in Firebaugh, California. There is hardly a business in the city that does not possess at least one life-size cutout of the man. (Shortly after I left, an 11-story banner of him went up downtown.)

In a parking lot near the team's brand-new Highmark Stadium, I chatted with Jenny Kless, a kind-eyed woman who tailgates out of a refurbished Volkswagen bus. When it came time to talk about Josh Allen, she put her hand over her heart. "What a beautiful person he is," she said, and assured me that Bills fans believe he can do anything. "I'm gonna spell that for you: B-I-L-L-I-E-V-E."

I found Andy Dikens and Gary Thomas tailgating by a Tesla Cybertruck. They told me they'd been following the team since the '80s and now had the same opinion on Josh Allen, which they expressed in tandem:

DIKENS: He's a stud.

THOMAS: He's the best player in the league.

DIKENS: Best player in the league by far.

THOMAS: Definitely a stud, I agree.

Leo Roth, a longtime sports columnist for the *Democrat and Chronicle* in Rochester, about 60 miles east, told me that Allen is the best player Buffalo has ever had, and claimed that even Jim Kelly, the first-ballot Hall of Fame quarterback who led the Bills to those four consecutive Super Bowls, would agree. (When I emailed Kelly to confirm, he answered, "Yes, I'm not scared to admit that.") As many sports people see it, Roth said, Allen may be the team's best, last hope of redemption. "If you can't win it with this guy," they say, "you probably never will."

To saddle one man with the hopes and dreams of an entire city is a heady gamble with, well, the hopes and dreams of an entire city. But Buffalo's circumstances may inspire a little shooting-for-the-moon. It's a highly segregated, economically stagnant, postindustrial city that has been struggling for decades. Buffalo has a fascinating history and many great qualities; it would be unfair and inaccurate to say the people there have nothing but football. Yet football plainly matters far more to its modern-day sense of self than anything else.

Robert Thompson, a professor of television and popular culture at Syracuse University who has lived in the area for 30 years, was the first person I spoke with who directly acknowledged the risks involved in belief. "I suppose I look at Josh Allen like I would look at an economy that was based on one agricultural product," he said. In that situation, you have to pray.

THE BILLS' NEW, $2 billion stadium, a gigantic silver spaceship plopped among converted mills and manufacturing plants, was partly paid for by Erie County and New York State taxpayers; the state leased the place to the team's owners, Terry and Kim Pegula (who also own the Buffalo Sabres). The stadium is named—as its predecessor was—for a health-insurance company. Inside, the design and decor nod to local folkways, most notably in the form of a 20-foot sculpture of a broken folding table—the cheap kind that you would buy for a backyard barbecue or school fundraiser.

This is a monument to a Buffalo tradition. Sometime in the 2010s, fans began body-slamming foldable tables at tailgates. Although now understood as something people do in good humor, because they are drunk and love the Bills so much, that's not how the ritual started. "They were doing stuff like that because the team was so bad," Mike Catalana, the sports director of the ABC affiliate in Rochester, told me. They needed to entertain themselves somehow. My husband's childhood friend Dan, whose family is from Buffalo, put it differently: The table-breaking habit was a display of dark humor—half-ironic self-harm carried out by people who were miserable.

I grew up in a small town south of Rochester, which also gets a good deal of lake-effect snow. Still, I remember a general feeling that our neighbor city was full of eccentrics who, for un fathomable reasons, had chosen to live in a depressed Arctic-like region rather than someplace normal. The Bills were part of their sad lot. We had some true-blue fans in my hometown, but in general our community regarded the Bills with a degree of remove—we wished them well, but we didn't necessarily want to get involved. My classmates instead concocted reasons to root for better teams: the Steelers, the Patriots, the Colts. Today, many people I grew up with are now Bills Mafia. But I know—and they know—it wasn't always so.

I don't begrudge anybody their porch flags or bumper stickers, however they behaved in decades past. The spirit is catching, and what else are you going to do? A couple of Christmases ago, my uncle—a farmer who is known locally for his Bing Crosby eyes and sometimes-mean-spirited sense of humor—told me that he'd been rooting against the Bills because he didn't like to see other people getting so excited. But, he said, he'd had to stop. Even he couldn't root against a guy like Josh Allen.

On paper, the Bills' chances may be better than they've ever been before. (By week four of this season, the Vegas odds were giving them the best shot at winning the Super Bowl.) The Bills' defense has gotten younger and faster; they traded for the very talented wide receiver DJ Moore. Many of the fans I met in Buffalo suggested that Allen is also getting better—that he's more mature as a player and a human being, having married the actor Hailee Steinfeld and become a family man. They love her too, and call her the queen of Buffalo.

By the week of my visit, the Bills had already won their first game of the season, in Houston, on a touchdown throw from Allen after the two-minute warning. Now they were set to play the Detroit Lions, in what would be the first-ever regular-season game in a stadium that all manner of T-shirts call THE HOUSE THAT JOSH BUILT. A few controversies about the building had already emerged—fan backlash against the soaring cost of attendance, a confusing sod debacle—but in the tailgate areas on Thursday afternoon, people were simply amped and optimistic.

When I arrived at Hammer's Lot, a popular site down the street from both the remnants of the old stadium and its gleaming replacement, the first person I saw was shirtless and, frankly, pantsless. He

wore a gladiator-style skirt constructed entirely out of Labatt Blue boxes. I'd guess that 80 percent of the men were wearing Josh Allen jerseys. But the crowd was diverse. I saw super-pregnant women in red-and-blue zebra-striped leggings, older women in red-and-blue-bedazzled jeans, and teen girls in sweatshirts with red and blue hearts on the sleeves.

There are some generational divides and hints of factions within the Bills fandom, and you might sketch the boundaries of these groups based on their relationship to this parking lot. The longtime owner, local resident Eric Matwijow, is beloved by a huge crowd of regulars; he claims that some of them have spread their family members' ashes on his gravel. Matwijow also told me that "woke" or "nose ring" Bills fans do not like him. Nor do the table-slammers, because Hammer's Lot prohibits that activity (on account of its being dangerous and stupid). He also openly resents the people who call themselves the "Bills Mafia" because he is old enough to remember the actual Mafia in Buffalo, which, as he mentioned to me, was all about murder and torture and stealing and other crimes.

To be fair, Del Reid, a 50-year-old former web developer, coined the term *Bills Mafia* accidentally, in 2011. It was a tongue-in-cheek response during a Twitter feud with a sports reporter that took on a life of its own. Reid and Matwijow have very different styles and a degree of personal animosity, but they come together on one thing, which is, of course, Josh Allen. Neither was bothered that their hometown quarterback is from California. He's not from *California* California, they each separately explained, but from the Central Valley. He's "not a surfer dude," Reid told me. "He's a farm boy," Matwijow said.

The way they talked about him reminded me of how A. Bartlett Giamatti once described New Yorkers' feelings toward the great Mets pitcher Tom Seaver, who also came east from California, bringing miracles. "He contrasted completely with the part of the country he was known to come from," Giamatti, a future baseball commissioner, wrote in 1977. People who had little in common with Seaver loved him because he was "a working guy who got rewarded," "who went by the rules and made it."

Although Allen isn't a Buffalo native, he fits in as though he were, Reid added. "We love him, and he loves us back."

IN THE PLAZA in front of Highmark Stadium, enormous steel bison puffed steam from their nostrils. Inside the stadium, the energy was even more rock-and-roll.

Before the game, an introductory video declared the new Highmark "a beacon of blue-collar football built for Buffalo, by Buffalo." The crowd's full-throated celebration was followed by the boom of fireworks. More than 60,000 attendees had been given light-up bracelets that were designed to flash red, white, and blue at dramatic moments, such as when Allen ran onto the field for the first time.

The Bills loped down the field on their opening drive, which ended with Allen running for a touchdown and the Jumbotron instructing everyone to sing "The Bills make me want to SHOUT!" The Bills scored another touchdown on their next drive, and we stood to "SHOUT!" again. When Allen ran it in toward the end of the third quarter, we were on our fifth rendition. The final score was 41–31, and the Bills were 2–0 by midnight. "I can't wait to watch the highlights," a woman in front of me said, with a sigh, to a friend as we walked to our cars.

ONE THEORY HOLDS THAT BUFFALO IS DESTINED TO LOSE BECAUSE PRESIDENT WILLIAM McKINLEY WAS ASSASSINATED IN THE CITY.

Just before I left Buffalo, I sat with my laptop in the café section of a Wegmans—where customers could impulse-buy a chunk of turf from the old stadium for $99.99—and listened to the old men nearby chat about the game over coffee and doughnuts. It was good news and bad news. Allen looked perfect, but the defense needs to gel, they said. Things were going well, but nobody knows what will happen in a long season. Sports are sick and twisted. Even the hottest start can fizzle out, as Buffalonians know in their bones. (They would lose to the Patriots in week four.)

The Bills curse is vague. The fans *feel* cursed, but they have never settled on the place to pin this feeling. One theory holds that Buffalo is destined to lose because President William McKinley was assassinated in the city, at the Pan-American Exposition in 1901. Mark Poloncarz, the county executive who helped negotiate the terms for the new stadium, told me that he'd joined Mayor Sean Ryan to lay a wreath at a monument to McKinley in downtown Buffalo this year, and that Ryan had asked McKinley to release the city from his vengeance. Other theories about the Bills' misfortune involve more classic stuff—for instance, that the old stadium had been placed nearly on top of a small cemetery, and occupied land that once belonged to Native Americans. (The new stadium is at least 1,000 feet from the cemetery and has signage that acknowledges the Seneca Nation.)

Phil Passafiume, a Buffalo fan I spoke with in Hammer's Lot, suggested one more factor: The old Highmark had featured O. J. Simpson on a wall among the team's other legends; the new one leaves him off. The city and team have addressed so many of their potential curses this year; if the Bills finally do win, they'll never know which one was really the source of their troubles.

That their day of triumph will come, this year or sometime soon, feels inevitable to me—if only because it's too dark to imagine otherwise. The Sunday after my trip, as I sat in a Brooklyn sports bar watching the Bills with my hands pressed to my face, fully converted to the cause, I thought back to what Roth, the newspaper columnist, had said about Josh Allen: "If you can't win it with this guy, you probably never will." Knock on wood and God forbid. *A*

Kaitlyn Tiffany is a staff writer at The Atlantic *and the author of* The Housewives Underground: The Untold Story of the Women Who Made the JFK Assassination Our Most Enduring Mystery.

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THE RIGHT WAY TO MAKE MAC AND CHEESE

My Aunt Louise used a key ingredient that held everything together.

BY DANYEL SMITH

My Aunt Louise and my grandmother both smoked Virginia Slims. At social events, even barbecues, Louise's cigarette was in a theater-length holder. She was married to a loud man we called Uncle Benny, who held his Marlboro in the same hand as his highball. Louise's kitchen, with its Talavera tile and swinging door, functioned like a VIP suite. It's where the mac and cheese was made, and the very important people were the kids.

This was late-1970s Los Angeles. Louise and Benny lived in a gray Spanish-revival bungalow common to the multiracial Miracle Mile: a red-clay roof and a front courtyard tinkling with chimes. On any given weekend, a hunting pal of Benny's might stomp onto Louise's spotless back patio with just-caught cod, or crayfish still moving in the trap—maybe even deer heart, thawing in a ziplock, or fresh pheasant to throw on the grill.

It was fine for others to contribute a protein, but side dishes were Louise's domain: deviled eggs, braised mustard greens, and the mac and cheese for which she was famous. I'd watch Louise fold boiled elbow noodles into the Cracker Barrel Extra Sharp I had shredded, plus eggs beaten with Knudsen whole milk (as opposed to Carnation evaporated). There were other ingredients—a spoonful of dry mustard, a pinch of Tony Chachere's Original Creole Seasoning—but what stood out to me were Louise's careful shakes, from a Schilling tin, of cream of tartar. I didn't know what that was, and I wasn't alone. For Louise's clique, cream of tartar was a culinary idiosyncrasy. "Cream of what?" they'd ask. "Why?"

Now, decades later, rowdy debates about mac and cheese are all over social media, especially at holiday time. Should mac and cheese be pourable, or baked until it can be cut like brownies? Is truffle a grace note, or too highfalutin? The sparring goes down in TikTok Stitches and the comment sections of Instagram Reels, as creators mix in mozzarella or mascarpone. Home cooks zhuzh up boxes of Kraft. My Haitian American friends make *macaroni au gratin* with habanero-laced *epis*. Ina Garten marinates her cooked pasta in cream, as you would overnight oats. I adore a good, melty cube of Velveeta (in my scrambled eggs), but using Campbell's Condensed Cheddar Cheese Soup? In mac and cheese? Gag me—as we used to say in 1980s Southern California— with a spoon.

Alex Hill, an L.A.-based content creator and recipe developer under the name @justaddhotsauce, knows that ingredients and cooking styles go in and out of fashion. She grew up watching her mother learn to make mac and cheese from the singer Patti LaBelle, a best-selling cookbook author whose recipe is a five-cheese stunner (and made in the custard style of my Aunt Louise). Hill's mom, a Puerto Rican married to a Black American, wanted to make mac and cheese in a way beloved by her husband and his family. "I thought my mom made the best mac and cheese," Hill, whose own mac is béchamel-based, told me. "She used Velveeta. And now it's so taboo."

MY AUNT LOUISE was not kin but sister-friend to my maternal grandmother, Lottie. They were glamorous, frank, and 40 years older than me, but Louise spoke about the body in a way that shared DNA often disallows. When I was 12, she told me there was no way to grate cheese without risking the skin of my knuckles. "Stop being so tentative," Louise said. "As you know, it's not *if* you bleed, kiddo. It's *when*." I had thought that the way Louise looked out for me and other children meant that I knew her. I'll never know how much I didn't know.

My grandmother and her girlfriends came of age in 1940s California, when school segregation was customary (and legal, until '47). Aunt Louise and Grandma Lottie both married military men and lived through the assassination era. I used to think of these women as always being braced for something. Tense. As we all got older, I could see they were shoring up a broken heart. People in my grandmother's set rarely talked about their emotions, at least to us. They were who they were because things were the way they were.

Like Louise, my grandmother was a good cook who did not love to cook. But Grandma taught me to make a nog so thick with beaten egg whites that it's eaten with a spoon. When I realized that she didn't even like the nog, she told me that you don't have to like something to make it. "You can make it," she said, "because other people like it." (I hear this in my head when I make my "famous" peach cobbler that I don't even like. Compliments are yummy, though, right? Especially when you're hungry for them.) Cooking for pleasure must have been a complex notion for my grandmother; her mother had cooked for a living in the Piedmont area of Oakland, where Black people

were forbidden to be owners or tenants.

At one of Louise and Benny's gatherings—where spatchcocked birds dripped with browned butter, brown sugar, and cayenne—I heard one of Louise's friends getting nosy about the menu. This friend's name was Mae or Bea, something one-syllable, and she was among the fools Louise welcomed but did not suffer, when it came to kitchen meddling.

MAE (OR BEA): You're not making a roux?

LOUISE: Roux is for gumbo and gravy.

Then one of Benny's crew barreled through the swinging door with charred wild-turkey thighs. Before Louise could block him, the man stuffed a boy's mouth with a burnt piece, then howled: "That's a rabbit! That's the Easter Bunny you just ate!" Now that child was crying. Then another. I wanted to fight this man. But I was 12.

In that kitchen, with its undernotes of Clorox, Louise looked up from dotting margarine on the steaming noodles in her rectangular glass pan. She didn't like grown men "hooting and hollering." She didn't like jokes that only the joker found funny. Aunt Louise had spoken to me of the sourness among folks who experienced different levels of possibility, and freedom. This was why she didn't much like for the generations to mix—unless she was on duty at the velvet rope.

So Louise hustled me, my sister, and our pals into her den. She passed me, the oldest, a boxy television remote, then fanned out editions of *Ebony*, *Life*, *Essence*, and *Sunset*. She brought us a bowl of chips and some mild salsa. Shutting the door as she left, Louise gave us a look that said simply and seriously that this was our territory while treacherous guests were nearby.

As usual, I followed her back to the kitchen. I noted how Louise contained the chaos. I was brave before the deer's heart. I got back to cheese grating.

IN THE SUMMER of 2000, when my sister was getting married, I visited Louise in a nursing home. She was a widow recovering—to the degree that she ever could—from an amputation. I had been living in New York City for seven years, and she acted as if that were a magical distance and length of time. My grandmother had told her I was doing well in my work—that I was, like the Jeffersons, moving on up. With a wink, Louise gave me a bottle of Rive Gauche from her bureau, and then asked me if I still cooked. I said I did, and I was glad it was true.

"I think we're losing recipes," Alex Hill had said, and for more than mac and cheese. Recipes aren't just nourishment, nor are they merely strokes of "culture." They are relationships. They make us feel included and protected. For me, they are loyalty—a sweetness where there might have been bitters. Hill, who has a cookbook coming out next year, knows the necessity of sharing her passions on social media, but she doesn't want to cook something solely because it might go viral. "I actually want to *cook*," she said. "I want you to cook my recipes."

The elbows in Aunt Louise's mac and cheese held cooked milk in their curves. My recipe is not the same as Louise's, but it's close. I use cream of tartar. I believe roux is for gumbo and gravy. I tilt my glass pan, just as Louise did, to see if any liquid moves. If it doesn't, I pull it from the oven. The top, crunchy. The edges, brown. Our custard, silky.

Alex Hill says cream of tartar is a stabilizer.

Louise had told me that too, in her Miracle Mile courtyard. "Cream of tartar has no taste," she said. "It just holds everything together." At the time, I didn't understand. *A*

Danyel Smith is a staff writer at The Atlantic.



ILLUSTRATION BY LIZ HART

The Geo-Located Generation



By Sarah Zhang

Constant surveillance is stunting children and making parents paranoid.



Illustrations by Miguel Porlan

No one warned me, when I became a parent, about all the apps that would colonize my phone: the app for the baby monitor where I could gaze at my daughter, even when my husband and I finally had a night out. The app for the Snoo smart bassinet we rented in bleary-eyed desperation, which logged her sleep by the minute. The app where I logged her sleep manually because the Snoo was not accurate enough. And still, I remember thinking that I had been quite restrained. I mean, I didn't buy the $299 Owlet smart sock, which would send her pulse rate and oxygen saturation directly to my phone, or the $290 Nanit monitor, which would track her every breath.

Our day care did not have a livestream—see? *restraint*—but that is indeed a service some now offer. Preschool required its own app, though, as did summer camp. Soon my phone began pinging with messages about playground spats and injuries as minor as paper cuts. As I write this, I've learned that my daughter woke from her nap at 2:17 p.m.

The panopticon doesn't end with babies and toddlers. Parents with children older than mine tell me they obsess over grades, which are updated instantly with each new assignment or quiz. They watch their kids via the camera on their Ring doorbell; they monitor text messages. They scrutinize daily photos from sleepaway camp—once a time of complete disconnection—for evidence of sunburns or social ostracism. *Why is he standing apart from everyone else? Why isn't he smiling?*

But most of all, parents track their kids everywhere they go. Location tracking might start, for younger kids, with an AirTag slipped into a backpack, jacket, or shoe. (Skechers now makes shoes with a dedicated compartment in the sole.) For kids old enough to have their own smartwatch or phone, the GPS is built right in—and so parents keep tracking them into adolescence and even beyond. Three-quarters of parents with teenagers ages 14 to 17 had access to their kids' location data, according to one study.

Even among college students, one-third were being tracked by their parents, according to another study, conducted in 2021 by Michaeline Jensen, a psychologist at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Five years later, Jensen says, that number is even higher: More than half of college students are being tracked, per her unpublished data. In her own lab, she's learned that even her graduate students continue to be tracked; she told me about one student, 29, who recently defended her dissertation but whose mom still checks—and calls about—her location.

If watching your kid's real-time location isn't enough, there is Life 360, a tracking app that allows parents to review up to 30 days of time-stamped location history, monitor driving to make sure their kids stay within the speed limit, and get alerts when they arrive at or leave saved locations, such as home, school, and, yes, a college dorm. "Holy sh—," a psychologist who studies kids' resilience started to say when I described the app to him. But a college psychiatrist whose patients include undergrads needed no introduction to Life360. "Students spend so much time complaining to me about that thing," she said. The app has 102 million active monthly users and counting.

What is all of this tracking doing to us? Lately, I have been posing a version of this question to child-development experts as well as parents and teens themselves. "It's funny," Kaitlyn Burnell, a psychologist at UNC Chapel Hill who has studied digital tracking, remarked when I asked her the question. "As you're saying that, I literally got a notification from my 1-year-old's day care saying that she ate a graham cracker."

I have not yet found a randomized controlled trial parsing the effects of parental notifications about graham crackers—nor, to be more serious, are there any long-term data on outcomes for parents who use these apps to monitor their babies from birth. But while it's hard to argue that newborns are suffering from overattentive parenting, developmental psychology does suggest that constant monitoring eventually becomes unhealthy. One of the primary developmental tasks of adolescence, Burnell told me, is achieving a measure of independence. "If you have this metaphorical umbilical cord," she asked, "is that sense of independence going to be adequately developed?"

The more I probed what constant monitoring is doing to kids, the more I also started to wonder what it is doing to parents, on the other end of the umbilical cord. Our phones promise us a kind of omniscience from the moment a kid is born. Even when we are physically apart, we remain digitally tethered. But as parents, we are supposed to undergo our own transformation as our children grow, relinquishing the knowledge and control we once held. "That's an important developmental task for parents too," Burnell said.

And here, we parents might be failing ourselves. We are certainly not thriving. In 2024, the U.S. surgeon general issued a public-health advisory about the mental health of parents, echoing a similar advisory about youth mental health three years earli er. In a national survey in which 18 percent of teens reported anxiety, so did 18 percent of parents. For all the recent concern about a crisis in teen mental health, parents are clearly struggling too.

I think of the immortal words of my 3-year-old this morning: "Calm down, Mom!"

When Maureen Paschal, a college counselor in North Carolina, sent her daughter off to college a few years ago, she was promptly invited to join a group chat for moms of the girls living on the same floor. The moms, she recalls, tracked their daughters' location during sorority rush, watching as they moved from house to house. But the incident that stuck in her mind came one fall morning, when a mom messaged the group chat that her daughter was still in her dorm room. She had a math test in 10 minutes. Could someone ask their kid to go knock on her door?

"I just was like, *This is too much. It's just too much*," Paschal told me. But not

everyone thought so. Another mom soon replied: *My daughter is on her way.*

In a sense, the scene that Paschal described was nothing new. *Helicopter parenting* came into popular use some 20 years ago, and articles about parents who trail their kids, metaphorically and literally, on campus still drop every fall, like acorns from an oak tree. But what stood out to me about this anecdote were all the phones—and how frictionless they make it to indulge every parental anxiety that pops in your head.

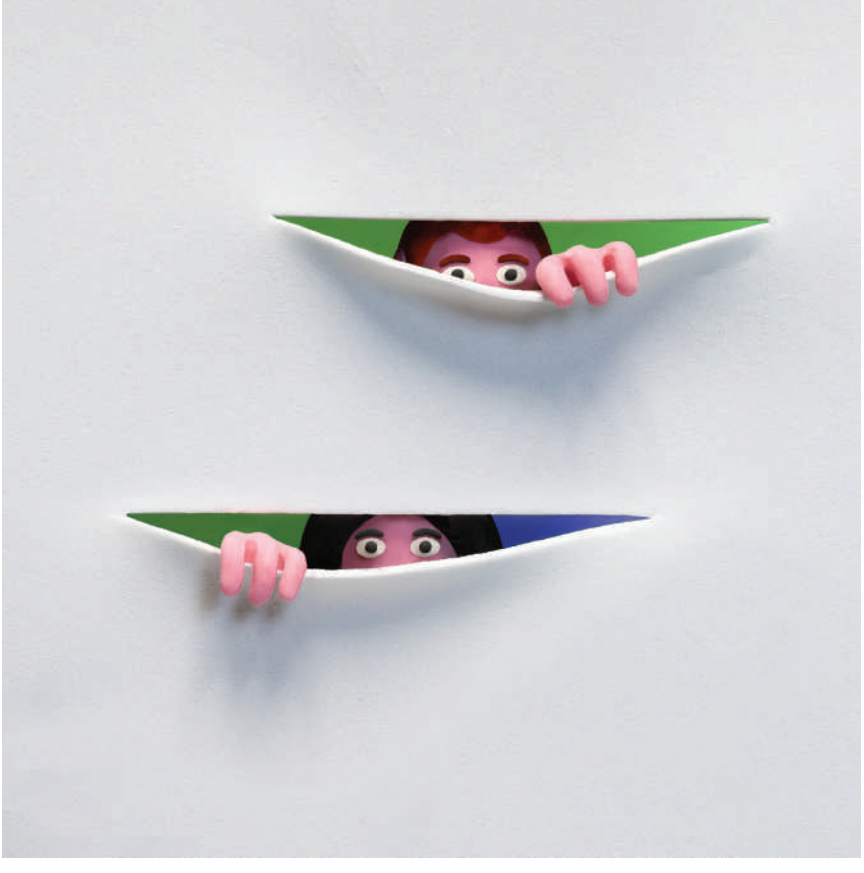
One step leads so easily to another: If you're invited to a group chat for parents, why not join? If you can see where your kid is on campus, why not look? If they're not where they are supposed to be, why not say something? All it takes is a few taps on your phone, which you pull out reflexively anyway whenever you sit on the couch.

Back in the dumbphone era, my own mother could not have spent all day messaging the moms of my freshman dormmates even if she'd wanted to. And I feel quite confident that zero of my teenage friends' parents tracked their location—again, because they couldn't, at least not without an alarming amount of effort.

Then, in 2015, Apple made a software change that may have done more to normalize location tracking than anything else: The company began shipping iPhones preloaded with Find My Friends, allowing people to share their location with one another. As the name implies, the app was not originally created for families, but it's since become a default option for parents tracking their kids. (The app merged with Find My iPhone in 2019 to become just Find My.) Life360, which launched in 2008 after one of its founders saw families trying to find one another in Hurricane Katrina's chaotic aftermath, has taken off in recent years too. Its monthly active users have quadrupled since 2020, with revenue totaling almost half a billion dollars last year. These are the two most popular location-tracking apps. Both are effortless to use.

When I first talked with teens and young adults about location tracking, I would start by asking when their parents began tracking them. I soon realized that this was like asking when they began eating solid foods. *Like, always?* For many kids, location tracking came automatically with their first smartwatch or phone, without much ado. For many parents, too, location tracking eased into their lives because it was available.

"Once we had that tool," a mom of four told me, "it felt like we were irresponsible if we didn't use it." I remember this feeling as well, when I first saw neighborhood moms discussing how to attach an AirTag to a 3-year-old. *Wait, was I supposed to be doing that?* Had I been cavalier—irresponsible—by sending my kid off to preschool without one?



MIGUEL PORLAN

Let's first say this: Location tracking is so useful! Convenience and coordinating logistics are the main reasons cited by about a third of parents who use it, according to preliminary data collected by William Pelham III, a UC San Diego psychologist who last year began a nearly 1,000-family study about location tracking during adolescence. Pelham, who came to this topic after studying substance use and delinquency in teens, told me his original interviews were geared toward asking about behaviors such as breaking curfew, having sex, and taking drugs. The third parent who came in tried to stop the interview, telling the researchers, "You guys don't get it. I use these apps purely for logistics. I use it to figure out when I'm picking him up at high school: *Is he at the east door or the west door?*"

For parents who use location tracking only like this, it's not that complicated—no need to overthink it. But safety is another big motivation, cited as the primary reason by 40 percent of parents in Pelham's data. And Pelham is interested in how parents ensure safety through location tracking: "What is the behavior? Does that mean checking every single day?" Multiple times a day? Calling—or even driving over if the parent sees something they don't like?

Faith, a recent college graduate, told me her mom watched her closely on Life360 in high school. (I'm using only first or middle names for some of the people I interviewed, so they can speak

candidly about their family life.) "She would call me when I'm on the highway, lecturing me about how fast I was going," she said. "Or there was this one time that I was at a friend's house and she didn't recognize the address. And she went to that friend's house from my location and knocked on the door." It was embarrassing, Faith said, but her friend wasn't particularly shocked; this kind of thing happens when everyone is being tracked. When the app glitched, as it sometimes does, her mom would drive out to the random location she saw on Life360. Faith's relationship with her mom was rocky to start with in high school, which made Faith closed off, which made her mom more dependent on Life360, which made Faith feel even less trusted—a downward spiral that many experts I spoke with warned about.

The handful of studies on location tracking of teens have found mixed or only very small effects on the teen-parent relationship, though they also have not probed too deeply into how the parents use it. (Nor have they, altogether, found a consistent relationship between tracking and socioeconomic class.) In general, the studies don't distinguish between the parent who looks at their teen's location only during pickup and the parent driving out to any unknown location on Life 360.

Many parents who use location tracking, I suspect, fall somewhere between these two extremes. Watching their kid's location dot is not about control so much as peace of mind. The apps offer a "perception of safety," Gregory Chase, who studied location tracking of teens as a Ph.D. student in Jensen's lab at UNC Greensboro, told me. He elaborated on the difference: "When you know someone's location, you don't necessarily know who they're with or what kind of behavior they could be engaging in." You can see your son in his dorm room and not know he's binge drinking; you can see your daughter at a friend's and not know about a sexual assault, the majority of which are perpetrated by someone known to the victim. But at least you can rule out your kid lying in a ditch somewhere?

A persistent theme in my conversations, and in conversations that experts say they have with parents, is the sense that the world has become more dangerous and too many risks lurk out there. This is not borne out in the statistics: In just about every way, teenagers are living safer lives than ever. They are not only less likely to be victims of violence than in the 1990s, when crime peaked; they are also less likely to smoke, drink, use hard drugs, or get pregnant. The rates of all these behaviors have plummeted by more than half. "There's some kind of risk- taking dimension that's definitely down in teens," Pelham said.

The pendulum swing toward safety has real benefits, but it may have costs too. Teenagers today are also less likely to get a job, go on a date, or drive—all of which involve some small but tangible risk or uncertainty in the physical world. Their lives have turned inward, and when they do venture out, they're tracked.

By coincidence or not, the rates of depression and anxiety in teenagers have steadily increased. These trends "feel intuitively connected, right?" Pelham said. He is careful to acknowledge that this observation is more inference than empirical fact. The cause of the teen mental-health crisis is a topic of debate, much of it recently centered on the role of social media. But it's hard to imagine that a diminished tolerance for risk and un certainty in teenagers is not affecting their well-being.

And perhaps parents feel it on some level too, because even those who closely track their kids spoke to me with evident nostalgia about their own freer, wilder youth—the opposite of what they are giving their children. "A lot of parents today are just super hypocritical," Henry Stuart, a college junior, told me. His dad still tracks him. "This is the same generation that talks all the time about *Oh, it was so great in the '80s; like, we could just ride our bikes all around the neighborhood, and, you know, we would come home when the sun goes down*," Stuart said. "But then these are the same parents that are on Life360, stalking their kids and watching their every move."

Thomas Parker, a dad of two and stepdad of four, encountered location tracking before he had teens of his own. (He doesn't track but his ex-wife does.) He had used a version of it, called Blue Force Tracking, while deployed in the military. "Everybody hated it," he told me. Well, clarified Parker, now a mental-health counselor in Arkansas, "we loved it, in that if we were ambushed or something and we needed help, they could tell exactly where we were—but it also turned into a nanny state. Like, *You're only supposed to be driving 30 and you're driving 35. You have to slow down*." Even in a war zone, it could be too much.

Russell Shaw told me a story about getting lost on a family vacation when he was 7 years old. He had gone to a video arcade with his older brother, who left first, after asking if Shaw knew the way back to the motel. "I said, 'Uh huh.'" His brother left. "Then I walked out of the place and I had no idea where to go." What next? This was the 1970s: no cellphones, no GPS. In truth, he was not far, perhaps a block away, but in his little-kid brain, he was utterly, deeply lost. He wandered. He eventually found an adult, who took him to the police, who drove him around until he spotted his parents walking down the street in search of him. "It sucked at the time," he said, "and then the next time something like that happened, I thought, *Oh, I can get through this*."

In his telling some half a century later, this story is not about the traumatic experience of getting lost but about how his younger self overcame it. What if his parents had been able to immediately swoop in because they saw his coordinates on their phone? There would have been no getting lost, no "it sucked," but also no eventual triumph. Shaw, who until recently was the head of Georgetown Day School, in Washington, D.C., has written a newsletter for *The Atlantic* about raising resilient kids and is working on a book about the topic. He wonders what all of this location tracking means for kids' resilience. "If we are being tracked or surveilled, and there is a ubiquitous sense that we can be rescued, are we not fully internalizing that sense of our own capacity?" he said. "And ultimately, there will come a time when we do need to stand on our own two feet."

Shaw's story of getting lost stayed with me because I did, in fact, hear the inverted

version from parents who track their kids. The modern tale goes something like this: A teen makes a mistake while driving or taking the subway; in a panic, they call their parents, who look up their location and coach them back to where they need to be—thank goodness for tracking.

One parent who recounted such a scenario is Louise Barkhuus, who actually studies location tracking as part of her research at NYU on human-computer interaction. She has been interested in the topic since 2003; early on, she found it difficult to recruit volunteers willing to install location-tracking apps, so unusual—even invasive—was the technology back then. (These days, she says, "it's so easy.") In her own life, when Barkhuus's daughter first started taking the subway alone, she kept a close eye on her location, and would text if the app showed her on a train going in the wrong direction. Several times, her daughter called her mom lost, asking where to go.

I wasn't sure, at first, how Barkhuus felt about micromanaging her daughter's subway rides. But when I told her about Shaw's story of getting lost at 7, and his worry that parents are no longer giving kids the opportunity to navigate these situations on their own, she responded, "I think it's completely correct." In the moment, though, what mother is going to hang up on her panicking daughter? "We're oversurveilling our children in a way that's not necessary," Barkhuus said, "but I don't know how to take it away."

Barkhuus's own research has chronicled how location tracking has become normalized, even among kids themselves. Sure, teens and young adults with particularly intrusive parents resent the stalking— some have learned to get around tracking, by tinkering with the settings or leaving their phone behind in a friend's mailbox—but many find reassurance in being tracked. (They are also all sharing their location with their friends.) Some of the college students she interviewed actually initiated it with their less tech-savvy parents. They've internalized the idea that they need it. Even Faith, who hated her mom's use of Life360, nevertheless said she understood the underlying motivation: "The world was getting more dangerous and it's just a safety thing, which I agree with fully."

Where might teenagers be hearing that the world is now so dangerous, other than from their parents? Over the past half century, the norms of parenting have veered hard toward safetyism. My colleague Hanna Rosin wrote about this shift in her 2014 *Atlantic* article "The Overprotected Kid," in which she observed that the independence of her own childhood seemed unbelievable a generation later. From 1971 to 2010, in one large U.K. study, the percentage of parents who allowed their 7- and 8-year-olds to walk home from school alone fell from 80 percent to 6 percent. Children absorb the sense that danger can lurk around every street corner, because it's what their parents taught them. Perhaps it shouldn't come as a surprise that when researchers look at the risk factors for anxiety in children, one of the strongest is having an anxious parent; genetics plays a role, but so does parenting.

Children absorb the sense that danger can lurk around every street corner, because it's what their parents taught them.

Barkhuus told me another story, about a time she took the train on her own as a girl of 12. She grew up in Denmark in the '80s, but the freedom with which she remembers moving through the world is not so different from what Americans of the same generation recall. One day, there was a big train accident. Barkhuus was fine, but the trains were delayed on the way home, and she was an hour late to her brother's birthday party.

I imagined how this would play out in 2026, if a 12-year-old spent an hour unaccounted for: Mom calling, calling, calling; checking the news and seeing that there was a train accident; calling; fearing the worst; calling, calling, calling until her kid finally showed up or called back. When Barkhuus got home, she remembers, her mom had simply assumed that her daughter was off doing her thing. She was annoyed, initially, at Barkhuus's tardiness to the party, but she had not constructed a whole scary scenario in her head. "She didn't think about an accident. She wasn't worried."

Without the expectation of being constantly connected, her mother had simply gone on with the birthday party. She trusted that her daughter would eventually show up, and she did.

But what if something *had* happened—outside the video arcade, or on the train? If you, like me, have a tendency to worry, perhaps this shadow of doubt also appeared unbidden in your brain, in which case, boy, do I have a Life360 commercial for you. It opens in a kitchen as a mother sings to her teenage daughter:

> You are my whole wide world,
> My heart, my joy, my baby girl.
> You'll never know how much I love you!
> When you're gone I just think of you …
> Dying.

Her voice drops. The live-action commercial turns into a cartoon enacting her words.

> Every time you leave my sight,
> When you drive to school or stay out
> at night,
> This is where I go,

To the million ways inside my brain
In which you could die at any
given time.
You could bleed out on the street or get
stuck in a mine.
You could get kidnapped by bandits.
Some creep could harvest all your organs
and then sell them online.
There are a million ways inside my brain
In which you could die at any
given time.
You could be flattened like a pancake by
hydraulic machines,
Or be sucked into a wood chipper by
the leg of your jeans …

And so it continues, with more and more outlandish scenarios for a whole minute, as the daughter rolls her eyes.

It's a funny ad, very tongue-in-cheek, I remarked to Lenore Skenazy, who quickly interjected. "You laugh, a little ruefully, but they normalize the idea that catastrophizing—'worst-first thinking,' I call it—imagining your kid dead is just the normal," she said. "And the only way to assuage it is to check, check, check, check your phone." The commercial ends with the daughter handing her mom a phone installed with Life360. "There," the daughter says. "No more freaking out." Just check Life360.

Skenazy is one of the foremost public advocates against this need to "check, check, check, check" on your kids, a position she held long before their phones were beaming their location into our pockets. In 2008, as a columnist for *The New York Sun*, she wrote about leaving her 9-year-old at a Manhattan Bloomingdale's with a subway map, a MetroCard, and $20 to find his way home alone. He made it, "ecstatic with independence," she wrote, but her actions provoked such hostile backlash, she was inspired to a new life's mission. She came out with a book, *Free-Range Kids*, and a reality-TV show, *World's Worst Mom*, where she coaxed overprotective parents to, for example, let their tween daughter use a public bathroom by herself. Skenazy also co-founded the nonprofit Let Grow to promote kids' independence, along with Daniel Shuchman, a private investor and philanthropist; Jonathan Haidt, a social psychologist best known as the author of the antiphone treatise *The Anxious Generation*; and Peter Gray, an evolutionary psychologist who recently came out with his own book blaming the decline in teen mental health on schools, rather than phones. Let Grow's founders may disagree on why, but they do all agree that society is squelching kids' independence— to their detriment.

I mention all of this to suggest that, on one hand, Skenazy's message of child independence has found a receptive audience, at least in certain circles. She is an excellent messenger too, by turns funny and unsparing. Skenazy and her co-founders at Let Grow are frequently featured in magazines such as this one. And parents who inhabit brownstone Brooklyn neighborhoods like mine talk often of aspiring to some flavor of free-range parenting.

On the other hand, the past 20 years have been a long, exhausting march toward more parental surveillance—and surveillance in general. Since *Free-Range Kids* was published, the percentage of parents tracking their kids' location has risen from approximately zero to 100 percent. (I exaggerate, but not that much.) And as I discovered when I had a baby, the products for monitoring your kids at a young age have multiplied with technological progress. When Skenazy's kids were small, baby monitors were more or less audio-only affairs. In this age of smart monitors, she said, imagine what monitoring a baby's every breath does to a parent. "You're supposed to be holding your own breath to say, 'Okay, she breathed. [*Gasp.*] She breathed. [*Gasp.*] She breathed. [*Gasp.*]' And so you're turning regular life into a near disaster that you must be alerted to all the time." An app like this sells short-term peace of mind, she argued, "but it delivers the opposite. It delivers the impression that your child is only safe because you are in control."

And if hyper vigilance is the only way to keep your kid safe, how can you ever stop watching? Today, it's monitoring your newborn's every breath; tomorrow, it'll be physically hovering over your toddler's every step; in 20 years, it'll still be tracking their every step, now from afar. Anxiety becomes a form of caring, surveillance a form of love.

> If hypervigilance is the only way to keep your kid safe, how can you ever stop watching?

Most parents agree—in the abstract—that kids need to confront their own challenges and make their own mistakes as they grow up. They need to learn how to ask for help when lost. They need to face the consequences of oversleeping for a math test before they oversleep for a job interview. But when you're hovering digitally, phone in hand, it is so natural to want to help and so easy to intervene.

Skenazy argues that the apps deprive parents of the opportunity to develop their own muscles: "There's no reps of your letting go of your kid, living without knowledge for a little while, and then them returning safe and sound. And you're realizing, *Wow, I don't have to worry every single second*." Instead we have been trained to check and check again, as if reassurance can be found only on our phones.



MIGUEL PORLAN

Perhaps the last person I expected to endorse Skenazy's views was Chris Hulls, cofounder, executive chairman, and until last year also CEO of Life360. "I really like her," he told me. "I agree with her on so much." Hulls grew up in Marin County, California, as a free-range kid himself—*very* free-range, in fact. At age 11, he told me, he traveled to Kenya on his own, where he lived with the family of an Episcopal priest whom he had recently met. "It was out in the bush with no power, no water, not only no cellphones, but no phones period, so I was completely, completely unfindable." He could call his parents only on a weekly trip to Nairobi. "If something bad happened, it would have taken probably days for my parents to find out, and I almost got bitten by a puff adder out there," he said. "That could have killed me."

Hulls didn't die, obviously, and the experience was a formative one; after high school, he joined the Air Force, then studied business at UC Berkeley, and then founded Life360, which began as a school project after Hurricane Katrina. The early years of running the app were a grind—he lived in a friend's closet—until it finally took off. Hulls has not chosen the risk-averse path in life.

He agrees with Skenazy about the importance of kids' independence. And he agrees that "safetyism is a thing, and it's not a good thing." But in a world where parents are already preoccupied with safety, he argues, Life360 actually grants teenagers more independence, by giving parents the peace of mind to allow activities they other wise would not. "Absolutely some parents do go over the top," he said. "But I think the average teen is getting more freedom and autonomy, not less." Life360's current CEO, Lauren Antonoff, told me the average user opens the app five times a day; a spokesperson later added that less than 4 percent open it 10 times a day and less than 1 percent more than 20 times a day. Most app usage, Antonoff said, is driven by people managing school pickup and other day-to-day logistics, not monitoring for safety.

Safety is core to the company's business, though. Life360 is a freemium app: Basic location tracking is free, but extra safety functions, such as individual driver reports and additional days of location history, can be unlocked for $9.99 to $24.99 a month. (Like all freemium apps, it is constantly nudging you to upgrade.) Safety "drives a lot of our retention and our revenue," Hulls told me. So what was the intent of the ad, I asked, where the mom sings about her daughter dying? "I thought it was the opposite of fearmongering," he said. "It's making fun of fearmongering." But perhaps the real genius is that it does both. The ad has been viewed nearly 9 million times on YouTube.

Maureen Paschal, the mom who told me about the parent group chat for her daughter's dorm, recounted that story because she herself understood the impulse to track. "I knew I would be obsessed," she said, if she had her daughter's location. Paschal's solution was to make her husband use the app on his phone. She could ask for her daughter's location in a real emergency, but by placing a big obstacle—her husband—in the way, she could not check all the time.

Other moms (yes, it is mostly moms who track) also told me about how they came to check the apps out of compulsion, habit, or simple longing. When Julie Bohannon-Wyczynski's daughter went to college, she would open up Life360 every day. "Everything in me wants to check and text her," she recalls thinking. "I need to let it go." She found herself similarly obsessed with her younger sons' grades in their school app, questioning them about any suspicious zeros she saw. "Mom, the teacher has not put in the grades yet," her sons would say, rolling their eyes. Bohannon- Wyczynski, who is a therapist herself, soon realized that checking whenever she had 10 minutes free at work was not healthy behavior.

Indeed, to psychologists, repeatedly checking an app is the opposite of how you're supposed to deal with anxiety. This behavior is called re assurance seeking. "It is a trap," Camilo Ortiz, a clinical psychologist on Long Island, told me. "You feel better immediately, and then you need it again." Or sometimes, you feel worse. Several years ago, Ortiz said, he saw his

daughter's location in the middle of a wooded park during the school day. "I called her and I couldn't get through to her, and I became panicked," he said. "I drove home 100 miles an hour because I was convinced she was kidnapped in a park." (She had actually gone on the subway, and the app had glitched.) "If I were to do it over again, I would track much less."

Recently, Ortiz, who is on Let Grow's advisory board, started piloting what he calls independence therapy for anxious kids. The therapy has kids brainstorm and carry out a series of activities unsupervised, such as taking the bus or walking to the deli to buy cold cuts. These activities are meant to expose kids to small doses of uncertainty and discomfort in scenarios that are not the direct source of their anxieties. (By analogy, Ortiz pointed to a small study where participants who were treated with exposure therapy to spiders became less fearful of heights too.)

One of the first participants, Ortiz said, was a 9-year-old girl who was afraid to sleep in her own bed. She chose to ride the city bus by herself. The girl actually missed her stop, but she found a grown-up, who helped her get off and backtrack the extra blocks home. That night, she slept in her own bed for the first time. "I can't know for sure, but I think the getting-lost part and realizing, *Oh, even if the worst thing happens, I can figure it out* was crucial for her in terms of her own sense of self-efficacy," Ortiz said. Hers is one of four cases that he published in a 2024 study.

When Ortiz pitches independence therapy to parents, "the first question is: *But I can still track them, right?*" Sure, he tells them, but the ultimate goal is no tracking at all. Just as the therapy teaches kids to tolerate uncertainty and discomfort, it's meant to teach parents the same. "We think this is a stealth treatment for parents," he said.

Recently, he's been experimenting with a version of independence therapy for just parents. They meet as a group over Zoom before having their kids carry out a daily unsupervised activity for three weeks. Can treating parents indirectly treat kids? (This basic idea also underlies a more established treatment program called SPACE, or Supportive Parenting for Anxious Childhood Emotions, which has generated enormous interest lately; it teaches parents to stop accommodating their child's anxieties.) One dad who went through Ortiz's program last year, whom I'll call by his middle name, Thomas, told me he had never considered himself anxious. He let his 12-year-old son walk to school and to the park with a friend—albeit while tracking his son's location and sometimes even following on foot "like a private investigator, just to, I don't know, make sure they didn't die."

In therapy, Thomas learned that he was supposed to eventually give up tracking. "Well, that's insane," he recalls thinking. "I must know at all times where he is. When he's 25, I'm going to want to know where he is." He described that moment as "a turning point when I was like, *Oh fuck, I'm just as crazy as all these other parents*." Thomas did stop following his son on foot—but the tracking, well, he hasn't been able to turn that off yet.

> "I must know at all times where he is," one father recalls thinking. "When he's 25, I'm going to want to know where he is."

Other parents told me about learning to counter not just their own anxieties but those of other adults as well, now that everyone's unused to seeing children walking around alone. "Are you really going to let Casey go into Walmart by herself?" Darleen Smith remembers her family asking about her 11-year-old daughter. Smith did let her daughter go to Walmart, and also to CVS and the nail salon and a movie and to set up a lemonade stand, which became six or seven lemonade stands. "She lasted, like, three, four hours some days, and she wasn't complaining at all. That surprised me," she said. Things didn't always work out perfectly; her daughter asked neighbors if she could walk their dog and no one took her up on it. But in giving her daughter the space to fail, she also gave her the space to exceed her expectations. Casey made more than $1,000 at her lemonade stands.

You don't need to sign up for independence therapy to let your kid take the bus or walk through Walmart untracked. You can just do it. You can just do things. But the program, I noticed in my conversations, gave parents much-needed permission to break social norms, however uncomfortable that made everyone involved. It almost always went better than they expected.

When Courtney Perrone, another parent in the group therapy, started having her 9- and 10-year-old daughters plan dinner and buy groceries by themselves, other parents in her small town realized that their kids could do this too. "It ended up sparking even a little bit more independence, I would say, around the neighborhood," she told me. "You now have multiple kids at the grocery store by themselves." And that's the thing about social norms: We create them, and we can re- create them too.*A*

Sarah Zhang is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

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When we talk about financial planning, we tend to focus on money. But wealth is only one part of what makes a life feel secure and meaningful. In fact, according to a recent survey by Gallup and Edward Jones, the vast majority of high earners don't feel financially confident—and the numbers are even lower for women. We spoke with three women in different phases of their lives about what their rich looks like.

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How I Became the Star* of a Hallmark Christmas Movie



By Alexandra Petri

* A very minor character around whom the whole plot kind of revolves!

Photographs by Sophie Green



On a Hallmark movie set, it is always Christmas but rarely winter. When you produce dozens of original holiday movies a year, there is only so much *year* for filming, and so you often find yourself making Christmas in July. As I am doing now in Canterbury, England.

It doesn't reliably snow in Canterbury anymore, even in actual winter, but there is snow on the ground. A man from Snowboy Systems, a producer of artificial snow from the East Midlands, is hosing down the sidewalk; the artificial snow on the sidewalk looks less artificial, he says, when the sidewalk is damp. This sidewalk snow is made from biodegradable paper and has the consistency of wet string cheese. Lining the sides of the cathedral are long strips of fleecy, fluffy artificial snow, like the kind in a department-store window. We are setting up for the big final kiss in the snow—a Hallmark Christmas needs a big final kiss in the snow—and *that* snow, falling from on high, will be made of foam. Three different types of fake snow in a single day of filming! That is what I'm here to study: how to make something so expertly fake that it feels real.

The Hallmark Channel turned 25 this year, and the brand is strong—so strong that specifying "Hallmark *Christmas* movie" feels redundant. On weekends from mid-October through December 2025, more U.S. women were watching Hallmark's programming than that of all other cable networks, including news and sports, according to Hallmark. Over that period as a whole, Hallmark was the second-most-watched cable network among women, behind only Fox News Channel (do you prefer countdowns to Christmas, or wars on Christmas?).

Netflix is now in the holiday-movie game with steamier concepts such as *Hot Frosty*, in which a snowman becomes a man with washboard abs. And short Christmas movies are being made just for your phone, in vertical-video form. Have you seen *Found a Homeless Billionaire Husband for Christmas* on ReelShort, a platform for "microdramas"? The 71 episodes are each less than two minutes long; this microdrama is not even *trying* to have realistic fake snow. My social-media feeds are now garlanded with AI Christmas videos that purport to be time capsules of the 1970s or '80s, showing sweater-clad families laughing as their turkey materializes out of thin air. Congratulations, we used all the water that formerly became snow to give you this creepy, plotless fauxstalgia!

Hallmark, despite the available technology, is still something made by humans for humans. The snow may be fake, but at least the fake snow is real. There is something tremendous about being among people who, using three-dimensional matter, make things *nice* for a living. Washington, D.C., where I live, and the world, where I also live, have both felt *not* nice lately. Sometimes you want to climb into a Hallmark movie.

So I am at Canterbury Cathedral—mere feet from where the English archbishop Thomas Becket was stabbed by the knights of Henry II—to be a Passerby and a Concert Attendee in a fetching winter coat.

But, as with all things made by humans, there is an element of unpredictability. While on set, I receive word that I have been promoted. I will not just be a Passerby. I will not just be a Concert Attendee. I will be Lord Mayor of Canterbury.

Lord Mayor of Canterbury does not sound like an ornament on the side of the tree that faces the wall. Lord Mayor of Canterbury sounds like someone who's actually in this movie—who may, in fact, have to *act*, for real. And this is when, under my fetching winter coat, I start to sweat.

IN THE BEGINNING, we had winter but no Christmas. Then, during the reign of Roman Emperor Augustus, someone named Jesus was born. It took a while for news of this event to spread, and still longer for this event to become a holiday. Celebrations really got into gear in the fourth century, after Constantine converted to Christianity. By the 12th century, the holiday had sprawled into a period of wassail drinking and jubilant misrule; in some churches, a choirboy was made a fake bishop and allowed to give a sermon. Becket himself gave the Christmas sermon in 1170; the stabbing, on the future Hallmark set, happened four days later.

There were a few evolutionary hops between vassals wassailing and American families zoning out in front of their TV sets, and many of them happened in the 19th century: Charles Dickens's ghost story staved Christmas into a beloved fable of generosity, and *The Nutcracker* turned the holiday into a hallucinatory nightmare. The 20th century gave us Bing Crosby's workhorse playlist, *The Muppet Christmas Carol*, and Mariah Carey's jingle-jangling anthem of the pining heart.

And on August 5, 2001, along came the Hallmark Channel, which gift wrapped two millennia of scattered ritual and merriment into a digestible box the size of our TV screens. Its "Countdown to Christmas" helped cement the holi*day* as a holi*season*, which lately begins before Halloween. Turn on your TV at any point during this time and see the modern image of Christmas: a man in a turtleneck sweater kissing a self-possessed heroine in the falling snow.

Before Hallmark, what original TV movies could you watch in the Christmas season? The landscape was pretty dismal. Consider the TV listings for December 2000. There were just a handful of



The team from Snowboy Systems prepares Canterbury Cathedral for fake snowfall.

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holiday-movie premieres, including *Special Delivery*, with Andy Dick, and VH1's *A Diva's Christmas Carol*, with Vanessa Williams as Ebony Scrooge. On Fox Family, you could catch an airing of 1996's *The Angel of Pennsylvania Avenue*, in which three children try to get President Hoover (*President Hoover?*) to pardon their wrongfully convicted father in time for Christmas.

But even Hallmark took a little while to find its stride, as anyone who has watched the 2003 classic *A Carol Christmas* can attest. Have you ever wanted to see Gary Coleman, William Shatner, and (an uncredited) James Cromwell play the ghosts of Christmases past, present, and future? Or hear Tori Spelling utter the Dickensian paraphrase "I'm gonna hold Christmas in my heart"? Run, don't walk, to rent this gem.

But then, in 2006, we got *The Christmas Card*. This is the Hallmark Christmas blueprint, and it is in every way a perfect film. The stereotypical Hallmark-movie plot can sound a bit dystopian: "She was a busy woman from the big city. Then one day the snow trapped her in Christmasville, and she never left …" *The Christmas Card* inverts this paradigm. Our protagonist, Faith, already lives in a small town. What's more, she loves this town, and her job at the family lumber mill, more than anything—a fact that is lost on her absentee city-slicker boyfriend, Paul, an international wine broker in a tiny sports car. But, fortunately, Faith has sent a Christmas card to a soldier named Cody, stationed in Afghanistan, and Cody is so charmed by the card that when he gets a break from fighting the War on Terror, he visits her town. He then saves Faith's dad from an out-of-control speeding car and starts helping at the lumber business. He also picks her up in a sleigh—with her favorite blanket. Wine Broker Paul does not stand a chance. There's an exquisite scene where Paul spends two hours in the woods yelling into his cellphone about wine while, behind him, Cody takes down Christmas trees with a chainsaw.

As with any great romance, this one makes you like the lead characters instantly and then spend the next 90 minutes shouting, "NO! DON'T MARRY PAUL! ALL HE CARES ABOUT IS RIESLINGS!" Faith's dad tells Cody that he needs someone to come back to, from the War on Terror, and this movie is about exactly that: the joy of returning to the cozy and familiar. By the end of the movie, you are frothing at the mouth lest something prevent Faith and her soldier beau, who have *identical diner orders*, from getting together. And of course they do, with a kiss in the snow. You can see why this masterpiece spawned a whole genre, and a legion of fans.

My own mother, who initially refused to be quoted on the record for this article, is one of these fans. But can she remember the name of even one Hallmark movie? Absolutely not. It feels almost rude to ask—like demanding that a fan of winter name a favorite snowflake. The point is not the snowflake (which is unique and exquisite). The point is the flurry, and its overall effect. Does my mother love Hallmark movies individually? Yes. But what she really loves is being surrounded by them *all*. She is watching one right now, as I type this. (It is August.)

The flurry blurs everything together. In addition to *A Carol Christmas*, there is *It's Christmas, Carol!* (with Carrie Fisher! though not as Carol). Then there's *Time for Me to Come Home for Christmas. Time for You to Come Home for Christmas. Time for Us to Come Home for Christmas. Time for Him to Come Home for Christmas.* (These are all real. It's a franchise.) *Time for Her to Come*



Above: ***The actor Nigel Pilkington (*****far left*****) engages the author (*****second from right*****) before the cameras start rolling for the climactic choral sequence.*** **Opposite page:** ***The author, dressed as Lord Mayor, carries her humbler Passerby costume.***

Home for Christmas. *Time for Them to Come Home for Christmas*. To me, this implies the existence of a more sinister *Time for It to Come Home for Christmas* (tagline, from Yeats: "What rough beast, its hour come round at last, slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?").

An unofficial list on IMDb counts 507 Hallmark Christmas movies, from the highest-rated, *A Biltmore Christmas* (2023), in which a magic hourglass whirls our heroine back to the 1940s, to the lowest-rated, *A Christmas Wedding Tail* (2011), with Jay Mohr voicing a Labrador named Rusty. (That list of 507 includes several Hanukkah films and a Kwanzaa film.)

This year, "Countdown to Christmas" will feature 34 new movies (a Hallmark record). The flurry is now a blizzard, blanketing our screens with mass-produced mirth and brand partnerships—with the NFL (*Holiday Touchdown: A Bears Love Story*) and Disney World (what if we locked eyes in the hall of animatronic presidents?). But the key ingredient will always be Christmas, which is an "emotional intensifier" in both Hallmark movies and real life, according to the historian Gerry Bowler, who once wrote a biography of Santa Claus. "We spend maybe 10 percent of our lives under the sway of Christmas," he told me. "Whether you observe it or not, you have to live in it. It is the one time of the year in which we take magic seriously." We act nicely, he says, and expect others to act nicely.

So, in May, I sent a couple of emails to the Hallmark publicity team saying it was my dream to write a feature about being an extra in a Hallmark movie. They responded: *Can you be in the U.K. in July?*

GOOD NEWS! Maria, the publicist who arranges my Hallmark debut, says she's read the script for *Christmas in Canterbury* and "LOVED it." It is inspired by a true event: the first performance by a girls' choir at Canterbury Cathedral, which happened in, amazingly, 2014. One of the producers, Oneida Crawford, saw the news and instantly thought: *This miniature feminist triumph deserves to be a Hallmark movie.*

The Hallmark heroine in *Christmas in Canterbury* is played by Jessy Schram, blond and blue-eyed and so iridescently sunny that you want to bend over backwards to do nice things for her. This is not her first time being a Hallmark heroine. Remember *Time for Them to Come Home for Christmas*? She played a woman who, despite amnesia from a bridge-related head injury, is so iridescently sunny that everyone wants to bend over backwards to do nice things for her. Hallmark heroines are a very specific sort of person. They are "smart" and "relatable" and have "1,000-watt smiles" but are "no shrinking poinsettias," according to the book *Hallmark Channel Countdown to Christmas: Celebrate the Movie Magic (Revised Edition)*, whose cover promises "Recipes, Watch Party Games & More."

Will Kemp is the Hallmark gentleman in *Christmas in Canterbury* (he's also a producer). Besides starring in a substantial number of Hallmark movies, including *A Not So Royal Christmas* and *Christmas Waltz*, he was featured in *The Scorpion King 4: Quest for Power*, which I have not seen but does

"We spend maybe 10 percent of our lives under the sway of Christmas. Whether you observe it or not, you have to live in it."



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not sound like a Christmas movie. Will is English, has stunningly green eyes, and looks like he moisturizes exactly the right amount.

And then there are the Hallmark extras, or background actors. In *The Christmas Card*, the extras buy Christmas trees from Cody, sit in church pews, and attend a dance at a veterans' hall. In *Time for Them to Come Home for Christmas*, they walk through town in their winter coats, listen to street performers play the theme song, and then normalize dancing along. They populate the world of Hallmark and make it more real, yet they never draw attention to themselves. The most I have thought about Hallmark extras is: *What a nice winter coat. But not as nice as the heroine's!*

Now I need to think about how to be an extra. So I call up an acting coach named Mary Malaney and ask for advice. "I will be dressed as though it is winter, and so I will be very hot," I tell Mary. "Do you know how to act cool?"

Mary has detailed, smart advice about using my sense memories of moving through city streets in winter, thinking about how I would hold my arms close to my sides and keep my head down to avoid the wind. I furiously take notes.

"I also have to attend a concert," I tell her.

Easy, Mary says. "If you hear something really beautiful, just allow yourself to hear it. And enjoy. And whatever is on your face in that moment is truth."

"How ambitious of a backstory can I do?" I ask. "What if I'm, like, the ghost of Thomas Becket and I've come back to haunt the cathedral?"

"Maybe not in this instance," Mary says. "Part of being in an ensemble of any kind is knowing how you serve the story. And unfortunately in this one, Alexandra, you are probably not the main character."

Extras are supposed to bring their own costumes, so Publicist Maria sends me a mood board of outfits for each of my two characters: Concert Attendee and Passerby. Concertgoers should bring burgundies, creams and whites, forest greens, deep reds, beiges, or other "rich winter tones," and are to "dress smart, elegant, and subtly festive." Passersby are instructed to avoid "modern sportswear, activewear, or trainers." I borrow a magnificent black-and-red-checked coat from a friend with actual taste. I bring boots with heels, even though I hate wearing heels and will be miserable. The boots look wintry, and the suffering will give me character, whatever that character turns out to be.

But wardrobe prep is not enough. I need Hallmark wisdom too, from the woman who wrote that perfect blueprint, *The Christmas Card*. "Where I live now, you can't swing a candy cane without hitting a Christmas-tree farm," Joany Kane says on the phone from her home in Western Massachusetts. Although she still mentors aspiring Hallmark screenwriters, Joany's main focus these days is Wicked Merry, an original pirate-romance universe inspired, in

part, by her love of Jimmy Buffett. (Volume three of her *Aargh Is for Romance* book series is titled *If Hallmark Movies Had Pirates*.)

"It always seemed to me that Christmas is the best time for romance, even better than Valentine's Day," Joany tells me. "Valentine's Day is kind of a made-up holiday, but Christmas is all about hope and magic."

What makes a good Christmas movie? Romance, of course. "I tend to go for swoon," Joany says. She isn't into death or trauma. She wants her lead characters to lock eyes and feel something. "Like in *The King and I*, when he just puts his hand on her waist when they're dancing? And he pulls her close? Oh my gosh, I just live for those moments. Every single script I write, I write around *How can I get to this moment?*"

A moment of swoon. *Whatever is on your face in that moment is truth.* All I have to do in Canterbury is be in the moment and respond as a normal human would. Doing things with my body, like a person. But anyone who knows me will tell you: This is not where I excel.

CANTERBURY IS a beautiful old English cathedral city. Charles Dickens liked it so much that he set some of *David Copperfield* in it. The Nazis disliked it so much that they destroyed a chunk of it during the Baedeker Blitz. Today, you can eat at a pub named the Old Weavers House that has been around longer than the city of Cleveland. You can go punting on a trout-filled river past a former priory that was built before the Aztec empire. And you can have fish and chips with Publicist Maria and then walk to a real Canterbury street where the magic—the niceness—is under way.

This is day 13 of the 15-day shoot (a typical length for a Hallmark production). The crew has been through a lot together, including choir rehearsals with children and a July heat dome. This film has been shot in roughly chronological order, meaning that tomorrow will be the first half of the climax, a choral concert where I will play Concert Attendee. And day 15 will feature the big final kiss in the snow. (Spoiler alert! Indeed, everything that follows—and some of what precedes—contains mild spoilers for *Christmas in Canterbury*, which airs December 11.)

Have you ever thought, *Theater is fine, but what I really want is to watch just one little scene entirely liberated from its context, eight or nine times in a row. Each time should be slightly different, but also very hard to hear, and there should be a man holding a boom mic standing in the way*? If so, you will love being on a movie set. This particular set is a scenic lane of colorful rowhouses all playing



The stars of **Christmas in Canterbury**, *Jessy Schram and Will Kemp, sit ensconced in wool and plaid—two crucial Hallmark ingredients.*

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themselves. A light on a cherry picker illuminates the street from above, making this entire block look like it is being abducted by a UFO. The night is quiet and pleasant, but punctuated by bursts of joy or distress from a neighboring pub (the World Cup semifinal is on). Will Kemp is about to walk Jessy Schram to her door, where they will no doubt want to kiss but refrain from doing so, because the climactic choral scene has not happened yet.

I don't have access to the script, so I can only guess the plot from the snippets of dialogue I hear and the broad outline from Publicist Maria: Jessy Schram is Rose, a choir director from Vienna, Ohio. After her beloved Grandma Bud dies, she leaves home looking for adventure. She travels to Canterbury and stays with her heavily pregnant friend, who is a choir director for girls. When this friend becomes too pregnant to direct, Rose is asked to fill in—because everyone thinks she's an esteemed choir director from Vienna, *Austria*. She meets the straitlaced Harrison (Will Kemp), who is also a choir director—for *boys*. While competing for the coveted Christmas Eve concert slot, Hallmark heroine and Hallmark gentleman feel a spark that inspires them to *merge* their *choirs*.

But no merging has yet taken place. So, tonight, Will walks Jessy home to her door (blue, with a Christmas wreath on it). They are discussing whether their night was an adventure? (It's hard to hear.) Yes, Jessy says, "because we kept our hearts open." They do multiple takes.

John Barrymore allegedly called love "the delightful interval between meeting a beautiful girl and discovering she looks like a haddock"; similarly, I feel that takes two through nine are the interval between marveling at the heartfelt dialogue and doubting that any human being would ever say these words in this order. But Jessy and Will are making it work. And so are the extras. Two extras walk through the scene, arm in arm, on an unerring path just where the camera needs them to be. I watch them in awe. They appear to be chatting naturally, yet they make no sound. Remarkable. Tomorrow, this is going to be my job.

"Because we both kept our hearts open," Jessy says again, warmly. Between takes, the team from Snowboy sprays down the street.

"Because we both kept our hearts open," Jessy says yet again, flirtier this time. She exudes Hallmark energy from every pore. At one point she will curse in front of the children's choir and immediately revise "FUCK!" to "BUCKETS FULL OF CHRISTMAS!" Even the curses are festive here. That's how deep the nice is on a Hallmark set.

It is so deep that Will Kemp is looking for ways to help people "level up" in all parts of the production. This, apparently, includes me. Before I leave set for the night, he tells me I've been promoted to Lord Mayor of Canterbury.

I WILL EASE INTO that illustrious station via my first on-camera appearance as a humble Passerby outside the cathedral. (Or am I the Lord Mayor, walking among the people? I am never certain of the answer to this question, so I decide to play Lord Mayor and Passerby as two distinct characters, to show my range.) A shuttle brings us extras to a building full of chairs and tents that serve as changing rooms. There is also a costume rack and a hair-and-makeup area near the window.

The first step for extras (called "supporting artists" in the U.K.) is to show the outfits that we have brought, for approval or rejection by the costume team. The team goes into British raptures over my borrowed black-and-red coat, in the sense that they tell me I have "fit the brief."

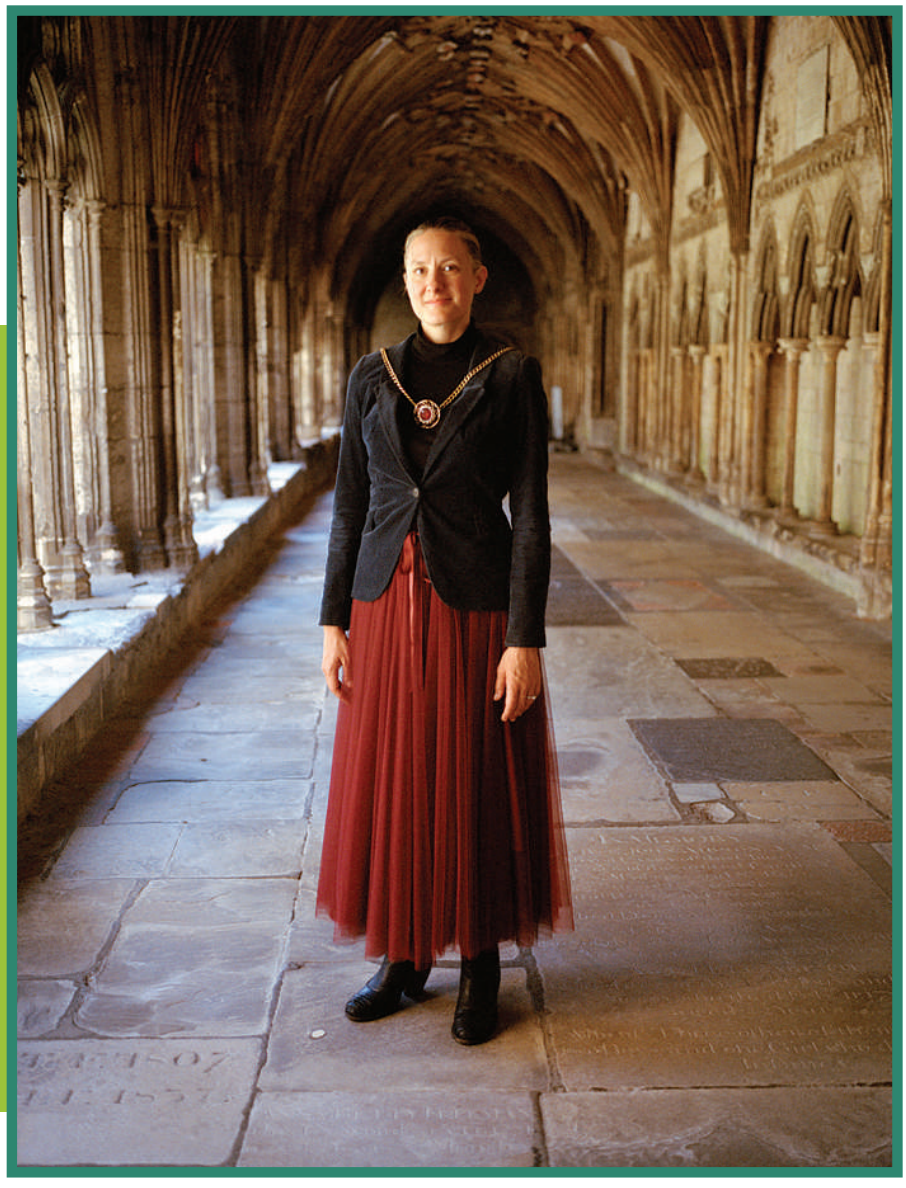
I am surrounded by other extras, and quickly share their conviction that this is one of the most exciting jobs on Earth. There is Helen, a model, who became a supporting artist because Ridley Scott's *Napoleon* needed people for an orgy scene. She says the filmmakers decided to go with younger extras for the orgy (rude!), but this near miss got her into the casting database, and she has been having a blast in the background ever since. "You'll actually find the background is where the interest is," Helen says. "Without the background, you have no texture."

Chloe, a Hallmark superfan and certified "Kemper," is appearing in this movie because Will Kemp messaged her on Instagram and invited her to do so. "I probably sound obsessed," she says apologetically, after telling me that she has attended six straight Christmas Cons, has been on two Hallmark cruises, and has a tattoo of the Hallmark crown logo on her arm. What is it about Hallmark that she loves so much? "It's such a community," she says. "And even the stars, they are so nice."

Articulating what makes Hallmark magical is indeed tough. Even my mother, with whom I've watched so many of these movies, can only offer: "They are predictably upbeat, generally enjoyable, and feature a suite of actors who become familiar faces over time." *Generally enjoyable?* As a *Star Wars* nut myself, I have less difficulty explaining my fandom. "It's a multigenerational, modern-day myth," I would say about *Star Wars*. It's life, but *space*. Something similar can be said of Hallmark, which is its own genre of mythology: life, but *nice*. It's life, but with someone helping you out of a sleigh in a gentlemanly manner.

It is time to become a Passerby. The assistant directors herd us to the flagstone streets, where we will be captured for posterity walking into the cathedral, then *sitting* in the cathedral. It is balmy. I am comfortable in my coat and white knit hat, complete with a pom-pom. First, we have a five-second establishing shot of people walking into the cathedral. Simple! All I have to do is walk in a normal manner. Someone shouts at me—I think it is the third assistant director, but I am too excited to be sure—to look up at the cathedral mid-walk, as a person might do. So I put my hands on my hips and tilt my whole body up to the sky like a little teapot. I know that this is not correct, but I have more pressing problems: I have forgotten how to walk. I have the strong sense that it involves my feet, but what if that's wrong? Maybe it's some kind of hop? And do you swing your arms while you do it? No, that can't be. I am being a marionette instead of a person.

This take was either so good or so bad that they do not ask me to do more of them. "I feel like you just forget how to walk, don't you?" says Nathan, a fellow supporting artist. "I've done so many scenes, like, walking down stairs, and that's the worst for me." It is amazing how you can do any action hundreds or thousands of times without thinking about it, and the second



The author as Lord Mayor of Canterbury, standing completely normally

you have to do it for an audience, you become a hapless lump attempting to walk on dry land for the first time.

Next I have to be two things I've never been—a lord and a mayor—*simultaneously*. What if she, too, has to walk?

MY ACTING EXPERIENCE is somewhat limited. In my youth, I tended to play numbered parts rather than named parts: 23rd Cousin A in a middle-school production called *The Land of the Dragon* (there was also a 23rd Cousin B who repeated my lines after I said them), and Puck 2 (or possibly 3) of an unspecified number of Pucks at Shakespeare summer camp.

So I would describe my acting level as "exactly correct for a production where many of the featured extras are friends or relatives of the producer." You see me perform and think, *Now, that's someone who was available on the date they were filming*. But there aren't three Lord Mayors, or even two. There is one.

I email my acting coach in a panic. Due to the time difference, I don't hear back from her immediately. Instead, I study famous mayors. I pull up Rudy Giuliani and Fiorello La Guardia on my phone. There are many pictures of Fiorello La Guardia standing behind a desk looking like a fish who is about to burst into song. I try to replicate these mayoral expressions.

I also email the actual Lord Mayor of Canterbury, a man named Alister Brady whose photo and contact information I find online: "Do you have any advice for someone who wants to wordlessly convey the essence of Mayor of Canterbury?" Amazingly, I get no response to this email.

My Lord Mayor outfit includes not a sash but a chain of office, which a costumer carefully stitches onto my costume blazer. Although the chain has a large, sparkling red jewel that vaguely resembles the Eye of Sauron, the accessory is, on closer inspection, held together by a safety pin. My fellow extra Natalie says

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that viewers will call me the "Temu Mayor," and I am not sure she's wrong. Maybe the mayor sold her real chain of office to pay for choir music? (This is me doing character work.) Natalie says she played a dwarf in *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power*, complete with dwarf ears, so she knows what a powerful talisman should look like.

I get myself into costume, trying to remain calm. Speaking of Natalies, Natalie Portman has said that scents help her get into character. Well, I have brought a scent with me: Dove's Cinnamon Pumpkin Pie deodorant, a product that exists. Thanks to this product, my armpits smell like someone is cooking Thanksgiving dinner in them. Hopefully, this will add a subtle sense of festivity to all of the mayor's interactions.

Hair and makeup's vision for the Lord Mayor is hair pulled back into a severe bun with what feels like 800 hairpins, and no makeup. "I think the Lord Mayor might wear mascara," I say timidly, and they gently apply some.

The photographer documenting my experience wants to take a portrait of me in my mayor outfit. This takes longer than it should. "Stand normally," she urges. Unfortunately, I have never in my life stood normally and am not about to break this habit for her. Also, I cannot stop bursting into laughter. "You know, the forbidden laugh," I say to her, as if this explains anything.

Listen. I have a lifelong condition that causes me to react to serious situations with compounding fits of laughter. In dancing school, I had to write a letter of apology for destroying a lecture with the giggles. I once went to a wedding where the officiant surprised the bride and groom with an arts-and-crafts project during the vows. As the couple began cutting hearts out of red construction paper, I began shaking with laughter, then weeping with laughter. Fortunately, you are supposed to cry at weddings. "It's just so beautiful," I managed, through my sobs. (If you are reading this, Chris, it was a lovely wedding, really.)

We receive the call to set, which is the actual cathedral, playing itself, but nicer. The cathedral choir looks beautiful, thanks to the lighting team and the strategic placement of dozens of fake candles. The job of Concert Attendee would have been just to sit there, take it in, and applaud at the end. The Lord Mayor's role is somewhat more involved. *Everything*, it turns out, hinges on the mayor—and on her ability to make a normal face.

"YOU'RE THE MAYOR?" asks a man with a mustache. He moves to sit next to me, because he says his character would want proximity to power. He is a professional actor named Nigel Pilkington (he played a dog walker on *Slow Horses*) who is *Christmas in Canterbury*'s antagonist, Alastair Sinclair. He says that when the camera starts rolling he is going to interact with me. Oh *no*.

Someone down the choir stall—another professional actor, Emily Swain, playing the school headmistress—indicates that she's going to look at me in a significant way when the song medley starts, because it includes the mayor's favorite song. The mayor's favorite song?! I feel like Jessy Schram as the amnesiac in *Time for Them to Come Home for Christmas*: I don't know myself but keep discovering that I mean a lot to other people.

Apparently the mayor is supposed to love this choral performance—information that I am learning right as the camera is about to roll. The mayor loves it so much that Jessy Schram gets to keep her job, despite all of the Vienna confusion. "Our Lord Mayor was in attendance tonight and was delighted with your rendition of her favorite carol" is a line in this movie—*a fact I learn in real time as the actor says it, on camera, in front of me*.

It is fine. It's fine! Acting is reacting. I can react. I live to react. All I have to do is make faces. Normal faces. Like Fiorello La Guardia.

One of the ADs now explains what we are meant to do during this choral performance: enjoy it. My acting coach was right! First, we will clap politely for the other, lesser choir that is leaving the stage, and then we will go *wild* for the collaboration between Jessy's and Will's choirs. I can do this.

Clack goes the clapper board. We are rolling. The lesser choir leaves. The boy choir members take their places onstage. The prerecorded vocal track of their singing starts to play, announced by a metronomic *click-click-click*. "*Gaudete, gaudete, Christus est natus*." The choir lip-synchs perfectly. Now the second choir—with girls!—runs onstage to join them. Jessy Schram gets pulled into the mix. To encourage the choir, the movie's choreographer (Will Kemp's sister) is gesturing exuberantly off camera. On camera, Jessy Schram is conducting! Will Kemp is also conducting! The choir is singing *together*.

The camera pans over our row to see how we are taking this. This is *the* moment. *My* moment. I have no idea what faces I am making. I feel delirious. Whenever they yell "Cut," I assume it's because my face is ruining the sequence. I keep forgetting to look at Nigel. "I am making the weirdest faces I've ever made in my life," I type into my Notes app.

Fortunately, gaping open-mouthed like Fiorello La Guardia is actually *correct* for this mayor, who is supposed to be delighted by this children's-choir performance. Oneida Crawford, the producer, drops by and compliments me on my reactions. She later suggests that I become a professional supporting artist.

They … want more of me? I keep getting promoted. We are now going to film some cutaways to the mayor in conversation with Alastair and a character named Hans Mueller, who has arrived from Vienna, *Austria*, to reveal that Jessy Schram did not. He's played by Will Kemp's younger brother, Roland, a Pilates instructor who urges us to do "thoracic breaths" between takes.

We move to a different choir stall. "You're the Lord Mayor?" one of the children from the choir asks when we're not rolling. "You've been to my house! You're friends with my mom!" I have? I am? I seem to have completely crossed over to the Hallmark dimension.

The next scene is as follows: Hans Mueller, the Lord Mayor, and Alastair are deep in conversation. A repentant Alastair needs to look up and bow in acknowledgment to Jessy Schram, and then he needs to get back to our conversation. Talking without talking is much harder than those other extras made it look. Here is a sample of our inaudible, improvised dialogue, as far as I can remember:

HANS: Have you been to the beach?

THE LORD MAYOR: I don't know what you're saying! I'm the mayor!

HANS: I've been to the beach.

THE LORD MAYOR: I am too busy to go to the beach, because I'm the mayor.

This is apparently going so well that they decide to get a close-up of us talking. And they bring the microphone over. A microphone? Are they going to record us talking out loud? The camera starts rolling.

Some moments feel as though they last much longer than they actually do. I imagine Thomas Becket thought that getting stabbed by those knights took a long time.

"This cathedral certainly has a rich history," Alastair improvises confidently, and I freeze. In this moment I am thinking many things. One is: *How did I get here?* Another: *Do I attempt to do a British accent in conversation with actual British people, one of whom is a professional actor?*

I remember opening my mouth. I know that some form of sound must have come out of it. I have no recollection of what this sound was, other than that it did not come out in anything remotely like a British accent, whatever my intentions were. I think I may have said, "Indubitably"?

I hear voices. "Show them your chain!" Is that the director herself, Shamim Sarif? Obediently, I brandish the chain. I can see the safety pin holding it in place. *Temu Mayor*, I think. "We spent all our budget on choirs," I say out loud, in what is very clearly not a British accent. This is when I break. The forbidden laugh comes lurching out of me, in great sobs. Tears are pouring down my cheeks. My sweat is redolent of cinnamon.

Somehow we are still rolling.

"Does it have magical powers?" either Hans or Alastair is saying. I am fully hysterical. "It is a talisman," I mutter, through my tears. I try to rescue the moment, as I did at the wedding, by saying, "I just loved the music so much." This does not work.

"We've lost the Lord Mayor," someone says.

THE NEXT DAY, I am talking with Jessy Schram. "I didn't realize that the Lord Mayor was, like, the pivot point," I tell her. We are standing outside Canterbury Cathedral in the final hours of filming.

"Oh, you are actually a plot point," she says. The mayor's love of the choir performance is the only reason her character is allowed a job now in Canterbury.

Jessy notes that, earlier in the script, her character references the existence of the Lord Mayor, saying that the song they're set to perform ("Once in Royal David's City") is his favorite song. Then one of the choir girls corrects her. Not *his*. The Lord Mayor is a *she*. "So then when I turned around," Jessy says, "and I saw you dressed in your beautiful jewel, I was so excited." She felt that my mayor had a "really good vibe about her." Is this more great acting from Jessy Schram, or did my acting coach work her own magic?

Will Kemp also offers encouragement after I apologize for my giggle fit. "Sometimes you become so aware of the ridiculousness of what you're really doing," he says, "and you have a bit of an out-of-body experience. And then you either giggle, cry, or have to sit down, or you do all three. So you're not alone."

A tear dribbles down my cheek. "You're crying," my Hallmark gentleman says. Are we having a moment? One of those moments that Joany Kane writes around? In fact, no. There is sunscreen in my eye.

I think about fake things and real things and how Hallmark twists the two into a delicious candy cane. I think about how Joany Kane owes the love of her life to *The Christmas Card*. She was 34, two years before the Hallmark Channel even existed, working at a lumber mill and writing her screenplay for a Christmas romance. One day, when the loggers came to collect their pay, she locked eyes with one of them. It was a thunderbolt. It was the kind of thing that would happen in a Hallmark movie. And suddenly, not only had she found a love interest in Logger Honey (as she would call him) but also she had realized that her movie needed to be set at a lumber mill. True story and Hallmark story, real and fake, forever blended. When she finished the screenplay, she went to deliver a copy to Logger Honey for him to read and ended up back at his place. He played his favorite music. They danced. She spent the night. "Probably spending the first night together was not Hallmark," Joany notes. "More like Netflix. Or, you know, Cinemax, 15 years ago. But it was true love for both of us." She never left. It's been 27 years.

Maybe it's possible to bridge the real and the fake. If it weren't for Joany's own life, *The Christmas Card* wouldn't exist. If it weren't for *The Christmas Card*, she wouldn't have gone over to deliver the script to Logger Honey—and she wouldn't now be waking up every day next to the love of her life. "Everybody's chasing that





The children's choir, another Hallmark ingredient, rehearses for the climactic sequence in the cathedral.

SOPHIE GREEN FOR *THE ATLANTIC*

moment of feeling," Joany says. And if you can't quite find that moment in real life, Hallmark has you covered.

Now it's time to catch that moment on film: the final kiss, in front of the cathedral. Our leads approach each other in their perfect coats. Snowboy's machine blasts its foam into the sky. When the foam falls, it is snowing, even though I know it isn't really. This winter in July is a kind of Christmas gift—something we are making, together, so that the world will be a little nicer. So that we can turn on the TV and see magic. Made magic. Which is, of course, the only kind we get.

Night falls on Canterbury.

As we get set up for the final shot, I watch the monitors. The crew sits against a wall, watching the monitors too. Will's luminous, moisturized face is framed by two Christmas trees. For a moment, we are all watching a Hallmark movie. Nowhere on Earth is the artificiality more obvious than here, on the set, with the boom mic just off camera and the Snowboy machine going *VOOOOOOOOOOOM*. Yet there, on the screen, it is briefly real. Magic. The ordinary, given back to us, properly illuminated.

Christmas feels so close and tangible that I can almost smell it—a real pumpkin pie, baking very close by.

Wait, never mind. That is my armpit. *A*

Alexandra Petri is a staff writer at The Atlantic.



ILLUSTRATION BY LAUREN PETERS-COLLAER

MR. PEPTIDE

THE INDEFATIGABLE CROATIAN WHO MADE THE WORLD AMINO-ACID CURIOUS

BY TOM BARTLETT

The wellness industry loves a secret cure. I encountered dozens of them at Dave Asprey's Beyond Biohacking Conference, held in May on several floors of a hotel in downtown Austin. There were supplements galore, of course: algae tablets for detoxification, ketones for concentration, nitric oxide for circulation. One company claimed that its capsules contained quantum energy. I saw people hooked to IV vitamin drips, sweating inside infrared saunas, and sealed in hyperbaric oxygen chambers. I watched a woman climb into a giant quartz bowl, which someone then struck with a mallet. I tried a pair of inflatable compression pants that rhythmically squeezed my legs to stimulate lymphatic drainage. I also stripped to my boxers and spent a thrillingly miserable two and a half minutes inside a cryotherapy booth.

The main attraction, though, was peptides, the short chains of amino acids now hyped as miracle drugs. In a ballroom packed with several hundred people, Asprey and a fellow health guru, Jay Campbell, extolled the many virtues of peptides, railed against restrictions on their promotion, and predicted a future in which they transform mainstream medicine. Both men are in their 50s, with shredded physiques and zero medical degrees. Asprey is best known for popularizing the trend of dumping butter and coconut oil into your coffee. Campbell made his name advocating for testosterone replacement

and now bills himself as one of the world's leading authorities on peptides. He spoke excitedly about one cutting-edge compound, called Klotho, that can "literally lower your biological age." He told the crowd that he's heard from women in their 70s who, after taking Klotho and the peptide FLGR242, started menstruating again. (Instead of imploring them to call their doctor, which is what the American Cancer Society recommends for postmenopausal bleeding, his advice was to "keep injecting.") As peptides become more readily available over the next few years, Campbell anticipates that disease as we know it will come to an end, including "ontological" mutations. (I'm guessing these are mutations that afflict only philosophers.)

Campbell and Asprey have been promoting underground peptides in their books and on their podcasts for years. Lately, though, these gray-market drugs have started to gain traction with a broader audience. The most talked-about among them goes by the cryptic designation BPC-157. It's commonplace enough that asking questions about it immediately tags you as a tourist. BPC-157 is a component in most of the popular peptide combos, ones with names such as Glow, Klow, and Wolverine (a reference to the comic-book superhero with self-healing powers, not the carcass-eating skunk-bear). It's rumored to be good for stomach ailments including acid reflux, bloating, and ulcers. Also, sprained ankles. It will reportedly ameliorate arthritis, carpal tunnel syndrome, and sciatica, not to mention hernias and migraines. BPC-157 has been said to loosen stiff shoulders and repair runner's knee. Suffering from bursitis? Gingivitis? Road rash? Low libido? Its boosters promise that it can help with all of these conditions and more.

In recent months, BPC-157's profile has risen significantly, at least judging by Google searches and Instagram videos, some of which feature a creepy AI-generated character who magically restores torn ligaments. Praise from big-name podcasters such as Andrew Huberman and Joe Rogan has no doubt contributed to its popularity (Rogan declared BPC-157 "super legit"). Reliable sales figures, though, are hard to come by. Conventional drugs that have been approved by the FDA—including GLP-1s like Ozempic, which are also peptides—are sold by multibillion-dollar global behemoths with legions of researchers and executives. Peptides like BPC-157 are sold by … honestly, who knows? The companies pop up and disappear. The proprietor of your favorite American peptide supplier might be an enterprising undergraduate who buys in bulk from China, where many peptides are manufactured, and relabels them. A small glass vial of freeze-dried powder arrives on your doorstep; you dissolve the powder in sterile water, draw it into a syringe, and inject it into your abdomen. Peptides are usually advertised as "for research use only," a wink-wink disclaimer that allows vendors to maintain that they're not violating federal laws regulating drug sales. Maybe that gives you pause. Or maybe you think that these sketchy transactions are necessary because the establishment—that is, Big Pharma and the United States government—is suppressing the good stuff.

I WANTED TO KNOW WHERE THIS WONDROUS ELIXIR CAME FROM, AND WHY WE'RE HEARING ABOUT IT ONLY FROM PODCASTERS.

Amid the sellers of red-light panels and blue-light glasses at Beyond, I stumbled on a company marketing a drinkable version of BPC-157. Its giveaway sticker read WE PREFER ORAL PEPTIDES, with the word *peptides* in much smaller letters because haha sex. The representative behind the counter referred to BPC-157 as "the soccer mom's peptide" and nonchalantly squirted some from what was essentially a hand-soap dispenser into a tiny plastic cup, then held it out to me. I hesitated, and the peptide hung in the air, unclaimed. "Are you afraid of it?" he asked. The not-so-subtle subtext was that I shouldn't be, that taking BPC-157 was equivalent to trying the dissolvable herbal-tea strips a few tables down or giving the giant quartz bowl a whirl. For the record: We were in a hotel hallway and I was being encouraged— dared, really—to try a drug that isn't FDA-approved, is prohibited by the World Anti-Doping Agency for athletes' use, and allegedly works throughout the body via some mysterious mechanism that is not entirely predictable. I was being offered an unspecified dose, although I wouldn't know what dose would be appropriate, because there are no agreed-upon dosing guidelines. I declined the peptide. The representative shrugged and drank it himself.

Perhaps I was being too cautious. Thousands of Americans have ingested or injected BPC-157. That guy didn't keel over after he swigged it. Whatever you think of their relevant credentials, Asprey and Campbell appear to be insufferably healthy middle-aged men. Robert F. Kennedy Jr., the secretary of health and human services, is on record as being "a big fan of peptides," a casually sweeping endorsement of an entire class of drugs. Although Kennedy has stoked vaccine hesitancy for most of this century and argues that Americans

are overmedicated, he has a soft spot for these particular shots. The "Make America Healthy Again" movement is officially on board too, which feels strange considering that MAHA is all about treating anything modern and artificial with suspicion. They're the raw-milk people! They don't even like Doritos and Coca-Cola! And yet they've decided that these highly processed powders, assembled by machines that link amino acids together, are somehow consistent with the nature-knows-best ethos. For MAHA, the renegade cachet of peptides is central to their appeal, and the fact that medical experts are wary of them is a plus. Under Kennedy, the FDA may soon allow six peptides, including BPC-157, to be made in the United States, which would mean that doctors could prescribe them, and that telehealth companies such as Hims & Hers, best known for discreetly shipping men generic Viagra, could offer them for sale.

Is there any evidence that BPC-157 works? Its evangelists like to note that the peptide has several decades of peer-reviewed research behind it. Those papers, more than 200 of them, are packed with charts and citations and have been published in journals that are respectable enough, if not quite top-tier. BPC-157 has been tested on mice, rabbits, guinea pigs, chickens, honeybees, and, above all else, rats. So many rats. These rats have endured all manner of miseries in the name of science. They have had their tendons severed, stomachs ulcerated, tails amputated, muscles crushed, bowels perforated, spinal cords compressed, blood vessels tied off. The ones that received the peptide consistently fared better, according to the studies: Their wounds closed more quickly, tendons knitted together more completely, ulcers shrank. Overall, they were more likely to survive this catalog of laboratory horrors than the unlucky controls. If the published literature is to be believed, BPC-157 is a rodent panacea.

When you read the papers, one after another, until you're bleary-eyed and bewildered, you start to notice some patterns. One is that very few of these studies have been conducted on humans, and humans, famously, are not rats. Another is that, as I've already suggested, BPC-157 is said to work almost every time for almost everything. Behold these triumphant verbs: *improves*, *enhances*, *promotes*, *stimulates*, *accelerates*, *restores*, *increases*, *prevents*, *abolishes*, *counteracts*, *heals*, *protects*. And it seems to yield benefits regardless of the form, or method of application, or which orifice it is delivered into. Also, when you examine the list of authors, you see many of the same names crop up again and again. One name, however, appears at the top of nearly every paper: Predrag Sikirić.

Sikirić is a 72-year-old professor emeritus of pharmacology at the University of Zagreb School of Medicine, in Croatia. I emailed him. I wanted to know where this wondrous elixir, supposedly good for both heartburn and a ruptured Achilles, came from, and why we're hearing about it only from podcasters. Precisely four minutes later, my phone buzzed. An insistent man with a thick accent wanted to know how quickly I could get on a plane.

THE CURRENT global hub for BPC-157 research is a cramped, cluttered room with a single window half-obscured by a tangle of plants. Sikirić's laboratory is at the university's medical school, roughly a mile north of Zagreb's main square, near a small café where future doctors smoke cigarettes and grouse about their workload. These modest quarters are temporary; renovations are under way on a larger laboratory in the building across the street. For now, new experiments are on hold, and Sikirić and his longtime lab assistant are confined to a glorified storage closet with empty rat enclosures stacked next to boxes of small plastic tubes and bags of feed. Among the haphazard decorations—including a foam brain and a hat that reads HAPPY ANIMAL HAPPY HUMAN—hangs a collage of patent medicines from the heyday of cure-alls, back when you could make whatever claims you wished about your restorative tonic without fear of government regulators shutting you down. On a counter sits a large glass bottle of clear liquid, the letters BPC scrawled on the label in blue marker.

The peptide in that bottle is Sikirić's life's work. When he was still a student, inspired by the pioneering research of the endocrinologist Hans Selye, who studied the biological effects of stress, Sikirić came to believe that the body produced, in essence, some universal antidote to injury, a molecule that would cue damaged tissue to return to its normal state, regardless of what had caused the harm. He reasoned that the remedy was probably found in gastric juice, because the stomach is constantly adjusting to fresh insults. Sikirić spent the 1980s searching for it, and the decades since trying to convince the world that he found it. Along the way, his work has often drawn eye rolls from colleagues at the medical school, some of whom remain unmoved by the animal evidence he has amassed. Even those who admire Sikirić's persistence and have known him for years, such as Miloš Judaš, the director of the university's Croatian Institute for Brain Research, do not share his faith in the curative properties of BPC-157 ("We are not sure whether it really works or not," Judaš told me). Sikirić's discussions with pharmaceutical companies have repeatedly stalled. The recognition he believed would be forthcoming from the scientific community has never materialized, despite his prolific scholarly output.

But none of that has deterred Sikirić in his effort to, as he told me, "bring BPC to mankind." He's just kept plugging away at this singular line of research, coaxing generations of graduate students to join him in the mission, and dreaming up new experiments to test his theory. Now the world is seeking him out. Along with reporters like me, he hears from peptide promoters eager to brag about being buddies with the discoverer of BPC-157. How his peptide took center stage, Sikirić isn't sure. For a long time, BPC-157 wasn't really known outside his lab except among readers of niche scientific journals such as *Digestive Diseases and Sciences* and the *European Journal of Pharmacology*. In the mid-2010s, it began appearing on bodybuilding forums and in bio hacking guides, where it was touted as a way to speed healing and recovery. But it remained on the fringes until recently. Testimonials from Rogan and Huberman, whose health recommendations reach enormous audiences, certainly helped spread the word: Rogan swore it fixed his hurt elbow, while Huberman credited it with eliminating his back pain.

However it happened, Sikirić is pleased that his peptide is at last having its moment.

He is gratified that BPC-157 is flourishing on the gray market as well. "Officially, I have to be against any kind of usage without full approval," he said. Unofficially, he's all for it. He interprets BPC-157's word-of-mouth success as proof that his peptide is helping the masses. If it wasn't, why would so many people recommend it? He is delighted, too, that the health secretary of the United States is a believer in peptides. I asked if he's ever spoken with Kennedy, who has a habit of reaching out to researchers whose work he admires. "I would kindly reject to reply to the question," he said. "This is good English?" (An HHS spokesperson did not respond to an inquiry about whether Kennedy had spoken with Sikirić.)

Sikirić can be at once engaging and cagey. Try to pin him down, and he launches into an unrelated anecdote. Broach a contentious topic, and he responds with a puzzling analogy. Ask about his past, and he grudgingly provides a few biographical details. Sikirić grew up in Zagreb, which was then part of Yugoslavia. His father, a lawyer, was jailed repeatedly for his opposition to the country's ruling Communist party; his mother, an encyclopedia editor, encountered government censorship. As a child, Sikirić underwent multiple surgeries, and those hospital stays made him want to be a doctor. Medicine also offered an escape from politics: "The pain is the pain for anybody," he said. After medical school, he worked for three years as an emergency physician in a small town, treating victims of car accidents, heart attacks, and stabbings.

But a country doctor can only do so much. The wonder drug he envisioned might help millions. Sikirić returned to the University of Zagreb to pursue this dream with a single-minded, near-manic intensity. In addition to churning out hundreds of papers, he has supervised numerous doctoral dissertations, all of them on BPC-157. His students tell of late-night phone calls from Sikirić, eager to share an insight. He and his wife of more than 40 years don't have children. He has no hobbies, doesn't take vacations to the nearby coast, and works for long stretches without a break. Sikirić walks quickly, albeit at a slight angle, as if he might tip over. He drives quickly, too: When I rode with him, he sped through downtown Zagreb, braking a few feet from crossing pedestrians, half-grinning at my evident anxiety. You wouldn't think it to look at him—baggy professorial sweater and corduroys, tightly cropped gray hair—but Sikirić is a septuagenarian in a hurry.

BPC-157's newfound fame has brought with it unwelcome scrutiny. Last year, a group of researchers in Poland raised concerns about BPC-157's safety, arguing that how it works is poorly understood and warning that it could cause neurological damage or promote tumor growth. These possibilities, they wrote, must be considered "before falling into complete admiration." In response, Sikirić pointed to his animal studies suggesting that BPC-157, on the contrary, inhibits tumor growth and protects against neurological damage. When I asked him about the Polish paper, he dismissed it as a bid for attention and emphasized how much it upset him. If BPC-157 really increased the risk of cancer, Sikirić insists that he would tell the public to stop using it immediately.

One argument for BPC-157's safety rests on the assumption that if the body makes it, it must be safe. But *does* the body make it? Sikirić has asserted that his peptide is a fragment of a protein, but he's never publicly shared key details about that protein. Several researchers have attempted to locate BPC-157's amino-acid sequence in databases of protein and DNA sequences, to no avail. I asked William Pearson, a computational biologist who co-developed the first widely used search tool for such databases, to try to determine where BPC-157 comes from. After hours of combing through repositories containing hundreds of millions of protein and DNA sequences, Pearson couldn't find a match. If the peptide occurs in humans, those searches should have turned it up. He also identified no matches among proteins from other animals—including, it's worth noting, rats.

Sikirić downplayed the failed searches. He doubts that those databases are comprehensive, though he acknowledged that he hasn't used them himself. Sikirić told me he's sure that BPC-157 originates in humans because he isolated it from newborns in the '90s. I didn't remember seeing that study in any of his papers, but that's because Sikirić says he never published it and doesn't intend to ("Some things you have to keep for yourself," he said). As for the gene behind BPC-157, he maintains that he's close to finding it, but won't reveal how he is conducting that search. He likened providing such basic information to a country disclosing its nuclear secrets. The answers, he said, could be found only in his head. I asked what would happen if he got run over by a bus: "This could be huge problem."

Sikirić believes that, like the cure-alls in his office collage, his peptide can be applied to any ailment, from minor aches to major diseases. During my stay in Zagreb, we played a little game: I named a malady and he told me whether BPC-157 could treat it. Macular degeneration? "Yes, it could." Gut inflammation? "This is the favorite site of activity." Dementia? "Certainly." COVID? "Naturally, yes." Concussions? "We published data about it." Anxiety? "The experiment was helpful in the mice." Depression? "Exactly." Heart attacks? "Any kind of condition." Headaches? "Any kind of pain." In Sikirić's estimation, BPC-157 can do no wrong. Its all-purpose goodness is fundamental to his theory: The peptide is consistently returning the body to its healthiest state. Other drugs have limitations and downsides, but not BPC-157. He compares it to steroids, but believes it's superior because BPC-157 has no known toxic dose ("You could eat BPC without any harm—literally eat, like bread," he said) and you can take it indefinitely.

Until I told him, Sikirić seemed unaware that some users report distressing side effects from BPC-157. There's an online support group called "Haters of BPC-157," in which people who believe that the peptide has harmed them commiserate and trade notes on recovery. The most common complaint appears to be anhedonia, which is a kind of emotional numbing. They say they struggle to feel pleasure after taking the peptide. Some blame themselves for using an unapproved drug. Others are angry at Sikirić ("Fuck him," one member of the group messaged me). Sikirić told me he felt sorry that people were suffering but doesn't believe it has anything to do with his peptide. (Predictably, he contends that

BPC-157 actually counteracts anhedonia.) Maybe the product they bought was contaminated, he argued, or maybe the cause was something else entirely. These are only anecdotes, he pointed out. And he's right; that *is* all they are. But the human evidence in favor of BPC-157 is also largely anecdotal.

Sikirić takes BPC-157 himself. Of course he does. I first suspected this when I noticed an empty plastic tube in the cup holder in his car. He was somewhat sheepish when I asked about it, and not forthcoming about how often, or for what purpose, he takes it. As a rule, it's frowned upon for scientists to sample the merchandise, though there have been famous exceptions. Jonas Salk tested the polio vaccine on himself before it was given to millions of American children; Albert Hofmann dropped way too much acid once before biking home. I asked many of Sikirić's colleagues and former students if they had taken BPC-157. Several told me they would never try a drug that hadn't been approved for human use. Others swore by it. They use it when they feel a cold coming on. They blend it into a cream and smear it on burns and diaper rash. They take it when they twist their ankle or strain their back. A bunch of them give it to their dogs. One former student, now a doctor, showed me a small tube of BPC-157 that she carries in her purse, just in case.



Predrag Sikirić has published hundreds of papers purporting to show the salutary effects of the peptide BPC-157.

THIS IS NOT how drug development is supposed to work. After a promising candidate is tested on animals, it normally passes through three phases of human clinical trials, after which regulators review the evidence and make a determination. The story of why BPC-157 hasn't followed this path is convoluted. More than two decades ago, clinical trials began under the auspices of Pliva, a Croatian drug company, but didn't reach the third phase. Pliva's research institute, which was responsible for new drug development, was acquired by GlaxoSmithKline in 2006, and progress on BPC-157 subsequently ceased. In Sikirić's version, GSK, as it's now known, decided to shelve the peptide because it was too effective and the company feared it would cannibalize sales of its other drugs. "Let's just say major breakthroughs are not welcome," he told me. Yet it's hard to imagine a pharmaceutical company nixing an important discovery knowing that a competitor might snatch it up. A study conducted by Pliva researchers found that although BPC-157 did hasten the healing of skin wounds in rats, the results were similar to those achieved with an already approved drug. The peptide did something, in other words, but it wasn't a breakthrough.

Another problem may have been Sikirić himself. Two former Pliva employees involved in the BPC-157 project told me Sikirić's passion sometimes seemed to override his objectivity. He bristled at pushback, and his commitment bordered on obsession. As one of them put it, when it came to his peptide, "Predrag was in love." Neither knew for sure why GSK didn't move forward with BPC-157 (a GSK spokesperson told me she couldn't find anyone with knowledge about a decision made 20 years ago). But they noted that it's far from unusual for experimental drugs to be abandoned during clinical trials; in fact, about 90 percent don't make it all the way through the process, including ones that show some benefit in animal studies.

After GSK dropped the peptide, the rights were returned to Sikirić, allowing him to pursue BPC-157 trials elsewhere. In 2015, a Phase 1 clinical trial was conducted in Tijuana, Mexico, but the results have never been published. The trial's sponsor was PharmaCotherapia, a Croatian company co-owned by Sikirić that last year reported having no employees. Sikirić let me briefly review the safety findings on his laptop but declined to share the full report. The summary I read described mild adverse events among some subjects but concluded that BPC-157 was "safe and well tolerated." According to Sikirić, the report was never published because the trial's principal investigator, Rufino Menchaca, a clinical neurologist, wouldn't sign off once the trial was completed (Menchaca, through a representative, declined to speak with me). The reason for his refusal to sign isn't

PHOTOGRAPH BY MARE MILIN FOR *THE ATLANTIC*

entirely clear, although Sikirić told me it had to do with worry that others would steal the data if they were published. Sikirić hopes to restart clinical trials soon, again in Tijuana, looking specifically at whether BPC-157 is a beneficial treatment for multiple sclerosis—though, in his mind, there is no question. He's certain that the experiments will confirm his expectations.

Sikirić is so determined to vindicate BPC-157 that he frequently sounds more like a salesman than a scientist. Money, however, doesn't seem to be what drives him: As Sikirić will admit, he has no knack for business, and at the moment it's shady online sellers who are getting rich from his peptide, not him. He just wants to be right, and he wouldn't mind getting some credit, too. As I'm typing this, Sikirić is sending me yet more papers via WhatsApp even though it's after midnight in Croatia. He needs me, and everyone else, to set aside any misgivings and agree with him that BPC-157 is a marvel. Skepticism is taken as an insult. Too often Sikirić's message is: *Trust me. Trust me about where BPC-157 comes from. Trust me that it works on humans, not just rats. Trust me that it's safe.*

FDA scientists don't seem to trust him. In June, the FDA published a 68-page report that looked closely at BPC-157 studies and found them unconvincing, arguing that they lack sufficient human-safety data and that too little is known about how or whether the peptide works. Agency researchers couldn't tell from the literature how dosage affected outcomes. They flagged the possibility that it could provoke harmful immune-system reactions. Claims about BPC-157 should be "interpreted with caution," they wrote, because of troubling gaps in the literature.

But when an FDA advisory committee met in July, it more or less disregarded that report and recommended allowing BPC-157, along with five other peptides, to be made by licensed compounding pharmacies in the United States. It probably wasn't a coincidence that weeks before the vote, the agency had announced the appointments of eight new committee members, six of whom had ties to the wellness industry, which hopes to capitalize on a regulatory change. (An HHS spokesperson told me that "all committee members underwent the same ethics review and vetting process required of all FDA advisory committee members.") One peptide lobbyist told me that the projected profits for BPC-157 could be in the billions. Hims & Hers plans to start manufacturing BPC-157 and allowing customers with a prescription to purchase it, assuming the FDA gives the green light (the company's CEO, Andrew Dudum, told shareholders that he was "extremely excited about this category"). Although FDA officials still have to accept the committee's recommendation, that seems like a formality, given that Kennedy oversees the agency.

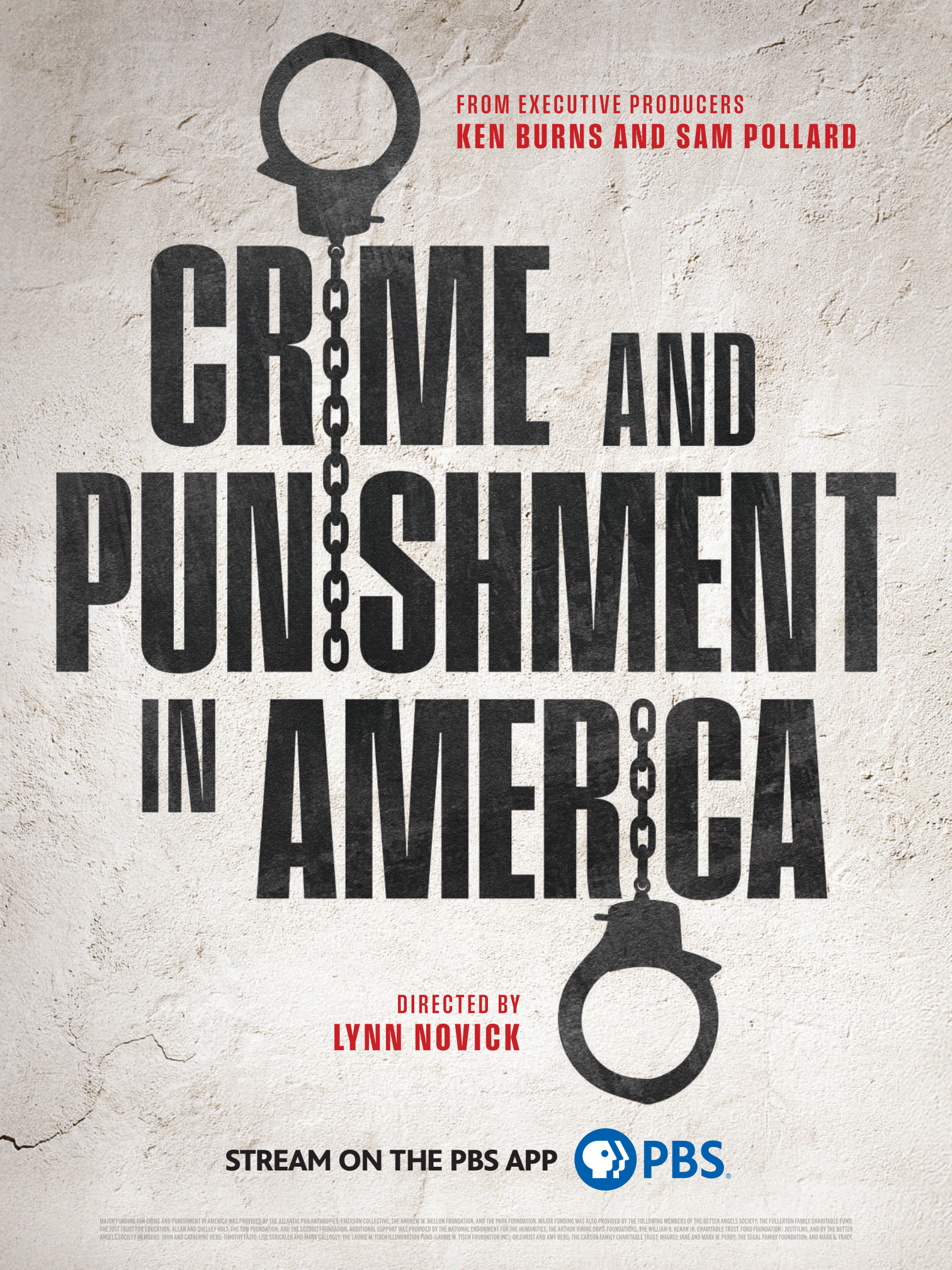
Peptides are usually listed as "for research use only," a disclaimer to skirt federal laws regulating drug sales.

I have mixed feelings about the move. No, we don't know enough about these peptides, and providing what amounts to backdoor government approval seems like a terrible idea. At the same time, if people are going to take BPC-157, I'd rather the supply come from a licensed pharmacy than some guy with a storage unit and an overseas hookup. I kept thinking about the question the peptide representative at the Beyond conference asked me: "Are you afraid of it?" Sikirić sent me home with a small plastic tube containing a single milligram of BPC-157. It looked like nothing, barely a few grains of fine white powder. I considered taking it, both for the sake of this story and because I have this weird twinge in my right shoulder sometimes. Instead, I sent it off to get tested. The report that came back was glowing: Unlike the gray-market peptides, many of which contain filler and God knows what else, the peptide from Sikirić's laboratory was chemically pure, full-strength, 100 percent BPC-157. It was the real thing—whatever that is. *A*

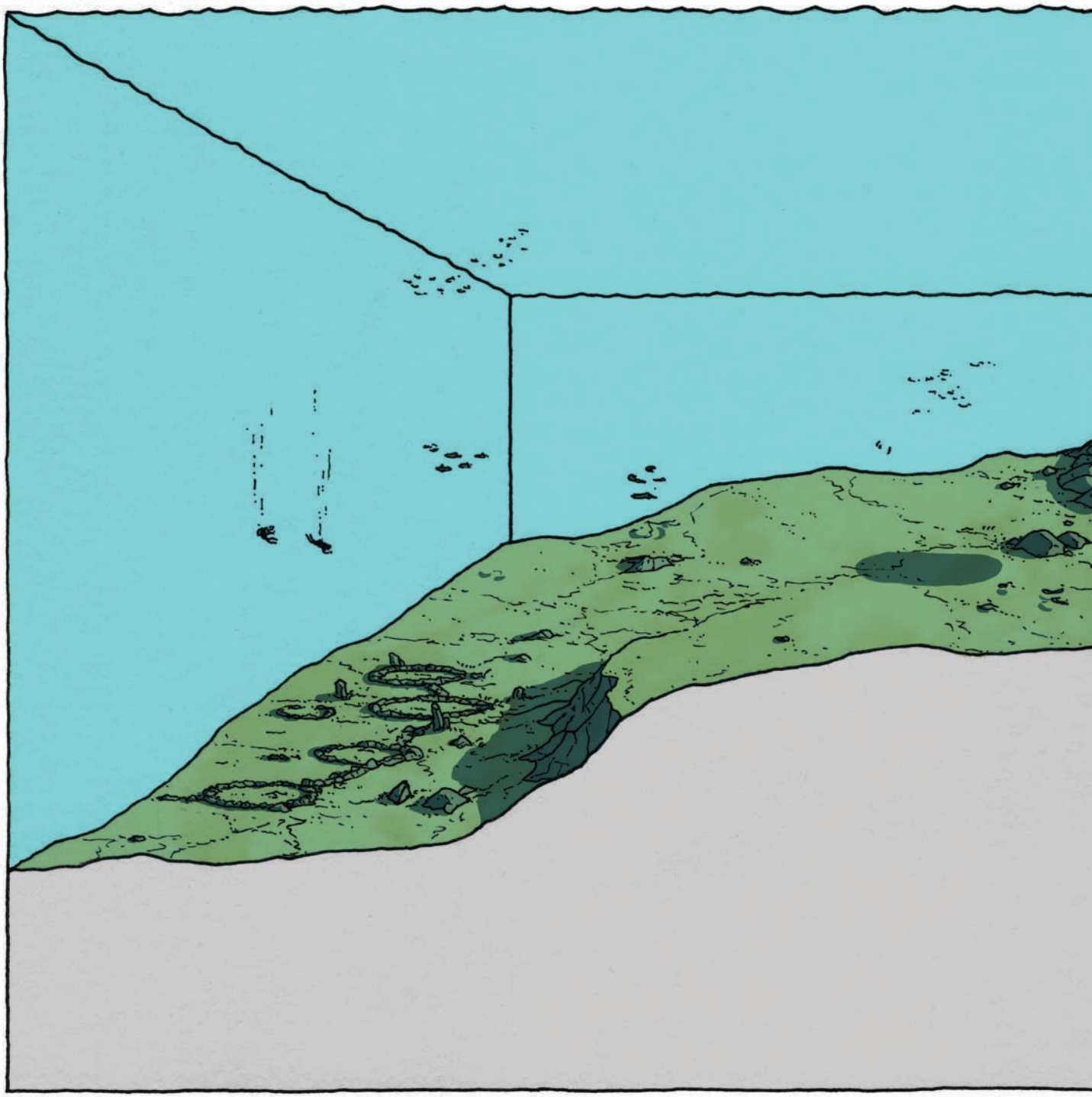


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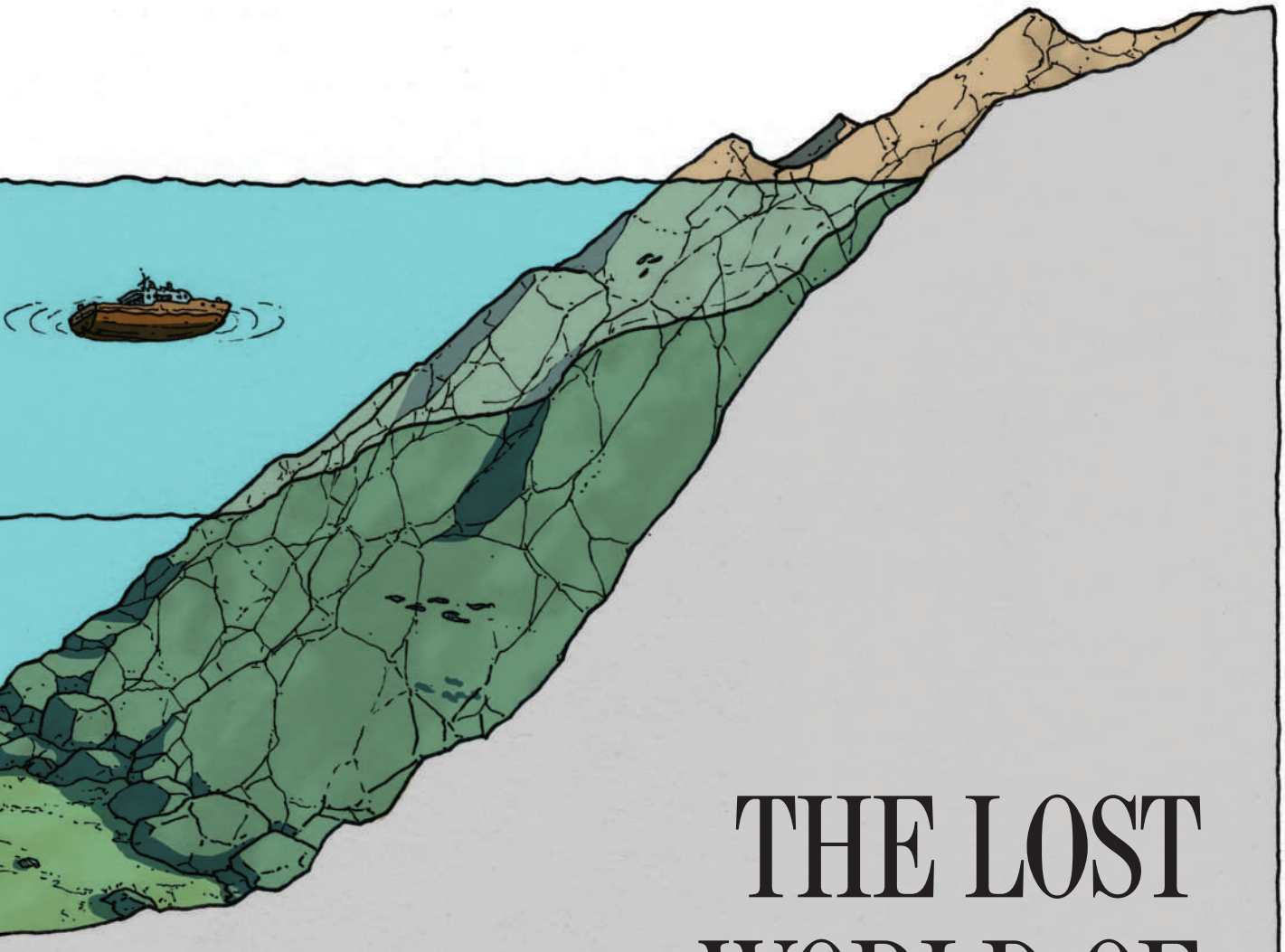
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ILLUSTRATIONS BY OWEN POMERY



THE LOST WORLD OF AQUATERRA

Most of human history is waiting to be found. And it's underwater.

By Toby Lester

Imagine a planet that's home not only to the seven continents you know but also to an immense feature you've never heard of, continental in scale. Extending along the world's coastal shelves from the tropics almost to the poles, this place is roughly equivalent in size to South America, with a total area of more than 6.6 million square miles. During the last Ice Age, it consisted almost entirely of lowland ecosystems: cold grasslands and tundras in the far north, grazed by woolly mammoths and steppe bison; temperate woodlands and open country in the middle latitudes, home to aurochs, horses, and giant elk; tropical forests, grasslands, and mangrove swamps near the equator, inhabited by Stegodons, Asian hippos, and Komodo dragons; and dry scrub in the far south, roamed by marsupial lions, giant flightless birds, and lizards the size of crocodiles. Great rivers, fed by an abundance of lakes and smaller streams, cut their way through many of these lowlands, eventually opening out into marshes, lagoons, estuaries, and tidal flats as they approached the coast.

Imagine that human beings settled this place after migrating out of Africa. As they dispersed, they developed technologies and vessels that allowed them to travel by sea; they devised hunting and fishing techniques that allowed them to accumulate surpluses of food and establish small permanent settlements; they buried their dead, built monumental structures, and organized themselves into social hierarchies. It may have been here, in fact— millennia before the rise of ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt—that many of the developments we associate with "civilization" first occurred. But then imagine this: Some 20,000 years ago, these lands began to flood, and by 6,000 years ago, they had disappeared entirely, taking with them much of the story of our past.

As it happens, there really is such a place. You've almost certainly been there yourself. It has even been given a name—and, no, it's not Atlantis. It's Aqua terra.

I FIRST LEARNED about Aquaterra more than a decade ago, when I received an email from the person who came up with the name—Jerome E. Dobson, a professor emeritus of geography at the University of Kansas and president emeritus of the American Geographical Society. Dobson had read a book I'd written called *The Fourth Part of the World*, which tells the story of a small team of Renaissance cartographers who, in 1507, became some of the first to map the giant landmass that European sailors had begun to explore across the Atlantic. To honor Amerigo Vespucci, who they believed had been the first to reach this "new" land, these cartographers had called the place America.

Dobson told me another giant "new" landmass was coming into view that deserved to be put on the map. If I wanted to learn more, he said, I should read "Aquaterra Incognita," a 2014 paper he'd published in the journal *Geographical Review*.

It's a fascinating monograph. To understand where—and what—Aquaterra is, Dobson writes, you have to think about how sea levels fall and rise during an ice age. As the planet cools, ocean water becomes locked up in continental ice sheets, and sea levels fall by hundreds of feet. Eventually the planet starts warming again, the ice melts, and sea levels rise once more. During the past million years or so, this cycle has repeated itself many times. Today we're living through an "interglacial," a relatively brief warm period during which the ice sheets have retreated and sea levels are unusually high.

If you were able to speed up the glacial cycle and watch it from space, you'd observe the ebb and flow of a planetary tide—one that over the course of millennia alternately exposes and submerges immense expanses of land along the continental shelves. The result, as Dobson writes, is "a vast earth feature," bounded by the highest and lowest sea levels of the glacial cycle, that "transforms back and forth among upland, wetland, and seafloor." This Earth feature is what he calls Aqua terra.

For much of the most recent glacial cycle, Aquaterra was mainly terra, but today it's mostly aqua. If you've swum or boated near almost any coastline, you've been there. Aquaterra isn't just the land now under water; it's the whole zone that the glacial cycles have alternately drowned and exposed. That includes many of today's beaches and coastal lowlands, which were underwater during warmer periods in the past and, as we're now learning the hard way, are flooding again as global temperatures rise. The present-day seafloor of Aquaterra, Dobson argues, is the "least-known zone on earth"—less mapped than the floor of the deep ocean (or even the surfaces of Mars, Venus, and the moon).

When modern human beings began to move out of Africa in serious numbers, starting at least 70,000 years ago, the planet had already been cooling for some 45,000 years, and sea levels were already more than 200 feet below where they are now. During the following 50,000 years, sea levels continued to drop, which meant that as people spread across the globe, they were often moving through and settling in coastal regions of Aquaterra that are now as much as 400 feet under water. And for much of that time, they were doing far more than just hunting and gathering. Many of the developments that have defined modern human society, Dobson argues, may have had their origins in those now-submerged lands. "Compare the most recent curve of sea level rise against the timeline of cultural innovations," he writes, "and you will find that much human progress occurred while seacoasts were still quite low." Aquaterra therefore demands recognition—and exploration.

"It was not just a place," Dobson told me. "It was a wellspring of the human race."

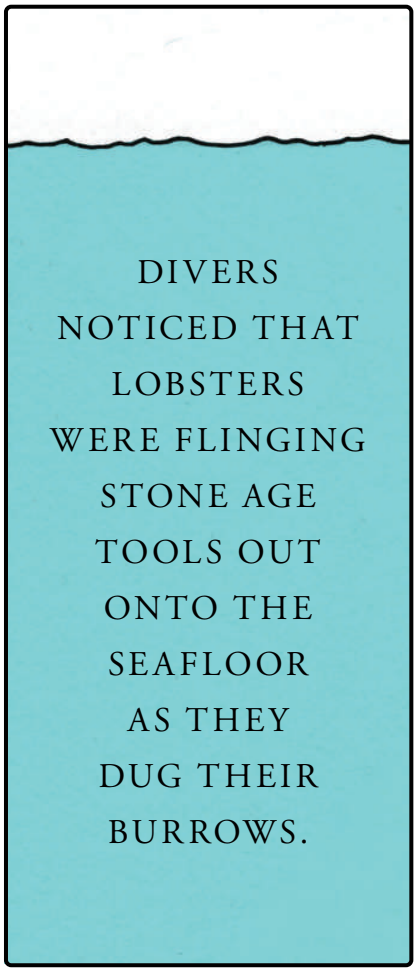
DOBSON HAS LONG been on something of a lonely quest to get geographers to adopt the name Aquaterra. The chance to name a giant new Earth feature doesn't arrive often (Antarctica, one of the most recent additions, began to appear on maps in the 1880s, although the word had been around for centuries), and if that feature happens to be largely invisible, you're likely to run into difficulties persuading others to go along with your name. Call the feature what you will, but it exists: During the past 20,000 years, huge stretches of formerly inhabited land along the world's coastal shelves have disappeared underwater, taking with them tens of thousands of years of human history.

Until recently, that is. During the past few decades, artifacts and sites dating back millennia have been found off the coasts of every inhabited continent. A growing number of researchers—geographers, archaeologists, anthropologists, amateur enthusiasts—are turning their attention to what lies offshore. "Everywhere we've systematically looked, we've found some areas where the former landscape has survived," Jessi Halligan, an anthropologist at Texas A&M, told me. "And in a lot of those places, those former landscapes have had sites on them."

The sheer range of these underwater finds is remarkable. Hand axes that are 300,000 to 1.4 million years old have turned up in the waters off South Africa. Neanderthal artifacts dating back more than 200,000 years have been found under the North Sea. In 2014 and 2015, a dredging project in Indonesia's Madura Strait brought up a rich trove of fossils that are 120,000 to 160,000 years old, including the remains of early hominins and a host of mega faunal species.

The finds that bear most directly on the modern human story, however, come from the most recent glacial cycle. In the Mediterranean, near Marseille, France, there's Cosquer Cave, whose entrance, 120 feet below sea level, offers divers access to dry interior chambers adorned with engravings and wall paintings that date from 19,000 to 27,000 years ago. In the Baltic, near Germany, there's the recently discovered Blinkerwall, one of Europe's oldest and largest Stone Age structures—more than 10,000 years old and more than half a mile long—which seems to have been used as a drive lane for hunting reindeer. Off the southern coast of England, at Bouldnor Cliff, near the Isle of Wight, divers have discovered roughly 1,000 stone tools and a wealth of organic materi al, preserved by lack of oxygen, including fragments of worked wood, traces of food, and the oldest pieces of string ever found in Britain.

There's action across the Atlantic too. Fishermen in the Chesapeake Bay region have hauled up so many artifacts that a 2020 article in an archaeology journal organized the finds according to the means of discovery: those brought to light by shrimp trawlers, scallop dredgers, crab scrapers, or oyster tongs. There's also activity in the Gulf of Mexico. Describing the work that she and others have done there, Jessica Cook Hale, a marine geo archaeologist, told me, "You can't fall off a boat in Apalachee Bay—on the east side of that bay—without bumping into a site." Cook Hale is affiliated with the Submerged Landscapes Research Centre, at the University of Bradford, in England—an important global hub for specialists in the field.



Most discoveries are made accidentally. Recreational divers pick things up. Fishing boats snag objects in their nets. Amateur collectors near The Hague, in the Netherlands, regularly find tools, fossils, and bones on the shores of the Zandmotor, an artificial peninsula created with sand vacuumed up from the seabed. At Bouldnor Cliff, divers exploring the remains of a submerged ancient forest noticed that lobsters were flinging Stone Age tools out onto the seafloor as they dug their burrows.

Once sites are located, the painstaking task of exploration and excavation begins. Doing archaeology underwater poses special challenges. Limited by the amount of air in their tanks, divers have to work in short, purposeful bursts. They have to descend with special equipment: underwater writing slates, inflatable marker buoys and GPS units, pre-labeled plastic bags. There are animals to contend with: Eels defend their lairs; remoras harass you; jellyfish sting. Ocean conditions—cold water, strong currents, terrible visibility—can be tricky. Helen Farr, a maritime archaeologist at the University of Southampton, has described working in the North Sea as like "diving in cold tea."

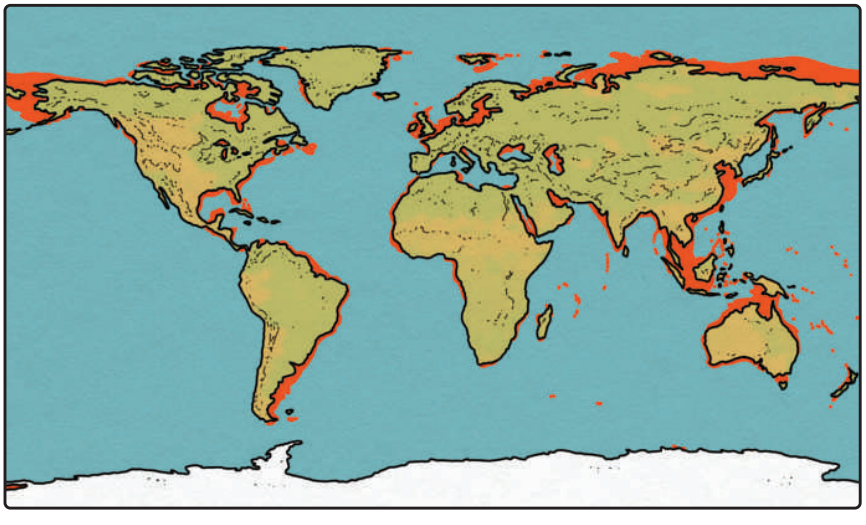
IN NOVEMBER 2025, I flew to London to attend a conference at the stately British Academy titled "Taken at the Flood," which brought together many of the leading figures in the study of underwater landscapes and archaeology. We were ourselves submerged, gathered in a windowless space on what the building map referred to as the "lower ground" floor.

The conference's closing speaker was Geoff Bailey, a British archaeologist who has spent more than 50 years conducting research around the world, with a focus in recent decades on what lies underwater. His look is somehow both grizzled and dignified. In his final remarks, Bailey proposed a thought experiment: Imagine a distant future in which sea levels have risen about 200 feet— the sort of rise that might take place if Antarctica and Greenland were to lose all of their ice cover. To show us what Europe would look like with sea levels that high, he projected a map onto the wall. Britain and Ireland had been reduced to an archipelago of small islands. Northwestern Europe's present coastlines and lowland areas lay deep underwater. Offshore, red dots lined the continent's diminished periphery, indicating fully or partly drowned cities: London. Lisbon. Barcelona. Rome. Amsterdam. Copenhagen.

In this scenario, Bailey asked, what if archaeologists of the future could study

only what remained above sea level, in places that today sit well inland from the coast? If they saw no evidence of sea-based culture in the cities that survived, what would they assume about life in 21st-century Europe? "They would think it was basically land-based," he said, "with major centers of power in Madrid, Prague, Moscow— places like that. Because all of the capital cities of Western Europe would be underwater, and most of the infrastructure that supports our present civilization."

That's a bit of a stretch, but it does help bring into focus what's been happening since the beginning of modern archaeology. In assembling a picture of our past, we've focused on what has survived on land (in the former highlands) while ignoring what lies under water. The result is that we've assembled a picture of our past that is likely to be just as fragmentary and misleading as the one those future archaeologists might assemble of the world we live in today. We may have missed a lot.



Taken together, the lands that make up Aquaterra, in orange, amount to a mass the size of South America.

What we won't ever find, however, are the ruins of a lost civilization deep under the sea. That sort of thinking, wishful and pseudoscientific, is the province of the popular British writer Graham Hancock, whose book *Underworld* (2002) promoted the idea that advanced seafaring civilizations flourished during the last Ice Age and were then swallowed by rising seas, leaving only enigmatic traces behind. Its popularity drives specialists in the field crazy. "Cult stuff" is how the British marine geoarchaeologist Nicholas Flemming described it to me.

If the study of drowned ancient landscapes has a founding figure, it's Flemming. Almost everybody I talked with for this article described him as a prime mover. So after the conference, I went to meet him at his home in Surrey, some 30 miles southwest of London. Flemming has had an astonishingly varied, adventurous, and productive career. It began in the 1950s, when he trained as a commando and diver with the Special Boat Service of the Royal Marines (roughly the equivalent of the Navy SEALs). He then pursued doctoral studies in oceanography at Cambridge. Over the past seven decades, Flemming has published more than 300 papers and reports and has also dived in the waters of more than 30 countries—continuing long after a car crash in the Balkans in 1969 left him paralyzed from the chest down. When diving from that point on, he used no special equipment: He swam with his arms rather than his legs and needed help only when entering and exiting the water.

Flemming, who is 90, has the look of a retired British adventurer from a bygone age. His hair is white, and he wears a walrus mustache that would have done Lord Kitchener proud. Seated in his wheelchair, he greeted me in his front hall and then, wasting no time on formalities, ushered me into his study. Flemming told me about the doctoral work he'd done at Cambridge, where he studied sea-level and tectonic change in the Mediterranean by surveying Greek and Roman harbors and ancient caves. As part of that effort, he worked on hundreds of submerged sites from classical antiquity. By the early 1960s, he had developed a conviction that much older sites might have survived underwater, and that he and others could find them.

Many archaeologists disagreed. Even when very old artifacts did occasionally turn up—most famously, perhaps, a 14,000-year-old deer-antler harpoon that a fishing vessel named the Colinda hauled out of the North Sea in a block of peat in 1931—they were treated as isolated curiosities. But Flemming interpreted them as confirmation that a whole drowned world of human history awaited discovery. "I knew what we were going to do and what we would find," he told me. "And we did."

A major milestone occurred in the summer of 1967, when, swimming in shallow waters off the southern coast of Greece, Flemming came across the ruins of a 5,000-year-old town, known today as Pavlopetri, where street grids, courtyards, and multiroom buildings had all survived. Archaeologists use a variety of techniques to date such sites: the reconstruction of ancient sea levels; the dating of the sediment layers in which the sites are found; comparisons of pottery, tool, and architectural styles to those that have been found on land; the radiocarbon dating of any surviving organic materials. Pavlopetri remains the oldest planned town ever found underwater.

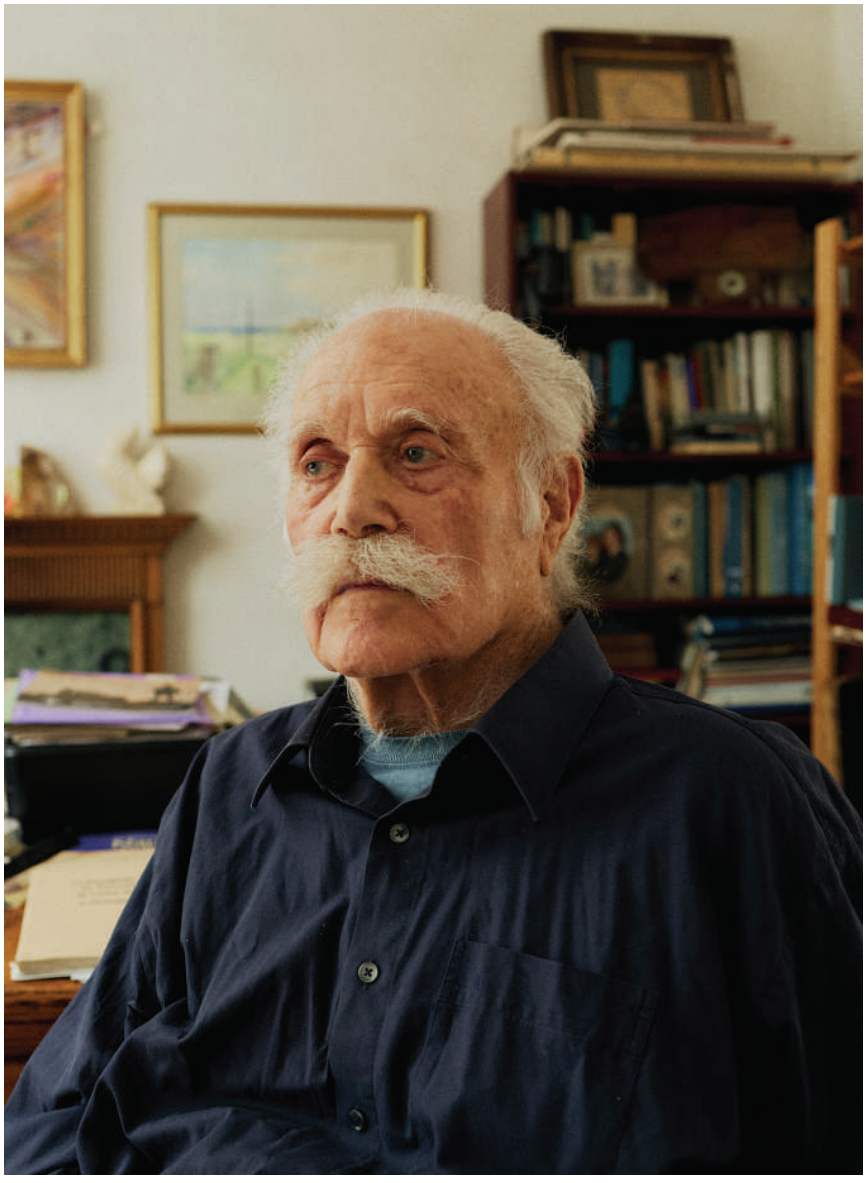
In the decade that followed, Flemming continued searching for older sites. And in 1981, off a small island called Aghios Petros, he discovered the remnants of a nearly 8,000-year-old village. As he described it in his 2021 memoir, *Apollonia on My Mind*, the Neolithic villagers had picked an "ideal spot"—the underwater site, bordering a sheltered inlet and supplied with a freshwater spring, would once have stood on a peninsula that reached into the bay.

Others were making discoveries too. From 1978 to 1988, the Danish archaeologist Søren H. Andersen led intensive excavations in the Baltic Sea at the

OWEN POMERY. SOURCE: VINCE GAFFNEY.

submerged settlement site of Tybrind Vig— excavations that yielded a wealth of preserved organic materials, many of them more than 7,000 years old, including canoes, decorated wooden paddles, fishing gear, bone tools, and plant remains. In 1984, while doing routine survey work in the Mediterranean, near Haifa, the Israeli marine archaeologist Ehud Galili discovered a site now known as Atlit-Yam: a 9,000-year-old submerged village of extraordinary completeness. It had houses, wells, and evidence of agriculture and ritual activity, including human burials.

By the early '80s, Flemming was beginning to feel less drawn to the study of classical sites. He'd worked on hundreds, after all. "Okay, they're very visual," he told me. "They're pretty. But one more Roman port?" Much older archaeology was what interested Flemming now—the "big game," as he put it. "You could have Neanderthals living on the seafloor," he remembered thinking. "You could have had elephants and rhinoceroses wandering on the floor of the North Sea and the Mediterranean."



Nicholas Flemming, 90, has explored the waters of more than 30 countries, continuing to dive even after an accident left him partly paralyzed.

AT THE TIME, Geoff Bailey was starting to have similar thoughts. He'd begun his career in the 1970s by studying evidence of ancient coastal settlement. In particular, he studied accumulations of discarded shells, or shell middens, tens of thousands of which survive along the world's coastlines, some of them hundreds of feet long and dozens of feet high. The layers of shells, piled up after their contents were eaten, preserve long records of human activity, including flaked stone, bone tools, the charcoal of old hearths, and sometimes evidence of human burials. Such sites began to appear in large numbers about 6,000 to 7,000 years ago, just as sea levels were gradually stabilizing—around where they are now.

In the '70s, most archaeologists thought the explanation for this phenomenon was straightforward. While sea levels were rising, the theory went, coastal regions were simply changing too much to have supported the range of human activities associated with social complexity. But once sea levels settled, a sort of postglacial revolution ensued. "Boom!" Bailey said, describing that view to me. "Suddenly you've got this explosion of shell mounds, coastal settlements, fishing technology, dugout canoes, etc., all over the world."

Bailey entertained doubts about that story early on. It seemed far more likely to him that people had been exploiting coastal environments, which are rich in resources and easy to move around in, for much longer than just the past 6,000 years or so. Wouldn't it make more sense, he thought, if the "sudden" emergence of cultural complexity along the world's coasts was simply a reflection of where and when the seas had stopped rising—and stopped covering up all the earlier coastal communities? Archaeologists, he felt, had fallen prey to evidentiary misdirection: The remains of communities on high ground had survived, whereas the original coastal communities had been washed away.

Others were pursuing related ideas. In 1975, the archaeologist Michael Moseley published *The Maritime Foundations of Andean Civilization*, in which he argued that much of the social complexity of ancient Peru arose along the coast,

primarily powered not by agriculture, as was generally believed, but by the biological richness of the sea.

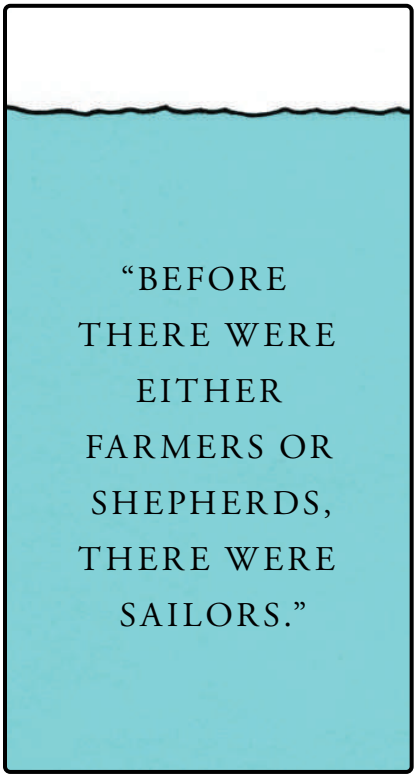
All of these ideas had important implications. If tens of thousands of years ago, people were living in significant numbers in coastal areas, they almost surely developed seafaring technologies and sophisticated navigational know-how long before we see any trace of such things in the terrestrial record. That would have enabled them to make longer and longer excursions at sea—to fish, to trade, or just to explore. To the underwater archaeologist George Bass, there was an obvious lesson in all of this, one that would help explain how people were able to spread so rapidly across the globe after migrating out of Africa. "Before there were either farmers or shepherds," he wrote, "there were sailors."

THE STUDY OF submerged prehistory started with a relatively amateur focus on artifacts and has progressed to the scientific examination of sites. At the turn of the 21st century, a new phase began: the reconstruction of entire lost landscapes.

A major force behind this development was the English archaeologist Bryony Coles, who, while a professor at the University of Exeter in the 1990s, decided that she was tired of hearing people talk about the "land bridge" that had once connected Great Britain to continental Europe. By that point, enough artifacts had emerged from the North Sea, and enough was known about sea-level change during the glacial cycle, to suggest a very different picture. The North Sea basin had once been a fertile lowland, home to all sorts of plants and animals—and people. The whole area had been a place to *be*, it seemed to Coles, not just a place to *cross*.

During that time, Coles made a ferry journey from Britain to Sweden, which took her over a large, shallow feature of the seafloor known as the Dogger Bank. That crossing gave her an idea: To help dispel the land-bridge notion, why not borrow from the name Dogger Bank and call the whole submerged landscape Doggerland? And why not try to reconstruct what it used to look like?

Coles read everything she could find about seafloor terrain, sea-level change, artifacts and animal bones hauled up by fishing vessels, and the archaeology of adjacent coastal regions. In 1998, she published a paper—"Doggerland: A Speculative Survey"—that included a series of maps presenting Doggerland's landscape during different stages of the glacial cycle. In Coles's reconstruction, Doggerland had evolved from a near-empty polar desert at the height of glaciation (some 18,000 years ago) into a grassland of birch and willow grazed by mammoths, horses, and elk (as temperatures rose), then into a forested expanse of hazel and oak cut by big rivers and estuaries, and finally (by about 7,000 years ago) into a scattering of islands in the midst of the encroaching North Sea—the largest of which, now submerged, we know as the Dogger Bank. Coles's paper sparked a conceptual revolution: Doggerland was a real place.



A few years after Coles published her article, Vince Gaffney, a British landscape archaeologist then at the University of Birmingham, and two colleagues, Ken Thomson and Simon Fitch, started to wonder: Might any of the companies that were prospecting for oil and gas deposits under the North Sea floor be willing to share the survey data they'd been gathering? It was a clever idea. By using the bounce-back of sound waves to identify features and anomalies deep below the seafloor—so-called seismic-reflection surveys—the companies had developed 3-D maps of the basin that were unparalleled in detail and scope. Gaffney and his colleagues suspected that those maps might include information about Doggerland.

One company, Petroleum GeoServices, agreed to share some of its information, and once the archaeologists began analyzing the data, translated on-screen, they discerned the beds of an ancient river and its tributaries. "I just looked at it," Gaffney told me, "and thought, *Bloody hell, this is going to work*." He and his colleagues soon reconstructed a 25-mile stretch of the river, which they determined had been almost the size of the Rhine. In the decades since, Gaffney and his team—now based at the Submerged Landscapes Research Centre—have reconstructed more than 40,000 square miles of Doggerland. "If you put a line from Yorkshire to Denmark," Gaffney said, "pretty much everything below that was at some point dry land, and we have largely mapped that area." That makes Doggerland by far the most extensively studied "paleo-landscape" in the world.

"WHAT THIS IS," Jonathan Benjamin told me, holding a large, greenish lump of rock in his hand, "is a beautiful hafted axe." Benjamin was speaking via videochat from Australia, where he is a professor of maritime archaeology at Flinders University. He held the rock up to his computer so I could make a closer examination. To me, it looked more like a vaguely deformed mango than an axe, but Benjamin quickly helped me see it for what it was. He told me to imagine his forearm as a handle—the "haft"—and he then rotated the rock in his hand until I was looking at one of its narrow sides. All of a sudden, I saw an expertly tapered blade at the head of an axe—one that had lain underwater for millennia. Benjamin chopped at me from half a world away. "It's still sharp," he said.



OWEN POMERY

That axe is just one of more than 260 Stone Age artifacts that Benjamin and his team discovered in 2019, in the shallow waters around Murujuga, part of the Dampier Archipelago, off Australia's northwestern coast. This was the first site of such antiquity securely documented in tropical waters.

News of the discovery thrilled Nic Flemming, who had been arguing for decades that such sites would be found. In fact, back in 1982, with his infant daughter in tow, he had led a month-long survey of the Cootamundra Shoal, about 200 miles off Australia's northern coast. The expedition, searching for ancient occupied terrain, was the first of its kind. Flemming didn't expect to find any archaeological remains during this short outing, but he and his team were able to confirm that the conditions in the area were, as he put it in his memoir, "sufficient to support a Palaeo lithic ice age human population during periods of low sea level."

Benjamin and his team, aware of that work, had found their site by means of logical deduction. For years, they had conducted sophisticated survey work, using sonar, seafloor mapping, aerial imagery, and paleo -environmental modeling to identify promising areas for investigation. By 2019, they had narrowed down their target area so precisely that when they began diving, they quickly found what they were looking for: ancient stone tools and environmental evidence of a once-inhabited landscape. In 2025, they went prospecting again and found more stone tools, dating back at least 9,000 years. "We keep finding more sites," Benjamin said. "Sites that make us ask even more questions."

Benjamin's team does its work in partnership with the Murujuga Aboriginal Corporation, which represents the traditional owners of the lands in that part of Australia. In recent years, it has become clear that the flood myths and stories that have been told for millennia by Indigenous peoples all over the world, often dismissed as primitive, fanciful, or at best symbolic, might encode historically accurate memories of past landscapes and areas of habitation in submerged regions of Aqua terra. Malik Churnside, an Aboriginal park ranger trained by Benjamin and his team so that he could take part in a recent dive, put this idea to me straightforwardly. Describing one of the tools that he'd found during a dive, he said, "It's literally picking up pieces of history from these old stories from way back in the day."

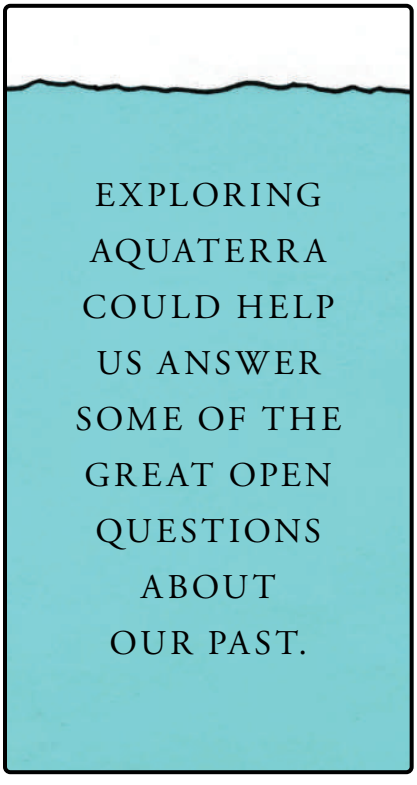
Nowhere is there a richer surviving body of such history than in Australia, where some traditional Aboriginal stories contain references to a now-drowned land known as Sea Country. Acknowledging this ancient oral history, Benjamin and his collaborators have named their research initiative "Deep History of Sea Country."

Patrick Nunn, a geographer at the University of the Sunshine Coast, in Queensland, has devoted years to studying the ways in which some Aboriginal traditions preserve memories of coastal change. If a story refers to an identifiable landscape feature that's now underwater, Nunn and his colleagues then use what they know about the history of the terrain

and sea-level rise in that area to determine how long ago that feature must have been drowned—which in turn provides them with a minimum age for the story. To date, Nunn and his colleagues have identified 35 areas along the coast of Australia where Indigenous traditions preserve accurate memories of what Sea Country was like when it was land. The oldest stories, Nunn told me, concern the sub mergence of the Bass Strait "land bridge," between the island of Tasmania and the Australian mainland, roughly 12,000 years ago. That's a long way back. So far back, in fact, that, if Nunn is correct, these accounts may be the earliest surviving record of human experience, sitting right at what he calls "the edge of memory."

Few of the sites that have been found in Aqua terra date back beyond 10,000 years. That's starting to change as scanning and seabed-coring technologies improve, submersible drones become affordable, and industry data become more readily available. Geographers and archaeologists have now named Ice Age landmasses whose drowned lowlands dwarf even those of Doggerland. Between Siberia and Alaska, there's Beringia, whose submerged portion is roughly the size of Greenland. Connecting Australia, New Guinea, and Tasmania, there's Sahul, whose submerged portion is nearly twice the size of the Iberian Peninsula. And connecting mainland Southeast Asia with Sumatra, Java, and Borneo, there's Sundaland, whose submerged portion is roughly a quarter the size of Australia. Those regions are now all understood to have been complex lowland ecosystems that for tens of thousands of years were home to all manner of flora and fauna. Their drowned portions are virtually unexplored—and all undoubtedly contain sites and fossils and landscapes that can help us answer big questions about human origins, global migration, and cultural development.

Cultural treasures might also await discovery. To imagine the possibilities, consider by analogy some of the great treasures found on land from our deep past: the lion-man of Hohlenstein-Stadel (roughly 40,000 years old), the astonishing art in Chauvet Cave (roughly 36,000 years old), the Venus of Willendorf (roughly 29,000 years old), the monumental Göbekli Tepe site (more than 10,000 years old). All were created at times when global sea levels were roughly 150 to 300 feet lower than they are today, in regions that lay considerably farther from the world's coasts than they now do. If many people—probably most people—during those same eras lived in coastal regions, as people from every era always have, they will have left extraordinary things behind.



AQUA TERRA HAS NOT only a past but also a future. As sea levels rise, Geoff Bailey's thought experiment is worth revisiting. If, over thousands of years, global warming were to melt our remaining ice sheets, the world's oceans might rise another 200 feet. That would mean the drowning of another whole continent's worth of land—and, once again, we'd lose coastal regions where much of human history and development has played out.

Bailey focused on Europe in his thought experiment, but with sea levels that much higher, many great cities all over the world would disappear. North America would lose New York, Miami, New Orleans, Houston, and Boston, among many others. In South America, Buenos Aires and Rio de Janeiro would go under; Africa would lose Lagos, Cairo, and much of Cape Town. Huge Asian population centers—Mumbai, Bangkok, Tokyo, Singapore, Jakarta, Shanghai—would drown, as would Darwin and Brisbane, in Australia.

The contours of the United States would be transformed. Florida would largely disappear. The Piedmont would become the country's new east coast. Submerged monuments and memorials in Washington, D.C., might become popular dive spots. The Gulf of Mexico would fill in much of the Mississippi Valley. In California, an inland sea might spread into the Central Valley, drowning Sacramento and Stockton and almost reaching Fresno.

The point isn't to lament that such things might happen. It's to illustrate how skewed perceptions of our era would be if all of this terrain were removed from future consciousness. And that, in turn, is a reminder that exploring Aquaterra could help us answer some of the great open questions about our past.

When did people first leave Africa, and how did they make their way to Southeast Asia? How did people cross open water and reach Australia in numbers significant enough to settle there? No evidence survives of the boats and technologies that made those migrations possible, because many of the coastal regions where they were developed today lie deep underwater in Sundaland and Sahul. And what about the Americas? Did the first people to reach them live for millennia in the now-drowned landscapes of Beringia? Did they use watercraft to make their way along the now-drowned western coasts of North and South America? The objects and sites that can help answer such questions may well exist on, and only on, the world's submerged continental shelves.

We live in an anomalous era. Aquaterra may be mostly water today, but for the greater part of human history—indeed, for the greater part of the past million years—it was mostly land. And that land is where we came from. *A*

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AFTER THE APOCALYPSE



As Venezuela struggles to recover from political upheaval and calamitous earthquakes, the U.S. government is exploiting the country for oil and money.

BY ANNE APPLEBAUM
Photographs by Lynsey Addario



I.

We drifted past abandoned drilling platforms, ghostly remnants of better days. Cormorants perched on the metal bars of broken oil rigs, drying their wings in the sun. When we reached a swirling, brown-green oil slick, Carlos slowed his motor. Raw oil could damage the engine, he said, and we'd already had to return to shore once that day to swap boats. We floated for a bit. Carlos, who makes his living as a fisherman on Lake Maracaibo, pointed out some surface bubbles, evidence of a leaky pipeline beneath the water. There was a strong smell of gas. He lit a cigarette anyway and laughed.

That morning, Carlos and his team had caught about 30 pounds of fish in the lake, a brackish estuary where oil was discovered more than a century ago. The subsequent boom built the cities of Caracas and Maracaibo, three generations of wealth, and four decades of democracy. A century later, tens of billions of barrels' worth of reserves remain beneath the water. Some of them might now be controlled by the American government.

They will not be easy to extract. After the boom came the bust, at first slowly and then very fast. Hugo Chávez, who ruled the country as a leftist authoritarian from 1999 to 2013, and then Nicolás Maduro, the autocrat who succeeded Chávez and ran the country until he was removed by an American military operation early this year, undermined the industry, chasing away engineers and impoverishing workers. Even as they said they were building "Bolivarian socialism," they removed benefits, lowered salaries, and created a capricious, repressive regime. Millions of people left the country.

Most American and European companies left too. The Russian and Chinese companies that arrived to replace them invested very little. Lake Maracaibo, the largest body of water in South America, also became one of the largest environmental disasters in South America. Two decades of neglect produced leaks, spills, poisoned water, and the ghostly drilling platforms I saw from the fishing boat. Fishermen sometimes rinse their crabs and shrimp with gasoline to remove the crude oil. All of their nets turn brown.

Billions of dollars of investment will be needed to remediate the site and recover more oil. In the meantime, people who live around the lake, like millions of other Venezuelans, work hard and earn very little. Their fish have to be sold immediately, because electricity is unpredictable and freezers are thus unreliable. Rapid inflation— 20 percent in July, an annualized rate of 783 percent—has made everything unaffordable. In

PREVIOUS PAGES: The remnants of a public-housing complex in La Guaira, Venezuela, in September, more than two months after two earthquakes devastated the city and neighboring Caracas.

BELOW: Clauimar Aguiar lives beside an oil field in Cabimas, Venezuela, where vast petroleum reserves coexist with poverty and failing infrastructure.





Skarlys Rodríguez looks through a classroom door at a school in La Guaira that has been converted into a temporary shelter for families displaced by the earthquakes. Rodríguez runs the shelter.

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a Caracas market, I found prices and exchange rates written on whiteboards, because they change every day.

The state is absent, or indifferent. Carlos pointed to a scar on his leg that he said was an old gunshot wound, the souvenir of an assault by one of the pirates who control the lake: "If you don't pay them, they kill you and take your boat." The coast guard is supposed to patrol the lake, he said, but it is rarely there.

The oil industry offers few well-paying jobs. At a lakeside town, its beaches blackened by oil, Francisco, a former boat mechanic at the state oil company—Petróleos de Venezuela, or PDVSA—told me he had quit because he got tired of not having the right tools and spare parts. One of Francisco's neighbors, Iliana, told me her husband had quit PDVSA too, after his salary plummeted from $50 a day to just a few cents a day. He now works for a Russian company that pays about $35 a day, but he has to spend most nights sleeping on the drilling platform.

From a great distance—Washington, say, or Mar-a-Lago— Venezuela is sometimes described as a bonanza for America, a trove of riches. On January 3, the day that the U.S. military captured Maduro, Donald Trump promised that it would be. "We'll run it properly; we'll run it professionally," he said at a press conference that day. "We'll have the greatest oil companies in the world going and invest billions and billions of dollars, and take out money, use that money in Venezuela, and the biggest beneficiary are gonna be the people of Venezuela." But at that same press conference, he also announced that he would be working with a new president: Delcy Rodríguez, Maduro's deputy and a leading member of the regime that had caused the destruction in the first place. He dismissed the country's opposition leader, María Corina Machado—who was the true winner of Venezuela's 2024 presidential election—as a "nice woman" who "doesn't have the respect within the country."

In Venezuela, this language sounded jarring. Since then, it has become even more confusing, because it is so at odds with reality. When I asked people living right next to some of Venezuela's largest oil fields whether Rodríguez had made any difference to the industry or the country, they laughed or sneered. Iliana told me, "People thought that things would change, but in reality nothing changed." José, another fisherman who used to work for PDVSA, had a darker view: "The gringos came to rob everything—the oil, the minerals. We are rich in everything, but here, we don't have anything." Later, a local oil engineer told me that none of the American agreements matters anyway, because the Venezuelan government is il legitimate and so "nothing is legal."

These opinions are widely shared. Perhaps surprisingly, given the disparate worlds they inhabit, the views of Maracaibo fishermen are not far from those of Ricardo Hausmann, a Harvard economist who served decades ago in a very different Venezuelan government, one that opened the country's natural resources to foreign investment through a transparent process. In the 1990s, PDVSA explained to legislators, foreign companies, and the public what it was doing. Contracts were made public. Money produced by oil investments



long funded social programs, including scholarships to study at American universities. These produced warm feelings toward America among educated Venezuelans that outlasted years of Chavista anti-gringo propaganda.

The political and business relationship now being forged between America and Venezuela is completely different. It's not a relationship of two equals, obviously. But nor is it exactly an occupation. Some have compared it to the Anglo-Persian oil deal of the early 20th century, or the 1905 treaty that gave the U.S. government control over the customs service of the Dominican Republic, but neither of those analogies is quite apt. Searching for a model or a reference point, I asked Hausmann how he would describe it. "A coalition of two kleptocracies," he said.

II.

What happens to Venezuelan oil when it is pumped out of the ground? Where does the money go afterward? And how did that change following Trump's announcement, on August 28, of "THE BIGGEST OIL DEAL IN WORLD HISTORY"? None of these questions has a simple answer. Over several days in Caracas and Madrid (where much of the Venezuelan opposition currently resides), and in telephone calls to Boston and Houston, I asked six people—two formerly in the oil industry, two still in the industry, and two in academia—to explain the details. All of them struggled to do so. One of them, an industry executive in Caracas who would speak only off the record, covered four pages of my notebook in diagrams and drawings, taking more than an hour and a half to explain how the previous legal system had worked, how a hydrocarbon law had been rewritten, how the new deals were unfolding and the old deals were being revised.

Perhaps the complexity is the point: Maybe the situation is hard to understand because neither the Rodríguez regime nor the Trump administration really wants anyone to understand it. Hausmann told me the Venezuelan constitution says that "anything of national interest should be approved by parliament, by the National Assembly. They haven't done that, and so right now they are protecting themselves through obscurity."

Despite the obfuscation, some of what Trump says is true: The U.S. really is controlling the sale of "millions and millions of barrels of oil" in Venezuela, as well as the sale of gold and other minerals. As a condition of lifting the economic sanctions that the U.S. had previously imposed on the country, all royalties and taxes from licensed companies are deposited into a special account originally set up in Qatar and later moved to Citibank. Industry analysts believe that

ABOVE: A collapsed high-voltage transmission tower in Lake Maracaibo, amid other deteriorating oil and electrical infrastructure.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Fishermen and their families live along the polluted shores of the lake, the largest body of water in South America and one of the continent's largest environmental disasters.



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more than $13 billion worth of oil has been sold since January, but that number is speculative. At a congressional hearing on September 15, Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent refused to confirm it. Repeated requests from congressional Democrats for more information have also received inadequate responses.

Some of the funds have been returned to the Venezuelan government. At another congressional hearing, a State Department official told legislators that money was being provided to pay "the salaries of government workers in Venezuela," among other things. Hard currency is also made available to Venezuelan banks. But although there is no evidence that money is being stolen or siphoned off to pay for other Trump-administration projects, there is also no evidence that it is *not* being stolen or siphoned off. Ostensibly, the accounting firm KPMG is auditing the process, but despite requests from Democrats in Congress, an audit was not released by the October 8 deadline. In his congressional appearance, Bessent did not say if or when it would be.

Opacity has consequences. Partly thanks to this system, the major new investments necessary for a real recovery have been slow in coming. The old oil fields I saw near Maracaibo, as well as the untouched reserves in the Orinoco River belt, will require billions of dollars and very long time horizons to develop or re develop. Any company planning such a project needs to believe that its contracts, and the political and social stability required to preserve them, will last for a decade or more. Francisco Monaldi, an oil-industry analyst at Rice University, told me that although the new hydrocarbon law, passed on January 29 under American pressure, is an improvement, it still affords Venezuela's Ministry of Oil the flexibility "to give you the best deal in Latin America, or the worst"—and then to change the terms of that deal later if it chooses. No wonder the current situation—an unpopular, illegitimate Venezuelan president propped up by an unpredictable and term-limited U.S. president— makes big companies nervous.

If the oil companies would prefer an elected Venezuelan president and a stable political system, this is not a matter of benign, high-minded principle. Oil executives "are not in the business of charity; these are not nuns," Monaldi said. "But these guys know when things are being done in a way that will eventually create trouble for them." With the exception of Chevron, which remained in Venezuela throughout the Chávez-Maduro era and is still reinvesting the revenues it earns in the country (although nothing more), most large companies have merely sent envoys to Caracas, signed memorandums of understanding, and returned home. Gold refiners are equally ambivalent about processing the Venezuelan gold bars that a Trump-friendly company removed from the country,



Venezuelans play checkers by flashlight during a rolling blackout in Maracaibo. Although the region sits atop some of the country's largest oil and gas reserves, many residents spend much of the day without electricity.



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according to *The New York Times*, because the gold was likely mined by criminal organizations and the industry has strict rules about proof of origin.

Trump's "biggest oil deal in world history" seems to have been designed to encourage American companies to start drilling faster and, more important for him, to distract from the oil crisis created by his war in Iran. But the announcement may have had the opposite effect because the deal, at least as it has been described in public, is even more opaque than the existing arrangement, and is even more unpopular. After the announcement, thousands of people left angry messages on the U.S. embassy's social-media pages, reflecting both fury and surprise. And no wonder: The U.S. administration's main business partner is a company called North American Blue Energy Partners (NABEP), whose notorious CEO, Alejandro Betancourt, is a household name in Venezuela. Betancourt has been investigated for money laundering in multiple countries, including the United States, Switzerland, and Spain. (He has previously denied wrongdoing and has never been charged with a crime.) After being arrested at London's Charing Cross Station on a Swiss warrant in November 2025, he was stuck in England for more than six months while the extradition case proceeded. Spanish police searched his estate outside Madrid as recently as August 28. *The Washington Post* reported that the Trump administration pressured Swiss officials to halt an investigation and lift an extradition request, seemingly in order to allow Betancourt to travel to the U.S. and Venezuela and close the deal.

Inside the country, Betancourt is infamous for bungling an upgrade of the electricity grid, over charging for used, poor-quality equipment and enriching himself in the process. People openly blame him for blackouts and power cuts that continue to this day. An opposition leader told me that he'd been hearing Betancourt's name cited as an example of regime corruption since he was a teenager. The fishermen in Lake Maracaibo knew exactly who he was, and everyone else I met did too. An analyst in Madrid told me that everything he thought he understood about U.S. intentions in Venezuela had been upended by the deal with Betancourt.

Like the system of oil payments, the deal with Betancourt is also suspiciously difficult to describe. In essence, the Venezuelan government has allocated 17 oil fields to NABEP, a company originally created with an American businessman, Harry Sargeant. According to the White House, the Pentagon's Office of Strategic Capital has acquired not ownership but "a 35% equity stake in its corporate parent"; others explained that the acquisition is a share in a contract, but this is again uncertain. The State Department seems to get the right to buy 20 percent of NABEP's oil at production cost—whatever that means—as well as the first



right of refusal on the other 80 percent. Some analysts told me they fear that the Rodríguez regime, to stay in power, will sell its oil below market prices.

No money was exchanged, and none has been invested. The Pentagon and NABEP are now responsible for attracting people who actually know how to drill oil to Venezuela—including to places without roads or infrastructure of any kind. I asked several oil analysts and economists, inside and outside the country, if the Trump administration and Betancourt could simply give drilling contracts to their respective friend groups in America and Venezuela. They all said yes.

A few people did try to see a glass half full. If more oil is pumped, then at least some money will eventually reach people, for example, which is better than no money. "It's a process," said Enrique Novoa, the former president of the Venezuelan Petroleum Chamber. "Tomorrow we hope to work a little bit better than today." But even among those trying to look favorably on the deal, everyone I met was either surprised or confused that the United States—a longtime critic of the Marxist language and statist practices of the Chávez and Maduro regimes— had so quickly and enthusiastically embraced the corrupt habits, and the corrupt personnel, of the Chavista elite.

At the end of the day I spent floating through the post apocalyptic landscape of Lake Maracaibo, I met Juan Pablo Guanipa, one of the best-known opposition leaders in Venezuela. Guanipa, who lives in Maracaibo, was released in February after eight months in prison. He was detained on the street the next day, placed under house arrest, and then released again. He is still followed by the Venezuelan security service wherever he goes. Sitting in a room filled with books, we talked about the oil deal, the poor economy, the rising frustrations of Venezuelans.

I asked him whether he found the new union between Americans and Chavistas peculiar. Of course he did, he told me. Most perplexing to him, it seemed, was the absence of Yankee pragmatism, the most basic thing Venezuelans expected of Americans. At the very least, American capitalists should know about the rule of law. "I never thought we would reach a moment when we would have to convince the United States of the obvious—that Venezuela needs a legitimate government, that we need elections, and that we need change."

III.

There is a straightforward way for Venezuela to acquire a legitimate government, one that would reassure both oil companies and ordinary people that a stable

ABOVE: Venezuelan security forces form a barricade on the streets leading to Miraflores, the presidential palace in Caracas, as anti-government protesters demand the release of political prisoners. More than 320 remained incarcerated as of early October.

OPPOSITE PAGE: A protester holds a sign that says "Come back already Mari!"—a reference to the opposition leader, María Corina Machado.

political and social order will endure: The regime could hold an election or a referendum, and let people choose the next president.

The U.S. administration, which not only controls Venezuela's most important sources of income but also holds the threat of further U.S. military action over the heads of Maduro's former henchmen, could help make this happen. Indeed, Secretary of State Marco Rubio has repeatedly said that it will. He has described a three-stage process: stabilization, recovery, and transition. With American encouragement, the regime and a part of the opposition—members of the last legislature recognized as legitimate, elected in 2015—have begun transition negotiations. Several people involved told me that although slow, the negotiations have been productive. In the first round, in August, discussions focused on reforming the supreme court, which slavishly followed the demands of the Maduro government, and which must be independent to ensure that the regime does not refuse to recognize an election result, as it has done in the past.

Unfortunately, many still aren't convinced that the transition is real. In large part, this is because Trump's description of Venezuela— a country where he says people are "really happy" and "dancing in the streets"—differs so dramatically from the reality they can see. But it's also because Trump seems so enthusiastic about a status quo that includes Betancourt, Rodríguez, and a host of other figures from the past. A few days after meeting with Rodríguez on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly, he described her as "very nice, very terrific," without naming a date for elections. On September 2, when a reporter asked him about Venezuelan elections, Trump said, "I just don't think they're ready yet. You know, it's very new."

Is democracy in Venezuela "new"? Are Venezuelans "not ready"? This language sounds just as strange and discordant to Venezuelans as the talk of great wealth supposedly flowing in their direction. After all, they did have a presidential election, and not that long ago. In July 2024, when Rodríguez was the vice president, Maduro was the regime's candidate. He lost decisively, even after stacking the cards in his favor. In the run-up to the vote, his regime disqualified María Corina Machado, who had been selected in a national primary, a decision she called "judicial criminality." They also nixed her first-choice substitute before finally allowing Edmundo González, a retired diplomat, to run as her surrogate. Then they harassed his supporters, used state media to insult and demean them, and even arrested them for fake crimes.

González won a landslide victory anyway, and the opposition could prove it. Anticipating that the regime might try to falsify the results, Machado and her team mobilized more than 600,000 volunteers to monitor polling stations and report irregularities using secure messaging apps. They collected and scanned the tally sheets produced by each voting machine, and uploaded them to a secure website, sometimes at great personal risk. In Antímano and La Vega, two barrios in western Caracas, I met community activists who regaled me with stories of that campaign. I was told of



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women who hid tally sheets in their underwear, of a man who stashed one underneath his toupee, of others who dressed as Maduro supporters to avoid being searched at the doors of polling stations. One local community leader told me that his 8-year-old son had gone around to polling stations on his bicycle and collected the printouts, knowing no one would suspect a child. Maybe Trump is "not ready" for democracy, but I met people in Antímano and La Vega who have fought for it longer and harder than most Americans.

The regime never published its own evidence. Instead, it declared victory and launched one of the most brutal repression campaigns in the country's history. Security and paramilitary forces fanned out across the country, arresting thousands of people and killing dozens. Independent organizations, including humanitarian groups, were effectively banned.

If Venezuelans aren't convinced that their country is making progress toward democracy, it's also because the apparatus that carried out this wave of repression is still in place. Numbers differ, depending on who counts as a political prisoner, but as of early October, 920 to 1,110 of them have been released since January, while more than 320 remain incarcerated. I met some of their relatives, camped outside the U.S. embassy because they had given up on their own government and hoped that the Americans would help them. "Marco Rubio says there are no political prisoners," one of them told me. "But the political prisoners are still behind bars." As of early September, no one from the U.S. delegation had acknowledged or interacted with the families. These kinds of protesters still face risks too: In the second week of September, a man who had joined a march organized by the prisoners' families was arrested, in public view, by men without uniforms.

Even among the political prisoners who have been released, hundreds are still, like Juan Pablo Guanipa, constantly followed, or else forced to report regularly at a courthouse, as if the regime were reminding them that they are only temporarily free. Perkins Rocha, a lawyer who was one of the opposition campaign's representatives before the electoral council in 2024, is still under house arrest. Seized off the street a month after the election, Rocha, a bespectacled scholar of constitutional law, was charged with terrorism, treason, criminal association, incitement to hatred, and conspiracy. He was taken to the country's most notorious prison, El Helicoide, where he spent two weeks in handcuffs, his head sometimes covered by a hood. After that, he spent many months in concrete rooms with no windows, sometimes shared by up to 20 people. Since his release in February, he has remained at home with an ankle bracelet, which he jokes is like "prison but with sunlight." To visit him in his Caracas apartment, I had to check in with the policemen who stand in the lobby of his building and beside the elevator outside his front door. One of them took my name and wrote it on his hand.

But the most important reason Venezuelans doubt the prospects of a democratic transition is the long absence of Machado, the opposition leader. Machado went into hiding after the election, at an unknown location inside Venezuela. In December 2025, she finally escaped the country, taking a fishing boat to Curaçao, the Dutch island territory off the coast of Venezuela, before flying to Norway to receive the Nobel Peace Prize.

In January of this year, Machado visited Trump at the White House, and she made what seemed to be a bid to win his favor, presenting him with her Nobel medal in appreciation of his "unique commitment" to Venezuelan freedom. But if she hoped that this would persuade him to throw American power behind her and the country's democratic opposition, that doesn't seem to have worked: Nearly a year later, Trump has not proposed a date for an election and Machado has remained stuck abroad, first in Washington, D.C., then in Panama.

Initially, the U.S. administration advised her not to go back: Her safety could not be guaranteed. Later, her attempts to return were blocked, and not only by the Rodríguez regime. Rubio did explicitly say—albeit in a Spanish-language interview, which Venezuelans would understand but his boss would not—that Machado has "every right to enter her country whenever she wants to return." But private planes she has chartered have been refused landing rights, even by Curaçao and Aruba, another Dutch territory. A boat she hired mysteriously developed "engine trouble." A commercial airline would not let her board.

Multiple people in Caracas told me that U.S. diplomats in the city describe Machado as a "problem." Indeed, if the Trump administration's most important goal is to cement oil deals with corrupt figures linked to Rodríguez, then perhaps she is. Machado has been clearer than others about the need to hold the regime accountable for past crimes. She has long argued that private companies should play a bigger role in the Venezuelan economy, a position that, ironically, puts her at odds with those in the U.S. administration who want to work with the Venezuelan state to extract resources.

I spoke with her while she was in Panama in early September, and she told me that her main concern, other than returning home, is that too many people, Americans included, do not "understand at all what is going on in Venezuela. Everything I hear is about conventional formulas for transition that take into account everyone's interests and opinions except the people's, as if the people did not matter."

Both in Caracas and in Washington, there are clearly actors who aren't that interested in "the people" or what they want. But if the U.S. government wants to carry out a transition without Machado, the attempt will backfire. If Betancourt is the country's most famous symbol of past misrule and corruption, Machado remains the most famous symbol of a democratic future. Without her, no election will be legitimate, and legitimacy is a necessary part of ending the Venezuelan crisis. "There are 1.1 million Venezuelans living in the United States, and 65 percent are willing to come back," Machado told me. "But they are not going to do it while the same regime that expelled them in the first place is still in power." Legitimacy is required for the construction of a Venezuelan military that can cooperate with the U.S. in the fight against criminal networks in the region, instead of being part of them. And again, legitimacy is the missing ingredient in oil-market reform, the insurance that companies need before they will make long-term investments.

Even if Machado returns (as perhaps she will have done by the time you are reading this article), nobody imagines that the country's path will be straightforward. In a busy open-plan office, crowded with people talking over small plastic cups of black coffee, I met Henry Alviárez, the national coordinator of Vente, Machado's political party. Alviárez told me that after he was released from prison in February, Vente had to "rebuild everything—regroup, recover the organization, and recover our direction." Vente started with 55,000 people, Alviárez said, and was up to 150,000 in September: "We now have structures throughout the country and in all municipalities, and according to the polls, we are the leading party in Venezuela." It is planning to launch a national debate—using online platforms, social media, and town halls—about what Machado calls a "grand national agreement" to amend the constitution, the educational system, the health-care system, and more. Vente isn't asking for an immediate election. But the party's leaders at least want to know when one will take place so that they can plan.

Some do believe they should wait: wait for the influence of the Rodríguez regime to wane further; wait for the Trump administration to lose power; wait for the congressional Democrats and the Republicans who support Venezuelan democracy to take action; wait for more oil to start flowing. There are risks to a transition, after all. No one can be sure when the economy will start growing again, and a new government could be blamed if it doesn't. But if waiting seemed like a good strategy six months ago, the risks are increasing quickly. Everything here looks normal, Alviárez said, gesturing at the people drinking coffee. But appearances of



Oil pollution is so pervasive in Lake Maracaibo that fishermen sometimes rinse their catch with gasoline to remove the crude oil.

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A 2-year-old child bathes outside her family's tent at a camp for people displaced by the earthquakes, which left more than 17,000 Venezuelans homeless.

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normality are deceptive: "There is a feeling of exhaustion and a desire for change that can only be channeled through a clear leadership and a clear objective. It can only be resolved if people finally have a date for elections. That could prevent a social explosion."

Some people, he told me, without naming names, "have said that María Corina is coming to destabilize the country. No. She is coming to channel that anger and conduct it toward a civic, peaceful process: an election." After fighting Chavistas and their Russian, Iranian, and Cuban allies for so long, nobody in Venezuela's historically pro-American democratic opposition ever expected a U.S. administration to stand in their way. But if it does, they are preparing to fight that obstacle too.

IV.

On June 24, two earthquakes shook Caracas, the seaside city of La Guaira, and several smaller towns along the coast. Suddenly, the risks of waiting became clear.

Within minutes of the quakes, several large apartment buildings collapsed, including a public-housing complex built by the Chávez regime for victims of a 1999 mudslide. Tens of thousands of other buildings were damaged. At least 6,500 people died (the full number is still unknown), more than 16,800 were injured, and about 17,000 became homeless.

Some governments, even some authoritarian governments, rally during a crisis. In the face of this tragedy, the Venezuelan regime froze. Rodríguez has enough police officers to guard Perkins Rocha's elevator. But she did not have enough soldiers, police, or rescue workers to dig Venezuelans out of the rubble, to offer people medical help and food, or to find homes for them in the days that followed.

I visited La Guaira, the city most badly affected, the week before school was scheduled to begin. No one I met in the refugee camps knew where their children were supposed to go, or whether studies would resume at all this year. One local school had been taken over by refugees who had no intention of relinquishing it, because they still had nowhere else to live. On the site of the collapsed public-housing complex, where bulldozers had finally arrived to take away the rubble, I met Ellie Solano, a bereaved mother who asked the men with machines to leave one part of the debris untouched, because she knew it lay on top of a sports field where her son had been playing. Two months after the disaster, she was searching for his corpse, digging in the early mornings and in the evenings, when it wasn't too hot.

Over the course of a day in La Guaira, I asked everyone I met how long it had taken for a government

official to offer help after the earthquake. Some said four days. Some said five. Some thought it had been more. "We didn't see policemen. No army, no nothing," one woman told me. "It was people helping people, neighbors helping neighbors, and like that, many, many days."

It still is. Just as grassroots movements emerged in Ukraine to support the army after the 2022 Russian invasion, many different kinds of voluntary organizations suddenly appeared in La Guaira after the earthquakes. Some, like Alimenta la Solidaridad, a charity founded a decade ago, had deep roots in the community already. Before 2024, Alimenta had more than 200 soup kitchens around the country. After the election, the regime restricted the activity of independent organizations and Alimenta had to shut down the kitchens. But the group revived itself after the earthquakes, reasoning that the situation had changed and, as Juan Andrés Saavedra, one of the group's leaders, told me, "the government didn't exist." Saavedra now organizes teams of volunteers who bring food every day to several sites, including the refugee camp inside the school.

In some societies, the absence of the state leads to anarchy. In others, people organize themselves instead. Venezuela is one of those countries, as Machado herself told me in an interview in December 2024. Even when she was in hiding, even when the political situation was at its most dire, Machado was certain that the experience of election organization had brought about "anthropological change," forging connections among people from different parts of society, inspiring them to want to reform their country from the bottom up.



Nearly two years later, Venezuelans kept telling me the same thing. One young woman, a political activist who had left the country and only recently returned, told me that the earthquakes and the chaos that followed were a sobering reminder of the lessons learned during the 2024 election campaign: *The government won't save us; the Americans won't save us; we have to work together*.

"We are on our own," she said. *A*

Anne Applebaum is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Volunteers and relatives dig through rubble in search of the bodies of missing loved ones after back-to-back earthquakes flattened entire neighborhoods.

ABOVE: Children gather for free lunch at a community kitchen.

BELOW: Two sisters, both sick with chickenpox, live in a makeshift shelter at a beachside camp for displaced people. Heavy rains flooded the shelter the night before.



Culture & Critics



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ILLUSTRATION BY COLIN HUNTER

An Absolute Beauty

The golden age of hockey literature has finally arrived.

By John Swansburg

Pity the Canadian book reviewer in the autumn of 1980. An American publisher has announced, with some fanfare, a forthcoming title about the national pastime—the Canadian national pastime. *Amazons: An Intimate Memoir by the First Woman Ever to Play in the National Hockey League* promises to tell the story of Cleo Birdwell's debut season with the New York Rangers. Of course, as a Canadian in good standing, you know that no woman has ever played in the NHL; there is no Cleo Birdwell. But the people behind the book are committed to the bit. At the Canadian Booksellers Association convention, held that summer in Toronto, a leggy model impersonated Birdwell, signing advance copies in a Rangers jersey. "She's tough and sexy," the book's publisher whispered to a *Globe and Mail* reporter.

"In a way it is the most romantic game," the Rangers' head coach says. "There is a lightness, a speed without effort."

Clearly this book demands attention. Perhaps the charade might even provide a welcome distraction after Canada's rather unmiraculous sixth-place finish at Lake Placid. But what awaits within its pages confounds. The on-ice action is overshadowed by ever more elaborate accounts of Birdwell's sexual adventures. In the course of one season, she sleeps with the Rangers' head coach, the Rangers' general manager, a former Rangers player, and one very jet-lagged tennis star. This is an incomplete list. In the brutal assessment of one critic in Calgary, *Amazons* is "little more than hardcover softcore porn that will disappoint hockey fans and heavy breathers alike."

But *Amazons* wasn't smut, or not exactly. Its author was Don DeLillo. His publisher took pains to guard this secret, but there was no disguising his writing from those who already admired it. Colin McEnroe, reviewing the book for the *Hartford Courant*, seems to have been the first to identify DeLillo's authorship in print. "'Amazons' is not only *his* book," he wrote. "It's his *best* book."

DeLillo did not share this appraisal. Although the book sold well—better, in fact, than any of his previous novels—he would not allow it to be republished. Even after the breakout success of *White Noise* in 1985, it never appeared in his official bibliography. *Amazons* soon faded into obscurity.

I first learned of its existence in 2006, when the writer Keith Gessen published an essay in *The New York Times Book Review* titled "In Search of the Great American Hockey Novel." Gessen wrote of his dismay that hockey had not produced a literature as rich as that of boxing or baseball. "Where is the Chekhov of the Chicago Blackhawks?" he asked. "Who is the Stendhal of the stick to the groin?" On the shelf dedicated to immortal hockey books, Gessen placed just two volumes: Ken Dryden's melancholy 1983 memoir, *The Game*, about his final season with the dynastic Montreal Canadiens, and DeLillo's *Amazons*.

Hockey and literature were two pursuits struggling to find an audience; perhaps, Gessen ventured, they could help each other. "What is needed now, for the sake of both hockey and literature, is more hockey literature," he wrote. "Not just books about hockey, like 'The Game,' but also books not about hockey, like 'Amazons'— which is not about hockey in just the right way."

Gessen may have been only half serious, but two decades after his essay appeared, something like his modest proposal has come to pass. *The Intangibles*, a new memoir by the *New Yorker* staff writer Nick Paumgarten, is a worthy successor to *The Game*, no less so for describing a career played in bruising beer leagues. The success of *Heated Rivalry* on HBO Max has made Rachel Reid's queer-romance series, from which it was adapted, into a publishing juggernaut. Hockey erotica, once a fringe category, has become a cottage industry.

Following that unlikely turn of events—and a January story in the *Times* positing DeLillo as the genre's unlikely inventor—his editor and agent entreated him to allow *Amazons* back into print. DeLillo acquiesced. After 46 years, Cleo Birdwell is finally making her curtain call.

***AMAZONS* WAS NOT** DeLillo's first foray into the world of sport. That distinction belongs to *End Zone*, his heady 1972 novel about college football and the madness of mutual assured destruction. Later, in the prologue to *Underworld* (1997), he turned to baseball, with his panoramic account of Bobby Thomson's "shot heard 'round the world." In those pages, too, nuclear war hangs in the air; the White House announced on the same day in 1951 that the Soviet Union had conducted a bomb test.

The tone of *Amazons* is zanier, more absurd, untroubled by nuclear annihilation. If anything hangs in the air, it's the reek of the hockey bag. Cleo Birdwell is the pride of Badger, Ohio, which she describes as a small, straightforward town where "the school was on School Street, the bank was on Bank Street, the river ran by River Road." But Cleo is not an ingenue; she's a hockey player. No amount of towel snapping or jock talk seems capable of making her blush. On the contrary, she's a wry raconteur of her teammates' puerile antics. One player, Eric Torkleson, has such an enormous member that it becomes an honorary Ranger, known as Torkle.

"A player would say, 'How's Torkle doing today?' Or, 'Who's playing Torkle in the movie version?' Or, 'Is it true Torkle's being asked to endorse Jimmy Carter?'"

The book is as sex-drenched as the Calgary reviewer warned. But sex functions less as titillation and more as the engine of the satire. Its object, mostly, is the American male. Cleo is frank, confident, liberated; her lovers are neurotic and narcissistic. One, the Rangers' general manager, is unable to perform after Cleo makes an offhanded Watergate joke. How could he, having been reminded of this great blow to the male ego? "We lost our manhood, our sense of pride and honor, our belief in God and Dick Nixon, our deepest dreams, hopes, and ambitions." (In an earlier scene, the GM has been deflated by intrusive thoughts of Torkle.)

Men who aren't trying to sleep with Cleo are usually trying to persuade her to sell something—the rank commercialization of sport is one of the novel's many prescient targets. Cleo is asked to hawk a sensual whirlpool bath called the Primal Vortex and a snack food called Amazons, especially formulated for "every age, every size, every make of woman." She refuses both endorsements. In the middle of the Rangers' season, Hughes Tool, the conglomerate that owns the team, hires a Saudi national to run it, hoping to push through a business deal with "men in the Gulf." DeLillo seems to have anticipated our age of sports washing, too.

To be clear, *Amazons* is not a lost masterpiece. Some scenes drag, like runaway *SNL* sketches. The dialogue, although generally hilarious, can take on a rim-shot quality, as if DeLillo were doing Dangerfield. A sportswriter confesses to Cleo that his ex-wife is now a lesbian. "Who is she a lesbian with?" she asks. "Paine, Webber, Jackson and Curtis. She's a financial analyst." Robert Gottlieb, DeLillo's editor at the time, turned down *Amazons*. You wonder how the man who convinced Joseph Heller that *Catch-22* sounded funnier than *Catch-18* might have sharpened this manuscript.

As for the hockey quotient, some fans may wish that DeLillo had set more of the novel between the boards. But *Amazons* is like Dickie Dunn's newspaper accounts of the Charlestown Chiefs in *Slap Shot*: It captures the spirit of the thing. The locker-room banter, at once clever and cretinous; the relentless travel to frozen, past-their-prime cities; the vicious play of the Philadelphia Flyers and the bloodlust of their fans ("screaming made-up and never-before-heard obscenities, as though they were overwhelmed by a massive thyroid deficiency"); the otherworldly allure of a sport conducted, improbably, on a sheet of ice. "In a way it is the most romantic game," the Rangers' head coach, Jean-Paul Larousse, says. "There is a lightness, a speed without effort. It is the skates."

AMAZONS: AN INTIMATE MEMOIR BY THE FIRST WOMAN EVER TO PLAY IN THE NATIONAL HOCKEY LEAGUE

Cleo Birdwell

SCRIBNER

THE INTANGIBLES: FRIENDSHIP, FATHERHOOD, AND THE LOVE OF THE GAME

Nick Paumgarten

PENGUIN PRESS

IT WAS lightness and speed that drew Nick Paumgarten to hockey. On land, he was ungainly: "You run like a goof," his brother once told him. "But on the ice the hobbles fell away. With skates on my feet, I could glide, swerve, cut, and feel for a few seconds at least that I'd broken the code, whatever it was."

Paumgarten grew up playing hockey in New York City. His junior career petered out in prep school, but for much of his adult life, he's competed in Manhattan's beer leagues. He's played on ragtag teams with only-in–New York linemates: creative types, a master crane rigger, a guy who used to be Woody Allen's super. Some are ringers fresh out of college; others are graybeards holding on for one more season of glory. Not that there is much glory to be had when the puck drops at 11:30 p.m. on the far west side. "We did it for no one but ourselves, and really it was more like we were doing it *to* ourselves," he writes in *The Intangibles*. "It was more destructive than constructive: murderous to our daylight ambitions and obligations, hard on the joints, and maybe equally hard on our families and friends."

So why do it? For fellowship, for laughs, for escape, for the spirit of the thing. To find what hockey players call the absolute beauties, like-minded men who play the right way: "with a commitment not just to proper comportment and teamwork but also to sticking around for postgame beers and high- and low-minded banter. A sense of humor, a sense of absurdity."

The Intangibles, the team that gives the memoir its name, plays the right way. It has some elite skaters but also plenty of grinders, the guys you can count on to show up, hustle, and, if necessary, intimidate the opposition, like the maniacal Flyers of old. The license to exact a measure of retribution for a cheap shot or a high stick, for running up the score or running your mouth—this, too, is part of hockey's ethos, and its appeal to men arriving at the rink from jobs, white collar or blue, that may offer fewer opportunities to administer just deserts.

Paumgarten himself is not above such belligerent displays. "On the ice," he writes, "in this realm circumscribed by boards and Plexiglas and patrolled by men in stripes, an artificial universe where you dart around in a suit of armor, with wings on your feet and levers in your hands, it is a privilege and a joy to shove and slash and tell people to fuck off, to be a jerk to strangers, without it being in any way an actionable affront."

Someone tell Keith Gessen: We have found the Stendhal of the stick to the groin. Though I suspect he already knows this. One of the Intangibles is a writer, referred to only as Keith, who often composes arch postgame emails, recording for posterity the team's triumphs and follies. I'm pretty sure I recognize the voice. *A*

John Swansburg is a managing editor at The Atlantic.

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BOOKS

The Scorpion

Bob Woodward's memoir reveals his sources and methods, and his manipulative prowess.

By George Packer

Bob Woodward has published a book roughly every two years since the Watergate scandal, 24 in all. Taken together, they comprise a running narrative of almost every administration from Richard Nixon's to Donald Trump's. The genre of the Washington book— a sequence of scenes inside rooms where important things happen, based on a convention called "deep background," with riches of information traced to no sources—is so familiar that it's easy to forget that Woodward practically invented it. Decade after decade, he has kept turning up in the Oval Office, at Georgetown parties, on the doorsteps of government officials—always on the job, the hunt. His approach from across a crowded room or the sudden appearance of his name on a cellphone screen has surely sunk the heart of countless sources. And yet, though they know better, they always talk, as if transfixed by a predatory stare—like the frog that agrees to carry the scorpion on its back across the lake. "Why?" the frog cries as it drowns from the inevitable sting, to which the scorpion replies: "It's my nature."

Throughout most of Woodward's career, several criticisms of his journalism have recurred: It provides little or no analysis; he's a pawn of his sources, telling the story they want told; and he's dangerous to talk to, because he privileges scoops above all else. These might seem to contradict one another, but in fact few



PAUL SLADE / *PARIS MATCH* / GETTY

people can survive stenography. Long quoted scenes stripped of context and meaning are almost always the cause of the damaging controversies in Woodward's books. Once, during a panel on Iraq War reporting, the investigative reporter Seymour Hersh—perhaps the only comparable figure in American journalism, Mr. Outside to Woodward's Mr. Inside—was asked what he thought of Woodward's latest book about George W. Bush. The questioner was clearly baiting Hersh to denounce Woodward for shilling for the president. Instead, Hersh replied that he valued Woodward's books because they reliably told him what was going on in the inner sanctum from which he and the rest of us were shut out.

Like clockwork over the course of half a century, a Woodward book has appeared and Washington has descended into a temporary frenzy, which sometimes even resulted in political change, not least the end of a presidency. If his many best sellers endure beyond their historical moment, their relevance will be as an epic court chronicle, a contemporaneous record of an age of almost unbridled presidential power. But as his work nears an end, his kind of journalism is seeing its influence disappear. The taboos that once shamed his subjects have fallen.

At 83, Woodward has had an important and interesting life, so why not write about it? But a memoir is a treacherous undertaking. "Autobiography is only to be trusted when it reveals something disgraceful," Orwell warned. It requires an unnatural ability and willingness to explore your own dark corners, failures, humiliations. Half a century of hunting for presidential secrets didn't prepare Woodward to be his own quarry. In *Secrets: A Reporter's Memoir*, he tells a few unflattering truths about himself—major stories he missed, friends he burned. But he doesn't always grasp their full significance. Scrupulous with facts but famously unable or unwilling to reflect, he's not a completely satisfying narrator of his own story.

THE BEST PAGES of VIP memoirs tend to be the early ones, before fame has arrived and revelations stiffen and grow stale. Woodward opens *Secrets* with scenes of self- exposure likely to startle the many sources and powerful subjects who have often experienced him as cold-blooded, risky company. Woodward was the first child of a successful lawyer and his homemaker wife in mid-century Wheaton, Illinois, strictly Republican, devoutly Christian—the most staid beginning imaginable. But his mother was emotionally unstable and unfaithful, and his father repressed his unhappiness in constant work. The atmosphere of tension and evasion gave their son a sense that his world might fall apart (since childhood, Woodward has had an acute fear of house fires). Anxiety turned him into a searcher for hidden facts: "I became a snoop. I would pry into cabinets and bedside tables, nosing through the top drawer of my father's dresser." At 11, Bob discovered among his father's socks a letter from his mother referring to "our divorce"— a topic they had kept from their son. At 16, working as a janitor in his father's law office, Bob would pilfer and pore over files of legal cases and discover scandals involving townspeople he knew. "Everybody had secrets, I realized."

Woodward in the *Washington Post* newsroom, 1973

To know things that others wanted to conceal gave him a sense of tenuous control in an unpredictable and dangerous world.

This origin story explains why Woodward became not a lawyer, a professional keeper of confidences, as his father had expected, but instead a reporter who exposes them while preserving every scrap of paper that falls into his hands. To know things that others wanted to conceal gave him a sense of tenuous control in an unpredictable and dangerous world.

After Wheaton came Yale, then five unhappy years in the Navy. On duty as a custodian of nuclear authentication codes, Woodward acquired the permanent fear that a nuclear war could easily happen by accident. He talked his way out of a tour in Vietnam by disingenuously claiming that, as a true Navy man, he was eager to keep serving aboard a ship. Wanting to defer law school, he talked his way into a tryout at *The Washington Post*. He failed in "a spectacular crash" (the concept of attribution—of identifying who said what to a reporter—was unfamiliar to him), but the speed and intensity of newspaper work were captivating. He had found the love of his life, and a year of minor-league ball with the *Montgomery County Sentinel* showed that he was a fast learner. In the summer of 1971, in an act of nerve that became his signature, he called the *Post*'s metropolitan editor, Harry Rosenfeld, at home; got yelled at; and was given a second chance.

Woodward's account of his apprenticeship evokes the intoxicating fun of becoming a reporter with the license to go anywhere and talk with anyone. The boyish anxiety that made him spy on his parents became a professional ferocity to find out everything he could about his subjects. Woodward's technique combines a glutton's appetite for material, a wooer's zeal to win over sources, and a priest's respect for the seal of confession. The identity of "Deep Throat," Woodward's underground-parking-garage informant during Watergate, remained unknown to the public for more than 30 years. He turned out to be a top FBI official named Mark Felt, whom Woodward had met by chance when he was still a young Navy lieutenant, waiting in the West Wing in 1970 to deliver Pentagon documents to Henry Kissinger's office. Felt was there on his own errand (perhaps, Woodward now speculates, to discuss Kissinger's illegal wiretaps of aides and journalists). They chatted, and Woodward, already driven to "grab on" to anyone in Washington who might be useful, asked Felt for his phone number before they parted.

The Watergate story remains an irresistible tale of youthful luck and courageous persistence. It was the first news story I ever followed closely, and whatever Woodward's subsequent faults, to me he will always be one of the two heroes of journalism who uncovered the crimes that ended Nixon's presidency. Woodward and Carl Bernstein's *All the President's Men* is still exhilarating—tense, vivid journalism noir, told in the third person, featuring two young reporters as its central characters. According to *Secrets*, this literary inspiration came from Robert Redford, who began pursuing Woodward for a movie about the pair in the fall of 1972, when the Watergate break-in was only a few months old and its historic implications unknowable.

Much of the memoir's Watergate section simply quotes or paraphrases familiar scenes from *All the President's Men*; perhaps 50 years of perspective couldn't improve on the original. Bernstein was the better writer, as a wry line in the book makes clear: "One office rumor had it that English was not Woodward's native language." Woodward the elderly memoirist, though, might have explored the difficult relationship that led to his reportorial breakup with Bernstein (with whom he remains personally close); instead, he says little more than "We disagreed a lot." He's just as reticent later about how he tried to reconcile fatherhood with nonstop work.

Being a journalist for Woodward "is not just a job but who I am," which means that *Secrets* is largely an account, book by book, of how he goes about that job. Because he broke his biggest story and coauthored his best book at the very start of his career, Woodward faces the danger of a long anti climax. His purpose in *Secrets* is to share "some of my favorite reporting stories," but also to reveal sources long concealed under the cloak of deep background. His uncheckable approach has aroused considerable skepticism about some of his more noteworthy scoops. In part to answer critics, he discloses the identities of "secret sources" who are now dead, as well as of some who are still alive and have given him permission. To Woodward, a secret is inherently valuable if it's in his possession, all the more if it's his alone. But not every secret is equally interesting, and the importance of even the biggest tends to fade with time.

For example, Woodward devotes three chapters to his pursuit of William J. Casey, President Ronald Reagan's longest-serving CIA director, for a book about the agency's covert wars. When *Veil* was published, in 1987, it provoked an uproar over a scene that described Casey, on his deathbed, nodding when Woodward asked if he was implicated in the Iran-Contra scandal. How could Woodward have slipped inside the closely watched hospital room? It turns out that he'd befriended Casey's security agents. Elsewhere, we learn that, in 1979, a Senate lawyer named Stephen Breyer paid a visit to Woodward's Georgetown house and read a prepublication copy of *The Brethren*, Woodward and Scott Armstrong's inside look at the Supreme Court— 15 years before Breyer himself joined the Court. I don't see how this qualifies as "another secret that has a certain historic value today," but maybe you have to live in Georgetown.

SECRETS: A REPORTER'S MEMOIR

Bob Woodward

SIMON & SCHUSTER

What these reporting tales lack in perspective, they compensate for in self-portraiture of a tireless, sometimes shameless reporter with a remarkable knack for getting people to give him what they don't want to give. During work on *The Brethren*, Woodward hunted down scores of Supreme Court clerks, among them one Steven P. Goldberg. Over lunch, Goldberg mentioned to Woodward that he had written a "case history" of the Court's unanimous 1974 decision requiring Nixon to release the Watergate tapes. This was the sort of casual discovery that excited Woodward's animal spirits: "What are you doing tonight?" Goldberg had plans, but he finally told Woodward he could come by for a 15-minute talk, which went on for hours, as Woodward deployed all of his skills: attentiveness, coaxing, a deceptively gentle barrage of questions, all while pushing the limits of common decency. "I need your help," he implored—a frequent refrain, along with "This is for history." Goldberg repeatedly refused to hand over the case history, but he ultimately agreed to read it aloud while Woodward took frantic notes, his hand cramping as he wrote down every detail about a surprisingly contentious argument among the justices, pressing whenever Goldberg wanted to stop.

At last Goldberg fell asleep in his chair. Woodward saw his opportunity. Giving a nudge and clearing his throat, he said that he would borrow the document for the night and return it in the morning. Goldberg "stirred and squinted up at me with clear annoyance and absolute exhaustion. Okay, he mumbled."

Woodward tells this story of extreme methods with an engaging mix of pride and self-mockery—which is not the same thing as true self-knowledge. Even as we admire his astonishing work ethic and dedication to prying loose the last fact, we recoil at his manipulations. Woodward is a killer. Does he see himself that way? He describes his technique and purpose with the earnest naivete of a boy from Wheaton, writing at one point, "I believe my approach is straightforward and my manner forthright," and at another, "For me journalism has always been about getting the public the best obtainable version of the truth." Yes—but it's also about self-aggrandizement. Woodward's readers and some of his sources understand this better than he does, and because a memoir depends so much on honest self-scrutiny, this gap is more damaging than an incorrect fact.

Janet Malcolm famously described the journalist as "a kind of confidence man, preying on people's vanity, ignorance, or loneliness, gaining their trust and betraying them without remorse." Woodward comes closest to bearing out this portrayal in the book's most revealing and disturbing section. Richard Darman was a powerful, now mostly forgotten White House official in the administrations of Reagan and George H. W. Bush. He and Woodward maintained a close friendship for almost 20 years, until the end of the Bush presidency. "Darman was my best friend *and* a source," Woodward writes. And not just any source—"my crown jewel," "a reporter's dream source," always ready to talk and full of information and insight. The pleasure they took in each other's company was heightened by the uses to which they put each other—Darman's leaks to Woodward serving his own bureaucratic machinations as well as Woodward's hunger for insider grist—so that affection and self-interest seemed almost indistinguishable. But Woodward, more than Darman, never lost sight of which came first.

This arrangement suited both men until the 1992 presidential campaign. Darman gave Woodward details of Bush's botched economic program—including how Darman had persuaded Bush to renege on his "Read my lips: no new taxes" pledge—for a book that wasn't to be published until after the election. But Woodward decided to use the material for a four-part *Washington Post* series, in which he would employ his "best friend," then Bush's budget director, as not just an obvious source but a central subject. The series, now scheduled to appear before Election Day, was bound to damage Bush's campaign. When Darman learned that Woodward planned to go back on his word and publish before the election, he realized that he had deceived himself about the nature of their relationship. He accused Woodward of violating his trust and, Woodward recalls, pointed out devastatingly that "writing about personal conflicts within Bush's team is counter to the serious purposes I claim in my journalism." We are a long way from high crimes and misdemeanors; Washington politics and journalism have become entertaining blood sport.

Woodward refused to budge, piously insisting on his "obligation to publish." The series came out, Bush lost the election, and a friendship that had also been a web of conflicting interests ended. Darman continues to haunt Woodward, and he tells this story with regret and a degree of self-loathing—not so much for betraying someone he considered his best friend, but for never trying to make amends before Darman's death, in 2008. Even here there is a limit to Woodward's self-awareness. He can't quite bring himself to acknowledge what Darman learned: that personal harm was not just a sad consequence of mistakenly mixing friendship with work; that this confidence game was a part of Woodward's trade, driven by a not entirely public-spirited determination to have a big story that no one else did.

"I present all the facts," Woodward tells us, "but I do not speculate about underlying or greater cosmic meaning."

I'VE FOUND IT possible to forgive Woodward's opaque sourcing, betrayals of trust, and credulousness, but not the other fault for which he's indicted: bad writing. This turns out to be a perplexing one. In *Secrets* we learn that he can write well; he just seems to choose not to. After interviews, Woodward would go home and immediately draft detailed accounts. He quotes a number of these memos in the book, and they are invariably more perceptive and original than his published work. Here is his description of the power in Bill Clinton's eyes: "Not just the eyeball which is active and expressive but his eyelid which does its own dance and twists oddly at times, sending its own message. He is very attentive. Even drinking a Coke, he keeps his eyes focused on me. Once even staring out through the bottom of his glass at me."

Why don't we get to read prose like this in *Bush at War* or *Fear: Trump in the White House*? "I present all the facts," Woodward tells us, "but I do not speculate about underlying or greater cosmic meaning." This self-erasure—perhaps an effect of a repressed midwestern childhood, or an old-fashioned code of reporting, or the absence of Carl Bernstein—accounts for the missing analytical context and the narrative non sequiturs that turn Woodward's later books into stitched-together interview transcripts.

Secrets shows a professional doing essentially one thing through a long and prolific career—the Nolan Ryan of journalism, with a better rookie year. Woodward has always been a barometer of power in Washington, including his own. The Washington book he did so much to enshrine mattered as long as it belonged to a world with standards of truth and codes of conduct. Now, with a president who announces his abuses of power on Truth Social, there are no norms left to be broken, no scandals to be covered up or exposed.

As for journalism, Woodward believes that truth will always matter, but "when there is already so much dirt all over, nothing sticks." A book as deeply reported, elegantly constructed, and damning as *Regime Change*, Maggie Haberman and Jonathan Swan's account of Trump's first year back in the White House, may be a best seller, but it can't give readers, as Woodward's earlier books did, the startling experience of privileged glimpses into the dark heart of politics. The powerful don't care anymore, and perhaps most of the people don't either. Woodward's achievement depended on a society that was still capable of being shocked. *A*

George Packer is a staff writer at The Atlantic.



ILLUSTRATION BY GABRIEL ALCALA

Self-Help Needs Help

The genre is trying to evolve.
It's having trouble.

By Gal Beckerman

In retrospect, 2016, the year that Angela Duckworth published *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*, may have been a high-water mark for the dogged go-getter-ism she was selling. Her book landed just as Hillary Clinton, that avatar of tenacity, seemed poised to win the presidency and Alexander Hamilton was rapping on Broadway about not giving up his shot. You could still just barely discern within each of the billionaires who bestrode Silicon Valley the dork with unusual willpower who had made it. And among the books clustered near *Grit* in airport bookstores—where the American self is apparently at its most moldable—were other pitches for individual hardiness, including efforts to make Stoicism hot again.

When I read *Grit* now, it feels to me like a taunt. Economic mobility has stalled, nonhumans are encroaching on our jobs, and COVID has scarred us with the knowledge that the unforeseen can creep up at any moment. You can be as gritty as sandpaper and still feel trampled on.

Duckworth herself now seems ready to concede that our mind alone can't control the direction of our life, that it doesn't all happen "from the inside out," as she put it in *Grit*. Back then, she arrived at the not-quite-mind-blowing conclusion that to be "the best of the best"—as accomplished as Olympic swimmers, Scripps National Spelling Bee champions, the president of Cinnabon—you had to really care about winning and work hard at it. "Today I wake up every day asking the same question that led me to psychology in the first place: *Why are some people more successful than others?*" she writes in her new book, *Situated: Find the People and Places That Bring Out Your Best*. "But I no longer believe that a complete answer begins and ends with the individual."

Adam Grant, another best-selling psychologist, appears to have hit a similar wall. In *Vibe: The Secrets of Strong Connections in a Lonely World*, his sixth book, he departs from his relentless focus on self-transformation and looks instead at "the quality of connection between people." For an author whose previous books are mostly about remaking yourself in the image of superachievers (he, too, has a thing for elite swimmers), this new endeavor feels like a departure: to consider that mercurial thing that happens between us and other people.

Duckworth and Grant are colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania (he is at the Wharton School). They are also both associated with positive psychology, the field created by Martin Seligman at the school in the late 1990s—Seligman was Duckworth's dissertation adviser. He rejected psychology's focus on mental illness and wanted to identify the conditions under which human "flourishing" happens. Positive psychology was, at least in its own self-understanding, trying to apply empirical science to the ancient philosophical question of how to live a good life; Seligman wanted, as he recently wrote, to see if the field could "make the world a better place."

But the approach underwent something of a corporate transformation as it migrated into business schools and HR departments. One of Duckworth's first grit studies examined the kind of cadet who thrives at West Point, and Grant looked at businesses such as Google and Facebook. Their evidence base, case studies, and examples continued to be drawn overwhelmingly from schools, companies, elite performers, and athletes (all those swimmers). What they were measuring was how you maximize performance, which is some distance from Aristotle.

By the time the psychologists each strapped on a microphone and took to the TED stage in the 2010s with compressed, bullet-point versions of their research, they were ready for the self-help-book section. Their arrival helped give a glow-up to an enterprise that has thrived from the start on the notion that your inner resources alone, properly unearthed and deployed, will propel you to become the most successful version of you. In *Self-Help* (1859), the book that gave the genre its name, the Scottish journalist Samuel Smiles wrote that "help from without is often enfeebling in its effects, but help from

within invariably invigorates." What method did advice-givers deploy? Extract formulas for inner drive from vivid models of extraordinary achievement, and never mind how much gets left out—those pesky forces of genetics and upbringing, economics and history, not to mention luck. Duckworth and Grant joined in, and their best sellers got blurbed by the business and media elite (Mark Cuban, Oprah Winfrey, Sheryl Sandberg, Arianna Huffington).

Yet now they seem to be swerving onto more unruly terrain. Are their new books, I wondered, prepared to question some of the tenets of the venerable self-made-man myth? A person's social world, the one outside their control that impinges on them at every turn, would seem to be key to understanding a rise or fall. Is that what *Situated* and *Vibe*, products of a disorienting moment, would do: look around and realize how little power we actually have over the course of our own lives?

THAT ISN'T what these books do. Grant does acknowledge the "uncertainty, complexity, and conflict" that characterize most of our encounters once we leave the confines of our mind. "Like it or not," Duckworth now pauses to observe, "our every thought and action is profoundly shaped by our peers and mentors, by our culture, and even by the objects in our personal space." Entire centuries-old fields of social science, as the authors both know well, have detailed how such forces influence us. But recognizing constraint and limitation is not what this genre is about. Its goal is to reassure us that we have ultimate control over our fate.

Grant's focus is on vibing, a word he uses to describe that ephemeral state when people or a group connect deeply—when "conversations pulse with energy. Thoughts soar. Trust grows. Time flies." He insists that this is a "skill set that can be learned and taught," and that it is crucial to one's success. What follows is an assortment of studies to establish the ideal conditions for generating this crucial synergistic energy. In one of them, the same woman approached two different groups of male hikers trekking through a rainforest and, after asking them to fill out a questionnaire, she tore off a piece of paper, wrote down her number, and handed it to each of them. She met the first group on an ordinary bridge, and only one in eight men later called. But half of the men in the second group, which she encountered on a narrow suspension bridge swaying 230 feet above churning rapids, called her.

The takeaway? What deepens a relationship is being in an "emotionally intense situation." Again and again, Grant plucks broad lessons from social-psychology experiments so odd that I came away wondering how big the sample size could possibly be, whether correlation and causation were getting confused—and, not least, how to apply the findings. Grant proposes engineering a group outing to such a bridge or a haunted house or, God help me, an improv-comedy class.

You can't really reverse engineer something like vulnerability or attentiveness or love.

Unlike his earlier books, which are largely about shifting one's mindset, there is only so much you can do to master your environment or other people, though Grant makes lots of suggestions. Throw dinner parties, but ensure that they are "carefully choreographed." For example, ask guests to each throw one shoe in a pile and then take turns grabbing a shoe and holding it up for the owner to claim. "At dessert time, I prompted people to play musical chairs," he proudly reports. I guess trust grew during these pre-K games? Often Grant slips into a style that reads like a manual for robots learning how to act like humans. "Laughing during and after disagreements," he advises, "is one of the most effective ways to maintain a healthy bond."

But you can't really reverse engineer something like vulnerability or attentiveness or love. Grant's attempt to script and quantify the ineffable connections among "associates, allies, pals, and companions"—his byzantine taxonomy of vibers—just seems condescending. Isn't it the truest of truisms to say that "relying on our first impressions is shortsighted"? His tendency to end sections on a sententious note only adds to the patronizing tone. "A strong bond can last for years," he intones, "but forming one doesn't have to take years. Sometimes a little heat is enough to build a blazing fire."

Duckworth's approach is more schematic, conveyed succinctly by a "Three Boxes Model": "Situation," "Thoughts," and "Response." To take her most basic example, if you put your workout clothes where you can see them (situation), exercise will come to mind (thoughts), and because "changing your thoughts, in turn, *automatically* changes your behavior," you'll go for a jog (response). At a small scale, sure, this works: If you want to eat better, place carrots and apples around the house.

But Duckworth goes bigger. In *Grit*, she made the case for personal agency; here, she's introducing "situational agency." "Like the best of the best, you, too, can proactively seek out situations optimized to achieve your fullest potential," she writes. If you don't like the culture in which you're embedded, if it's cramping that potential, go elsewhere. Rearrange your environment for maximum grittiness.

Yet her guidance is strangely out of touch. Among her case studies, she focuses on, who else, an Olympic swimmer, Léon Marchand, and his decision to move from France to Tempe, Arizona, so that he

could train with a world-renowned coach. Keep in mind that both of Marchand's parents, as well as an uncle, were Olympic swimmers; that he had joined a swim club at age 6; and that he had already placed sixth in the 2020 Summer Olympics in Tokyo before his move. From this fine-tuned trajectory—he went on to win four gold medals—Duckworth concludes that anything is possible for any of us if we just change our location: "In those moments when your challenge seems daunting, ask yourself, what would Léon do? And remember what he *did* do: Léon Marchand got on a plane."

Never mind that relocating is hardly simple for anyone. Is our own situation always so clear to us? And if you change it, how do you know you're making it better and not worse? Duckworth advises parents who want to improve their children's opportunities to consider moving to school districts with better teachers and more resources, even if it means living in a smaller home. What if the child gets bullied at that new school? What if they resent having to share a room with their annoying sibling? Every circumstance in a person's life is multi dimensional. Describing the many factors at work is daunting enough, but pinpointing what can (and should) be changed is like trying to yank a tablecloth from a set table without breaking any dishes.

Duckworth doesn't see the problem. She has yet more boxes, these for items labeled "uncontrollable" and "controllable," as if the two can always and easily be parsed. The effects of "the modern world" and "your genes" (uncontrollable) get put in one category, and "the culture of where you work and live now" and "your mindset" (controllable) get put in another. I did a double take when I saw these neat divisions. Had Duckworth just cracked the great mystery of nature versus nurture?

One of the more nonsensical studies she cites found that growing up in a household with 500 books had the equivalent effect on a child's "lifetime educational attainment" as having college-educated parents. How did this study even work? Can you isolate the effects of the books? Who else but college-educated parents would fill their house with that many books? Duckworth is not concerned with such details. The lesson lies in having books around (controllable), and she lectures parents accordingly: "Situationally wise parents don't rush out to buy their children the latest iPhone. Instead, they purchase as many books as they can afford, line their walls with bookshelves and not TV screens, and take their children to the library on weekends."

Duckworth and Grant have fallen into the same self-help trap. *Situated* and *Vibe* gesture at the realm beyond our immediate power, but they are still about how we can flex our willpower for the sake of more and more success. Duckworth refers approvingly to the Serenity Prayer, but she seems to miss what actually makes it meaningful. This is a prayer for people working on accepting their smallness and fallibility—it was popularized by recovering alcoholics. It is a prayer of realism, not ambition. The possibility of change exists, but only once you recognize and embrace the notion that many things will always be impossible to change.

SITUATED: FIND THE PEOPLE AND PLACES THAT BRING OUT YOUR BEST

Angela Duckworth

SCRIBNER

VIBE: THE SECRETS OF STRONG CONNECTIONS IN A LONELY WORLD

Adam Grant

VIKING

EVERY SELF-HELP BOOK is also an autobiography, even if unintentionally so. Why should we listen to such writers if they haven't faced and overcome the problems they purport to solve? Both Duckworth and Grant reveal themselves as obsessive overachievers. Both went to Harvard. Duckworth was a consultant at McKinsey, then had stints teaching middle and high school before getting her Ph.D. in psychology. Grant's friends called him Mr. Facts as a kid—he was the boy who fired off baseball statistics when they were just trying to trade cards. Despite his fear of heights, in high school he became a springboard diver good enough to be in the Junior Olympics. He got his master's and doctorate *in three years*.

There's nothing wrong with being driven. But compulsively performance-oriented people—in my experience, at least—find it hard to resist monitoring their behavior until there are zero unknowns. Grant hinted at this internal struggle in a 2013 *New York Times Magazine* profile: "For me, in my moments of idleness, I experience the most existential anxiety, so I like that every moment is scheduled, even when it's having on my calendar that I'm going to watch a television show with my wife. It means my brain is engaged in other things, and it's not going to be a terrifying evening."

This frantic need to conquer uncertainty comes through in his books. He starts with humility, but what follows is an intense self-surveillance, a search for objective measures of how he's doing. As he began writing for a popular audience, he has recalled, he pined for his diver days, when he was meticulously rated on the size of the splash as he entered the water. So he assembled colleagues to rate every new article and book chapter he produced on a scale of zero to 10.

Look around at all that resists being easily tweaked toward "excellence"—not least other people and reality itself—and the limits of self-help appear unavoidable. Duckworth reveals this at one point in *Situated*, in a way that I'm not sure she even realizes. In a genuinely vulnerable moment, she recounts a marital crisis after a lifetime of assuming that, with enough grit, she could manage everything. When her husband's real-estate-development company

encountered hard times, their relationship frayed; she cried herself to sleep every night and contemplated separation. Following the advice of her book, Duckworth reports that much of the solution lay in shifting the elements in box one, altering their schedules and restructuring their work life to create a new situation: Now they could "sleep, exercise, and laugh a little *every single day*."

But that doesn't seem to be what really saved them. She also describes all the therapy they undertook, with "tremendous reluctance" on her part—and with three therapists: one for her, one for her husband, and another for both of them. This is not changing the situation. Therapy is about better understanding yourself *within* a situation, tracing your patterns, learning to see others better as well. The work entailed is not optimization. It's about dropping illusions. For Duckworth and her husband, it meant articulating the "messy bits," the "sadness, confusion, fear, and doubt that each of us had been carrying in silence." Doing what Léon Marchand would do—get on a plane to another city—was precisely not the point.

Every time I toggled between reading these books and opening the newspaper, I was reminded of just how inadequate their self-help message feels for this moment. When Duckworth and Grant talk about "culture"—which they do, a lot—they're often referring to the highly controllable, measurable, top-down cultures of sports teams, tech companies, consulting firms. Their books' neatness does not leave room for the feeling of being completely stuck, individually and collectively, and also buffeted by a world swirling out of our control. Most days, I feel like Alex in *A Clockwork Orange*, strapped into a chair, eyelids held open, forced to watch norms collapse, economies rupture, ecosystems crumble.

Personal or situational agency sounds great, but maybe what we really need is moral agency. Grant has occasionally garnished his stories of start-up successes with mentions of such leaders as Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela, to curiously dispiriting effect: The struggle to reshape values and society blurs into having a good pitch deck and some move-fast-and-break-things gumption. It's the abiding ethos of expediency and mastery that limits the self-helpfulness of these new books—their emphasis on getting somewhere quickly and knowing with total certainty that you have arrived. Is that the point of fulfilling work, of satisfying family life, of friendship, of really anything worth doing? *A*

Gal Beckerman is a staff writer at The Atlantic *and the author, most recently, of* How to Be a Dissident.

Poem for the WaterShed

By Gretel Ehrlich

Let's say we

have nothing and

start from there. Then that burns and

from its ash we make ink.

Let's say we can write but

have no words.

Let's say we can sing.

What if we had songs but no

ink, brush, voice.

What if we swept the floor with

a swan's wing and the whole

day lifted and we could begin again.

What if all we had left

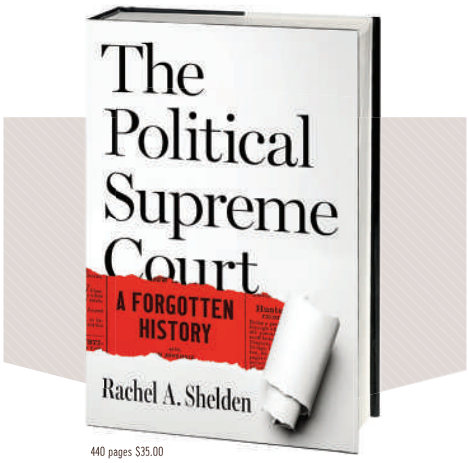
was a match and

nothing to burn.

Gretel Ehrlich is the author of The Solace of Open Spaces *and 16 other books of poetry, nonfiction, and fiction.*

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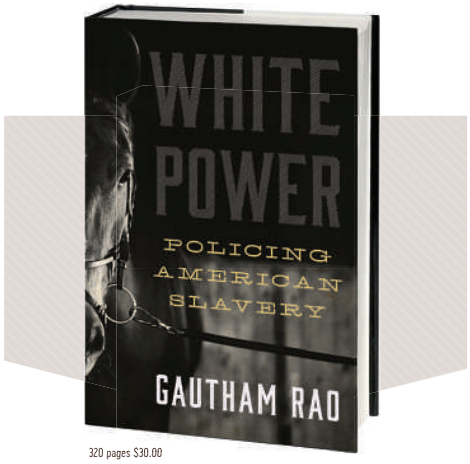
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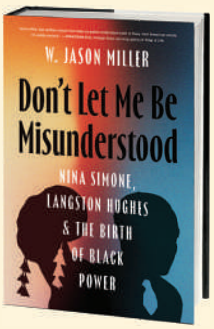
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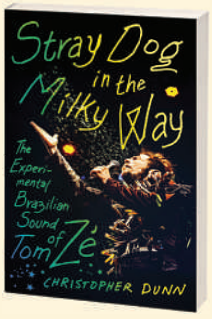


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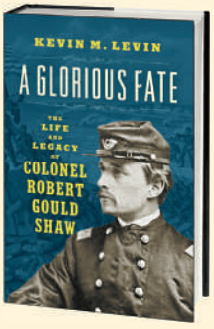


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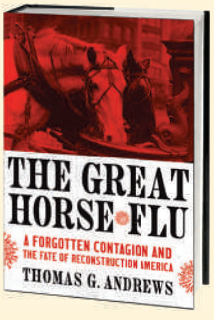


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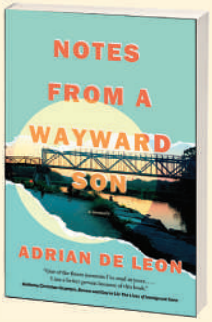


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BOOKS

Kirsten's Midlife Crisis

American Girl dolls helped define girlhood for a generation. How did the brand lose its way?

By Hillary Kelly



In the early 1990s, when I was in elementary school, a fancy catalog would arrive in the mailbox of our 1950s split-level in Philadelphia four times a year, and I'd hurry to my room to pore over its elaborate spreads. Tea caddies, Windsor chairs, writing quills, ice-cream churns. We didn't have any antiques in our home, but the lure of the past was so strong that sometimes my sisters, five and seven years older than me, crammed onto my bed to dog-ear the pages too. Most of all, we looked forward to checking in with the girls arrayed there, whose stories we knew so well: Samantha, Molly, Kirsten, Felicity, Addy, and, later in the decade, Josefina.

They were the American Girl dolls, preadolescents just slightly older than me, and I was enthralled by the pictures of their period dresses, tiny school supplies, and exotic waxed lunch foods. My own doll was the farm girl Kirsten Larson, a Swedish immigrant to 1850s Minnesota. She had come in a burgundy box, with a slim book titled *Meet Kirsten* tucked in beside her. I promptly begged for the five other Kirsten books; the historical-fiction series followed the same pattern for each doll, ushering her through a year's worth of life events, tailored to her personality and time and place. I remember playing with Kirsten in the backyard and having her trace out symbols in the dirt, just as she did with her new friend, a Dakota girl called Singing Bird, in the second book, *Kirsten Learns a Lesson*. To have such a doll was to own a whole world and the narratives within it.

In my blue-collar neighborhood, we lucky doll owners felt that our Boomer parents had entrusted us with a valuable possession, and they had. When they were first introduced, in 1986, American Girl dolls cost a shocking $68 (roughly $208 today). Almost every Millennial I know who once spent hours with her American Girl doll has kept it, lovingly, into adulthood.

The dolls' hardscrabble backstories piqued curiosity about the past. Kirsten's best friend died of cholera on the

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ELIZABETH RENSTROM FOR *THE ATLANTIC*

journey from Sweden; Samantha Parkington, the wealthy "Victorian beauty" living in 1904 Westchester County, New York, was an orphan; Molly McIntire's doctor father was off serving in World War II England. Each doll confronted challenges in her young life that felt at once intimate and unfamiliar. Add well-made accessories and vivid history to the mix, and girlhood acquired an allure that Barbie seemed to bypass on her way to her plastic Dreamhouse.

Yet as American Girl's 40th anniversary arrives, the brand finds itself in something of a midlife crisis. In 1998, Pleasant Rowland, the former teacher and textbook writer who'd dreamed up the dolls, sold Pleasant Company to an unlikely steward: Mattel, the company behind Barbie and her stilettos. A quarter century later, the heyday of preteen devotion to playmates from bygone eras seems like, well, a bygone era. Mattel's dire balance sheets for the American Girl line confirm that the magic has faded.

Might a surge of celebratory attention to the Pleasant Company past be the secret to renewed relevance? It certainly could not be better timed, with the Millennial faithful now in their childbearing—and toy-buying—years.

Pleasant Rowland's American Girl–doll enterprise was a mission to rescue an endangered phase of life.

WITH ROWLAND'S spare-no-effort ethos of product creation clearly in mind, Mattel has released *The Making of American Girl*, a chronicle of Pleasant Company's origin story that resembles the sumptuous catalogs of my childhood, only far grander in scale. The coffee-table book is a canny paean to the dozen years of Rowland's leadership. Extolling her "courage and conviction," it dwells on her commitment to craftsmanship. The scrapbook-style spreads showcase mock-ups of her early brainstorming, the fabrics she insisted on, the dovetailed furniture joints and delicate details on all those teeny accessories that girls craved and parents put on their credit cards. Designed as a nostalgia trip for Millennials, it works. My 9- and 4-year-old daughters showed the book off to their playmates one weekend afternoon, but it was those girls' 40-something mom who lingered over it with me, comparing notes on the expensive items we had known better than to ask for in childhood, such as the bisque plate and mug for Kirsten, made by the renowned Rowe Pottery Works in Wisconsin.

But what about the rest of the story of the doll that had become America's second-most-popular by the late '90s? That's left to Amanda FitzSimons, a journalist who did not have the cooperation of Mattel, or of the now-85-year-old Rowland, for her smart and colorful cultural analy sis, *An American Girl: How a Billion-Dollar Doll and Its Unlikely Founder Changed Girlhood Forever*. That means she's free, after exploring how the dolls and books became unexpected hits, to describe how the American Girl brand's identity eventually grew so muddled that it has become barely recognizable.

FitzSimons starts with Rowland's big idea, conceived on a trip to Colonial Williamsburg in the early 1980s and transformed into an elaborate business plan over a weekend at her northern-Wisconsin cabin, where the woodstove and outhouse had her thinking about life in the past. The books, "for girls about girls," came first—they were "the heart of" the American Girl collection, in Rowland's words.

A boss who looked for tenacity in her employees as well as her dolls, Rowland liked to say that her initials, PTR, stood for "Prepare to Redo"; a researcher at the company devoted a day, for example, to conferring with poultry-science experts to determine the exact hour at which Kirsten's hens would lay eggs. With that attention to detail, Rowland turned the business into a high-volume, high-value sensation. Over time, Pleasant Company offered ever more accessories, such as carefully constructed craft kits (I had my eye on a wooden loom for weaving a doll sash), stationery, and matching outfits for dolls and their girls. But above all, what Rowland sold was the idea that girlhood was important, in need of preservation.

Her American Girl enterprise, FitzSimons argues, was a mission to rescue an endangered phase of life. Girlhood was slipping away. The term *tween*, which encompasses kids as young as 8, was popularized as a marketing tool in the '80s and quickly became shorthand for a child who didn't act like a child. Late-20th-century girls, Rowland worried from the start, "turn on the television set and the world comes down on them hard. It's sexually explicit, it's dangerous and violent, it's angry, complaining, discouraging." By the mid-'90s, the phenomenon of kids aging out of pastimes earlier was well documented.

FitzSimons credits Rowland with an astute insight amid rising calls to shore up girls' self-confidence: "It wasn't that girls wanted to be older," she writes; "it was that they wanted to be understood, feel important." The dolls' figures never matured, and the books didn't include periods or crushes; friends, school, and adventure occupied the girls' imaginations. Samantha fights back when a local menace puts salt in her birthday ice cream; colonial-era Felicity Merriman befriends the daughter of a Loyalist family despite her father's Revolutionary politics.

In aiming to transport girls to other worlds, Rowland had more than innocent fantasy and vivid Americana in mind. Her goal was to encourage play that felt immersive and incorporated historical adversity. The books included plotlines about children working in factories and the displacement of Native people in the Midwest. Her cast expanded to include a second trio of

dolls—Felicity, as well as Josefina Montoya, who lives on a New Mexico rancho in 1824, and Addy Walker, an enslaved girl who escapes to 1864 Philadelphia.

The panels of scholars hired to help vet the dolls' backgrounds and physical appearance had their socially charged work cut out for them. Lonnie Bunch, later the founding director of the National Museum of African American History and Culture, was part of the committee advising on Addy, whose development stirred plenty of debate over her storyline (whether American Girl's only Black doll should have been born into slavery, for example) and over specifics (which hair texture was appropriate, how cheerful faces should look in book illustrations). People argued about her suitability as a possession for white girls. (Endorsed by Oprah in time for Christmas 1993, Addy was a commercial success that year.)

The original six American Girls telegraphed a spirit of optimism about the very idea of being a girl. Rowland's characters were intrepid and resourceful but still gracious; free to be tomboyish while also engaged with feminine traditions, such as Kirsten's quilting. Breaking down gender stereotypes wasn't Rowland's goal, and "feminism was never mentioned in the room," the creative director of *American Girl* magazine told FitzSimons. But the "girls can do anything" spirit of third-wave feminism, cresting in the '90s, was the backdrop of the brand's rise: empowerment and education in one finely crafted package. As Rowland put it in a letter addressed to parents in an early catalog, "Growing up in America is, has been, and can always be an experience to treasure."

THE MAKING OF AMERICAN GIRL

AMERICAN GIRL PUBLISHING

AN AMERICAN GIRL: HOW A BILLION-DOLLAR DOLL AND ITS UNLIKELY FOUNDER CHANGED GIRLHOOD FOREVER

Amanda FitzSimons

ATRIA BOOKS

SAMANTHA: THE NEXT CHAPTER

Fiona Davis

AMERICAN GIRL PUBLISHING

"I DON'T CARE if a girl grew up in Colonial times, Victorian times, in 1950, or today," Rowland once said. "The emotional experiences of childhood are absolutely true and constant." Thanks in part to my own exposure to her dolls' stories, I confess I can't quite believe that she ever really meant this. The hardships entailed in Kirsten's months-long sea voyage stunned snack-happy 8-year-old me; I was suddenly aware of the many conveniences and freedoms that I took for granted. Our kinship was strong—we even shared a birthday (June 8)—but our attachment, I felt, was also about imagining how different my days and moods were from hers.

When Rowland sold her venture (for $700 million), the business was just expanding into American Girl stores and cafés, an old-fashioned "mecca," she called it, for mother-daughter doll bonding (and buying). The world's virtual horizons had barely begun to be mapped, and the looming kids-getting-older-younger landscape was soon Mattel's problem to worry about. Over the past two decades, according to one study, the average age at which children begin to be interested in "adult-oriented topics such as fashion and technology" has decreased from age 12 to 8. In 1990, little girls were hoping for $50 nightgowns to match the one their doll wore; now they're pining for $90 Drunk Elephant glycolic serum to slather on their faces before bed.

For Mattel at the turn of the millennium, adultified competition arrived in an unnervingly direct and provocative form: Bratz dolls, aimed at young girls. With their pillowy lips, heavy eye makeup, and distorted big-head-small-body proportions, they were mutant Barbies, accelerants for the idea that brasher and sexier were better. By 2006, they accounted for 40 percent of the fashion-doll market.

The American Girl heritage was buried as Mattel played catch-up. Except for Addy and Josefina, the original dolls were retired. Catalogs shrank; chic burgundy gave way to hot pink. Proliferating doll lines—Best Friends, Truly Me, WellieWishers—shifted the focus away from the bond between a girl and her doll, as a *New Yorker* article noted, and onto friendship networks. Instead of intriguing relics from earlier times—a miniature oil lamp or a friendship quilt—the Girl of the Year doll (the run is limited, so buy her fast) had plastic-tchotchke versions of things such as a cellphone and a Stanley- style water bottle.

New dolls that were added to the historical American Girl line soon hailed from more recent times; Courtney Moore, who "never met a mixtape she didn't like," was from 1986, the year the brand was launched. The accompanying books became perfunctory, a scattershot array of graphics and a story that gestured at history but never dove in. Even as doll prices rose, American Girl revenue cratered, reportedly falling by 61 percent from 2016 to late 2023.

IN A RECENT INSTAGRAM POST, a mom vented about a visit to the books section at an American Girl store: "Excuse me. Where are the boxed sets. Where are the SACRED TEXTS. The Library of Alexandria, again." Mattel notably hasn't bothered to reissue the full book series, though the six original dolls have been re released for the brand's anniversary. Instead, targeting its Millennial fan base, the company commissioned a new book in the Samantha series from the best-selling historical novelist Fiona Davis, whose other work for adults features adventurous young women in glamorous and gritty 20th-century New York City.

In *Samantha: The Next Chapter*, Davis locates her subject in 1920. Now 25, Samantha is down on her luck in New York (her family's fortune has been stolen) and working as a shopgirl. But she soon finds the thieves and helps the suffragists' cause, championed by her Aunt Cornelia in the original books. For some readers, Davis's aim of evoking "sweet nostalgia" and inspiring "wonder at the women you've



ELIZABETH RENSTROM FOR *THE ATLANTIC*

A Modern Era Kirsten doll, now with space buns and an updated dress, and the six original American Girl dolls

become," as she has put it, may prove rewarding. Yet her American Girl audience is ambivalent, too. Reared on Rowland's vision of boldly imaginative girls eager to play their part in an America that was constantly improving, Millennials are also dealing with disenchantment: The country they now inhabit hasn't delivered on the optimism that powered the world of the dolls and books they loved.

Davis's grown-up Samantha, though a tribute to the brand's history-infused approach, is likely to disappoint. She is stuffed with generically desirable attributes of womanhood and faces conventional emotional dilemmas: She's determined to remain independent while looking for love, forward-thinking yet happy with her lot. It's a formula for tame likability rather than conflicted maturity.

Earlier this year, the latest American Girl catalog landed on my doorstep—it was a re-creation of the first catalog cover, which showed a girl curled up with her doll on a chintz-covered window seat, intently reading a book. But inside, after a few pages dedicated to the historical dolls, was a torrent of brand collaborations (with Hill House Home dresses, Disney princesses, Polly Pocket) and a spread welcoming the Modern Era collection—the classic dolls, now offered in shrunken, all-vinyl versions with oversize heads, and dressed up in trendy contemporary outfits.

American Girl has a tough needle to thread (the cliché seems apt): make the dolls of good quality, but not too costly; repackage American history, but don't offend anyone; get Gen Alpha girls interested, but remember that Millennials now hold the credit cards. I've deemed my 4-year-old too young for a $175 doll, and my *Harry Potter*–obsessed 9-year-old considers my vintage Kirsten books too slender to take seriously. But when an old 1995 catalog I'd ordered for research arrived, both pored over it, fascinated by Samantha's miniature brass lunch pail and Felicity's coal bed warmer. I explained that the company no longer makes those items; we can get them only for astronomical sums on resale sites. "But this is all so perfect," my elder daughter said. "It almost makes them come alive." *A*

Hillary Kelly is a literary critic and an essayist.

Memories of the Train

By Siqi Liu

Illustrations by Katherine Lam

The train's seats: blue with a white strip down the middle. The windows: wide, tinted green. The sun: halfway below the horizon. He was playing with the top his mother had bought from the cart lady. With each spin came flashes of rainbow light: *zzz zzz zoom*. The train's seats: white with a blue strip down the middle, five per row. The windows: wide, tinted blue. A hard orange sunlight cut through the glass.


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He was playing with the top his mother had bought. Next to him was his brother, Dudu. Dudu was 4. He was 9. Their mother was in the bathroom. With each spin came flashes of rainbow light: *zzz zzz zoom*.

The train's seats: mostly blue and a little white, five per row. They sat in row 18. Earlier Dudu, giggling, had knocked over the top. Annoyed, he'd slapped Dudu's hand away. Dudu had grown bored and fallen asleep. Their mother, before going to the bathroom, had told him to watch his little brother. Now the train pulled into a station, and he tried to read the name of it in the glare of the setting sun. He could recognize only two of the four characters: *hill* and *city*. Their stop was the next one, but as people got off the train, others were already standing up, reaching for their luggage. The top rolled from the tray table onto the floor, bounced, and slid under the rows in front of him. He crawled on the floor, dodging people's shoes and thighs and suitcases, until he snatched it back into the safety of his small, warm fist. When he crawled back to his seat, Dudu was gone.

The woman: same height as his mother. Hair in a bun. Dangling earrings. She held Dudu the way their mother held him. Dudu, whose head rested on her shoulder, opened his eyes drowsily as she carried him off the train. In an instant they were swarmed by bodies on the platform. Through the window he caught a glimpse of the woman's face, which looked ordinary, which he'd later fail to describe with any specificity to the sketch artist at the police station. Over the woman's shoulder, Dudu's face pinched in confusion. Inside the train, he heard a wail, sharp and alarmed, coming from his own throat. His fist pounded the glass. But the train had already begun moving.

AFTER HIS BROTHER was abducted on the train between Changsha and Guangzhou, his parents bankrupted themselves. They closed their convenience store. They camped outside the local police station. When the police moved on to other things, they spent all their money on an incompetent local detective. They spent all their time plastering ads on the telephone poles of a city that had been neither a home nor a destination. But Dudu remained gone.

A few seasons passed before they finally returned to their run-down apartment in Changsha, but it felt like years. His mother's hair had turned white. His father's cheeks sagged permanently, as if they were trying to run away from the rest of his face. The room he had once shared with Dudu was frighteningly quiet at night without the sound of Dudu's soft, wet snores. Back then he believed that the walkie-talkie his father had given him for his seventh birthday had magic powers. At night, he'd take the cold block in his hands and press it against his ear, whispering, "Dudu, Dudu, can you hear me? Come back, I need you for our mission. Over."

Silence spread through the house and wrapped everyone in their own impenetrable cocoon. He knew that his mother blamed him for what had happened, though she never said it aloud, and though he'd told the police that on the train he'd begun screaming and pounding the window right away to get the other passengers' attention. Some mornings, in the apartment's heavy stillness, his mother set down boiled eggs in front of him without cooling them in water. They blistered his fingers when he tried to peel them. He knew that she did it on purpose—she used to always cool them for him first. He knew that his father, though he never said it aloud, blamed his mother for what had happened. His father had once swept the hair that his mother would shed in the bathroom without complaint. Now he hardly spent time in the apartment at all. His mother's white strands piled around the toilet like a thin layer of frost.

When his parents divorced, he chose to live with his father, because his father intended to go as far away as possible, while his mother intended on staying. She was convinced that Dudu would one day find his way back to their crumbling apartment. He followed his father to a new city, then another new city, then another new city. He toted around the shoebox that held the top and the walkie-talkie with each move. He hid the fact that he had a brother from each new friend he made, each time he introduced himself to a class.

During those years, he tried to forget about what had happened. But once in a while, he'd visit his mother and see that she continued to sit in a dark corner of their old apartment, shedding hair, shelling peanuts, waiting for Dudu to knock on the door, waiting to die. The visit would dissolve any sense of movement in his own life. His mother continued to bake cakes on Dudu's birthday. She told him she worried that if Dudu called, she would no longer recognize his voice—surely puberty would have thickened his vocal cords, given him the tenor of a strange man.

When his father moved to the United States, he went along. He gave himself a new name in the new country: Brent, which means "hill." Brent made new friends who believed he was an only child. He was unable to tell the first two women he loved about what had happened. The third woman, after he told her, drew his head down onto her lap and stroked his hair until dawn. He married her. They lived happily together for six years and unhappily for two, then parted ways. He made a lot of money one year and lost it all the next. Both of his parents died. On their deathbeds, both of his parents spoke of Dudu and cried.

Throughout the years, the only constant in his life was Dudu's absence. So many of his nightmares started with the top. He blamed the top for what had happened almost as much as he blamed himself. If his mother hadn't bought him the top, he and Dudu would have invented some game to play together. The games they once played included: "you be the soldier and I'll be the general," "you be the plane and I'll be the captain," "you be the rabbit and I'll be the farmer," "you be the fox and I'll be the dog." If they'd played a game, Dudu wouldn't have fallen asleep. If he hadn't been looking for the top, he wouldn't have lost track of Dudu. If he'd been a kinder older brother, he would have let Dudu play with the top and Dudu wouldn't have fallen asleep. If … The list went on.

"Do you find yourself consumed by all the things that could have gone a different way?" his therapist asked him. By then, he was living alone in a large brownstone in Boston after divorcing his second wife, who, despite her duplicitous nature, had been benevolent during the divorce proceedings. She'd agreed to a slightly smaller

alimony on the sole condition that he start therapy. "Do you find yourself going down a rabbit hole of imagining alternative realities? Do you find yourself shaking, crying, unable to breathe normally when you follow this train of thought?"

"Yes," he said, frowning at the word *train*.

The therapist opened a drawer and pressed a cold, hard fruit into his hands. "When that happens, try sucking on a lemon."

She cut off the top of the lemon with a pair of scissors. He put his mouth on the fruit's cool flesh. The sourness was so intense, it shot a ray of numbness all the way up his neck and into his skull. The feeling annihilated his memories for a few short, blissful moments. *This was why paying extra for a human therapist made sense*, he thought. The artificially intelligent ones—those bright icons bobbing on a computer screen—wouldn't be able to hand him a lemon when he needed it.

By then, he'd tried to find his brother relentlessly for years. He'd started as soon as he'd made his first fortune. He'd paid private investigators all over the world to track down what had happened to the kidnapped boy with the crescent-moon birthmark on his left elbow. False leads had taken him everywhere: a temple of monks in the high mountains of Tibet; the burning cold of China's northeastern countryside; a penthouse in Singapore made of sleek, dark marble; an old couple's shack in the Australian outback (a journey that almost cost him a foot); an angry man's courtyard in the center of Beijing; two different cities in Canada; a boat on the Mekong River. He'd been presented with men who had crescent-moon birthmarks on their left elbows and strange stories of origin, men he'd instantly determined were not his brother. Some of the prospects had been honest mistakes, while others had been clear scams for the large cash reward.

Twice in his life, he'd come across someone he thought was his brother. One time, he was at an ostrich farm in Cape Town with his first wife when they saw another Asian couple strolling ahead of them in an open pasture. Something about the back of the man's head—a cowlick, an oblong skull—made Brent sprint toward him. He stopped several feet away, directly in the couple's path. The man's confused face looked like it could have belonged to his brother, didn't it? There was enough resemblance in the nose, the eyes, he was almost sure. But when he whispered "Dudu?" the couple merely looked at him with alarm and scurried away. The other time, he was in the dizzyingly sunny streets of Dubai, right outside a colossal mall. He saw an Asian man passing by whose gait was so familiar that his knees went weak. Before the man could melt into the crowd, he grabbed him by the hem of his shirt. The man promptly threw off his arm and spat in his face. His elbow: bare, smooth as a porcelain plate.

Over and over, he tried to recount things precisely. But the more he tried to pin down each detail, the more they fluttered away, like a dead butterfly emerging from its glass case, shape-shifting before his eyes.

When his fortune ran dry, he used what little money he had left to travel back to the city at the foot of the hill. The platform on which his little brother had disappeared had fallen into disrepair. Wildflowers gnawed at its borders. The train no longer went through here, because a new high-speed train now stopped in another part of the city. In his foreign clothes and carrying his foreign knapsack, he walked back and forth along the abandoned tracks. Over and over, he tried to recount things precisely. But the more he tried to pin down each detail—the color of the seats, the shape of the woman's earrings—the more each detail fluttered away, like a dead butterfly emerging from its glass case, shape-shifting before his eyes.

DURING HIS year of therapy, he married for a third time. His wife was 14 years younger than he was. She possessed the perfect combination of his first wife's intelligence, his second wife's beauty, and a joyful optimism that neither of them had. She moved into his chilly, high-ceilinged brownstone and filled it with plants and small ceramic vases and toys for her cat. His life began to feel fuller, more peaceful. The only disagreement they had was on the topic of children. She wanted two. He wanted none. "Children are selfish, indolent little kings with no morals," he argued. "They make their parents into servants and destroy everything."

Aside from their impasse on this topic, they never fought and hardly ever argued. He didn't tell her about Dudu, having learned his lesson from his prior marriages. His first wife had felt neglected when he traveled the world to chase unsubstantiated leads, leaving her behind in their cavernous house for months at a time. His second wife had resented him for spending all the money he'd made on private investigators.

So when his third wife asked about the top and the walkie-talkie in a dusty box in his closet, he replied that they belonged to the child of a friend who'd given them to him for safekeeping. On nights when he'd have nightmares about the train, and the scream rising from his throat in the dream would possess his body, and they would both shoot up in bed at the sound of his screaming, he'd tell her about a recurring dream of falling off a cliff. She'd hold him tight. "Just imagine that I'm at the bottom, ready to catch you," she murmured.

Her optimism touched him. He sucked on lemons. He tried to forget.

TEN MORE years passed. His marriage began to fall apart. He began to make his next fortune. For some time, both of these things preoccupied him greatly. Though he never stopped thinking about Dudu, he found himself spending less energy on

the search—a search complicated by the lies he had to tell his third wife to explain his occasional travels to obscure places. When they divorced, he grieved as he'd grieved his first two marriages, but not without a small sense of relief. Finally, he had all the freedom in the world to track down any lead that came his way.

He decided to meet up with his first wife for coffee in London, where they'd lived 20 years ago. The thing he initially noticed was that she now wore her beauty in a more intimidating way. When they were married, she'd been a shy medical-school student, but now she ran a sprawling neuroscience lab filled with technicians and Ph.D.s who, from the sound of it, snapped to attention at her every whim. Whenever she opened her mouth to speak, her dark lipstick made an authoritative ring. At first they talked nostalgically about the years they'd spent together, as if they'd absolved each other. But soon the conversation soured. She asked him if she could have her wedding dress back—it was vintage and worth a lot of money now, and had been a gift from her parents.

"Why on earth would I have it?" he asked.

"The day we moved out, you gave the handymen the wrong instructions, and they loaded the box with the dress into your moving truck."

"All of your boxes had the red FRAGILE tape, and none of mine did. It would have been obvious if that box got mixed up with mine."

From the wedding dress, they moved on to argue about who'd taken better care of their Rottweiler, what had happened to the stamp collection (another item lost during move-out day), why he'd thrown away the casserole her sister-in-law had made one Christmas, why she'd always complained about getting on a flight to visit his mother, who'd led such a lonely and stale existence in that run-down Changsha apartment. It had been just like this during their marriage: One of them was always telling the other that they were getting the facts wrong.

The more they argued, the more he felt a sense of relief. Recently, after divorcing his third wife, he'd been thinking about



his first wife. The image that kept appearing in his mind was of the mornings they'd once spent in their tiny London flat, their legs intertwined underneath a yellow-checkered duvet as they studied the same spot on the wall where sunlight splashed onto peeling white paint. He would hold her beautiful neck and think, *So this is what it's like to have a companion in life: to look at something and know there is always someone next to you looking at the same thing*. They were young back then, and malleable. There were junctures when one of them could have chosen to grow with the other instead of apart. If they had, then perhaps …

But now he settled into the safe certainty that they'd been right to leave each other. She was still the same: petty, self-centered, stubborn. She threw down her napkin, dropped a few bills on the table, and said haughtily that he ought to get checked by the memory reader. The memory reader? He set down his cup, perking up. She looked at him with pity, then an old flash of tenderness, before sashaying away.

He searched *memory reader* on the flight back to Boston. He read about a machine that could produce a high-resolution film from a snippet of human memory, one that captured every original visual and auditory detail. "*Original* is the keyword," he saw in a paper with his first wife's name in the byline. "What distinguishes THE MEMORY READER from its predecessors is that it is able to access the *original* event in perfect condition. In the human brain, every instance of a recall leads to an infinitesimal rewiring of the memory. In essence, the memory grows falser over time—colored by the subject's emotional state and evolving subjectivity.

KATHERINE LAM

However, THE MEMORY READER is capable of accessing the true memory and creating a replica, as if producing a livestreamed video of an event *at the moment it all happened*."

Decades earlier, a team of American neuroscientists had found a way to transfer memories from one snail to another using RNA injections. They moved on to mice and rabbits and monkeys, and gradually their ambitions expanded from implanting memories to recording them. Though they'd seen substantial success along the way, the recording technology had initially failed to garner much attention—the value of accessing a false (that is, tainted) memory was low. Only in the past year had they found a way to produce the clean data of the original memory, excising the background noise of accumulated falsities with which the brain naturally swathed the original event over time. They'd tested it on minimally conscious humans (the family members of people in vegetative states were very interested in harvesting their loved one's memories) and were just starting clinical trials on fully conscious humans.

The paper went on to describe its potential uses, such as helping Alzheimer's patients safeguard their memories or revolutionizing the documentary-film genre, but he skipped all of that. As soon as the plane landed, he called his secretary and told him to obtain a memory reader at any cost, through legal means or not. Then he called his private investigator.

THEY PERFORMED the procedure on him in a rented office, in a room that was cold and bare. The investigator had explained that no hospital wanted to take on the liability of overseeing such a new operation, even though there were very few risks and no physical side effects as far as anyone could tell. After all, they would be making a copy of only a tiny memory block. The whole snippet, including the moments immediately preceding the abduction, couldn't be more than three or four minutes long. When he woke up from the anesthesia, he felt a light whoosh in his head. But then his bare feet touched the cool linoleum floors, and he felt all right again.

The investigator made two copies of the film, one for herself and one for him. When she handed him the velvet pouch, he fingered the flash drive inside with bewilderment. "So it's done. I can watch it now."

"Sure you can. You can watch it, you can destroy it, you can do whatever you want with it. It's your intellectual property—literally." The investigator cracked a smile at her joke.

The whole way home, the flash drive felt as heavy as a brick in his pocket. He didn't even bother removing his shoes before he charged into the living room and plugged it into his television with trembling hands. How many thousands of times had he tried to recall every detail of those four minutes, how many thousands of times had he found himself doubling back, wondering if he'd missed anything, wondering if he'd gotten something wrong? Finally he would *access the original event* for himself. Finally he would know the truth.

But as he sat down in front of the screen, a sense of gloom settled on him. What was the point in seeing what he had missed, in seeing the face of the woman he could never recall? It wouldn't change the fact that 41 years and 62 days had elapsed since he'd seen his brother. It wouldn't change all those hours of regret he'd lived. In fact—he thought back to his brief year of therapy—it would only propel him further down the dreadful rabbit hole of hypothetical thinking: what more he could have observed, what more he could have remembered. The film would give what had haunted him a more definite shape.

For a few agonizing days, he could barely sleep or eat. One moment, he'd make up his mind to watch the film. The next moment, he'd find himself on the couch, shaking, unable to bring himself to reach for the remote control. Then, one morning, the phone rang, and it was the investigator, calling much earlier than he'd expected. She'd found his brother.

He couldn't believe it: The address where Dudu allegedly lived—on the sixth floor, unit two—was less than 60 kilometers from the apartment where they'd grown up, where their mother had stood guard for decades. After she'd died, he'd promptly sold that apartment so he would never have to think about the decaying place again. He wondered if there had been some mistake. But everything in the packet the investigator handed him made sense: the age; the birthmark; the photo ID of a man with their mother's thick eyebrows and their father's broad lips; and the DNA sample, which confirmed their sibling relationship.

"How did you get his DNA? Is he a criminal?" he asked her in a daze, even though he'd once paid someone to go through all the law-enforcement databases in the world that collected DNA samples from petty criminals, and no match had turned up.

"He's not a criminal. He's a janitor at a middle school. Married with three children. I went to the school to take a look at him myself. That's where I got the DNA sample—we don't need to get into the details."

They were in his brownstone. He fell heavily onto his couch, while she perched on one of the dining-room chairs. She told him that the film of his memory had cracked the case open. "So you saw the woman's face," he said.

"No. You never saw her face."

So it wasn't his fault. He hadn't seen her. He couldn't have possibly described her to the sketch artist.

She explained that because she couldn't see the woman's face from his memory, she'd had to find a work-around. In the film, she saw the woman pass a man who sold trinkets on the platform. She'd tracked down that man, who was now old, selling secondhand phones in the new train station across the city. She'd paid him $50 to let her use the memory reader on him. In watching the film of his memory, she'd seen that the woman had handed Dudu to a man at the end of the platform. The investigator ran the snapshot of that man's face through a criminal database and saw that it matched the face of a low-level criminal who'd been arrested for participating in a human-trafficking ring 20 years ago. The problem was that this man had been dead for five years. She had to go through a mountain of police files to find the sole member of the ring who was still alive. Then she went to Tianjin to pay him

a visit. She showed him a photo of Dudu, and he said he'd never seen the boy in his entire life. But he gave her an address in a remote village in the mountains of Sichuan and told her someone there might know something.

"I went to the address and found an old blind woman living alone. When I asked if she knew a little boy with an oblong skull and a crescent-moon birthmark on his elbow, she shut the door in my face, so I knew I was on the right track. I went door-to-door, showing people Dudu's photo, until one man, smoking on a tree stump, said, 'Why, one summer I dragged that kid through the mud, tied to the hind legs of a horse.'"

She stopped and poured Brent a glass of cold water. "We don't need to get into all the details. The important thing is that we found him. Here is the address. Here is the plane ticket." She put the envelope into his hand and had to curl his fingers around it with her own.

The flight was the very next day. He threw clothes haphazardly into his suitcase, hailed a cab, rolled his suitcase over the smooth floors of the airport, squeezed into the plane's narrow aisles, looked out the window as it ascended through a dense and foggy layer of clouds, and had the feeling the entire time that he was sleepwalking, that he was lost to the forceful forward motion of his body. Yet he could barely close his eyes on the long flight. The only time he did, he thought he heard Dudu's wet snores from back when they were children. He stared wide-eyed into the plane's darkness.

WHEN HE LANDED in Changsha, he realized he was no longer used to its deadly heat. Its humidity felt like a second skin. The last time he'd come was years ago, for his mother's funeral and the sale of the apartment. When he arrived at the address the investigator had provided, he found himself staring at its whitewashed concrete walls, sweating profusely. He paced back and forth in front of the building. He walked all the way up the stairs to the sixth floor and then walked down. He repeated this three times. Each time he arrived at unit two, he couldn't bring himself to knock. He could hear the sound of children laughing and a woman singing from behind the door and smell the scent of toasted sesame wafting through the cracks. He realized he didn't know what to say to them. He had gotten on the plane in such a hurry, he hadn't brought anything—no gifts, no fruits, nothing to prove he was family.

He sat on the curb, considering his options, watching sweat drip from his hairline to his knees. The apartment was at the edge of a man-made lake. Its water was turning pink from the setting sun. Whenever a hot breeze picked up, the willow by the lake shuddered. He was staring at the tree when he saw a man approaching. The man carried a backpack. He was lanky, his gait familiar and relaxed. His whistling was forlorn and friendly, and the sound of it rippled through the breeze.

FIRST THERE was hesitation: They looked at each other like two spooked animals coming face-to-face in a darkening forest.

"Who are—"

"Are you—"

"You must be—"

"I am—"

"We are—"

A slew of explanations: out of sequence, incomprehensible, blubbering. An embrace, or rather a clutching of the head, the neck, the shoulders.

"I go by Brent now."

"I go by Du Ping."

"Can I still call you Dudu?"

"Can I still call you Older Brother?"

The first thing Brent did was scan his teary eyes up and down Dudu's body. He was relieved to find that Dudu still had all his fingers, and that 10 dusty toes peeked from underneath his sandals. Yet he had clearly suffered. A web of crow's-feet radiated from the corners of his eyes. Sunspots pockmarked his cheeks, no doubt from days of hard labor. A faint scar stretched from his left ear to his chin (was it from being tied to the hind legs of the horse?). His threadbare shirt had a hole at the collarbone.

"You live here," Brent said, feeling his tongue moving clumsily around the syllables of his native language.

Dudu motioned them to sit down on a bench by the lake. A lot had happened, he explained. When he smiled, he revealed a missing bottom-front tooth. He and his wife had moved here only a few years ago. They'd been reared in the same mountainous village in a remote district of Sichuan, and it had taken them a long time to scramble out of the ditch where they'd grown up. The family that had adopted him—after he'd passed through a string of traffickers—was a peasant family that wanted a son. They'd bought him for a year's worth of harvest. The family had been so poor. His prospects had been so slim.

Brent wanted to weep. "You've tasted so much bitterness."

"Older Brother, who hasn't tasted bitter ness? Let's not talk about such things now. It's a happy day."

When they had finally saved enough money to move out of the village, Dudu explained, he'd picked this town precisely because it was so close to his childhood home. "You used to take pisses from our fourth-story balcony, remember? You used to say you were watering our first-floor neighbor's garden. Our mother used to grow those vines that curled around the railing."

Brent nodded even though he could not remember. In general he found the memories of that apartment to be unbearable and always tried his best to forget them. They were too tangled up with the image of his mother sitting in the dark, shelling peanuts, waiting for her younger son to show up, waiting to die.

"When we first moved here, I found our old building, you know. I still remembered the address. It was not easy, because I can't read the road signs and landmarks, but I managed by asking a lot of strangers for directions." Here Brent couldn't bring himself to return Dudu's smile. He felt a swell of tears at the knowledge that his brother had remained illiterate all these years. "When I knocked on the door of the apartment I still remembered so clearly, I half-expected our mother to show up in her apron, holding a peeled banana the way she used to when she chased after us, begging us to eat so we could stop being constipated. But it was a stranger who opened the door, a young man who knew

nothing about our family. It was foolish of me to think all of you wouldn't have moved away a long time ago."

Now Brent truly wept. He told Dudu that for decades, their mother had guarded the apartment, waiting for his return night and day. Only after her death had he sold the place. "Forgive me," he said.

Dudu put his hand on top of Brent's. "There's nothing between family members that can't be forgiven." Though their reunion may have been delayed by a few years, Dudu reasoned, they still had decades ahead to share their lives. Besides, how could Brent have known? Life was stranger than anyone could expect.

"When you were younger, did you ever try to find us?" Brent asked.

Dudu considered this question, brow furrowed. "Older Brother, for many years I had this strange idea. How do I put it. You know, children have interesting ways of looking at the world—like my daughter, for example, who thinks that her baby sister is an alien. Who knows where these ideas come from. When I was taken away, I felt for some reason that I was taken because I wasn't wanted. That I was bad, and the woman who took me was delivering a punishment I deserved. I thought our family was better off without me."

Brent whispered, "How could you believe that?"

Dudu's frown deepened. "I don't know, Older Brother. It must have been my childish mind, creating an illusion. But I thought—I thought—I saw you looking at me through the train window, and you looked happy. I thought you didn't try to get anyone's attention because you wanted me to disappear from your sight forever."

"That's impossible! I pounded on the window. I screamed your name. I jumped up right away, I even tried to run after you, but the train started moving—"

"No doubt I was confused. Nothing during or after it made sense for a long time. Maybe I was just influenced by the unfamiliar man, who kept saying, 'Look, kid, your family didn't want you. They're not even looking for you.' Anyway, I must have believed him because twice on the journey with that unfamiliar man through that unfamiliar city, I had the chance to escape but did not. Twice he dozed off, and twice I could've run away, maybe eventually found my way to a police station. But all I could do was sit by his side and shiver."



KATHERINE LAM

Brent wanted to weep again, but he was beginning to feel numb. Images that he'd long tried to forget rose to his mind: his father's large, brown hands pressing wrinkled MISSING PERSON posters on countless telephone poles; his mother throwing herself at the feet of the callous police chief; his mother's hair turning white as snow; the three of them crowding around a table in the cheap hotel where they'd stayed for months, eating ramen day after day, searching for Dudu in that strange city. He now imagined a door opening onto the scene—Dudu, led by a police officer, entering the hotel room. Dudu, who'd managed to escape from his captor, pulled into their sobbing, relieved embrace. They would've grown up playing together in their parents' convenience store. They would've gone to school together. They would've always been a family. If Dudu had escaped, then …

"Older Brother, would you like to come upstairs? Meet my wife and children?" Dudu was standing up now, dusting off his pants. "They would be so happy to see you. I've told my wife so much about you. My oldest son reminds me of you: He likes to read and points out words on the streets I don't know. My older daughter is always doodling in her notebook—maybe she will become an artist. My youngest one is still tiny, but people say she will be a great beauty."

Brent could imagine what lay behind the door: a good woman, three mischievous children, a home that was clean but unbearably cramped, a laundry line sagging with fresh-smelling but tattered clothes, a tiny secondhand table where a boy who looked like Dudu did his homework and a girl who looked like Dudu drew and all of them ate rice quickly from small, cracked bowls, careful not to let a grain go to waste.

He promised Dudu he would visit soon, yes, tomorrow, definitely. For now, he needed to go back to his hotel and attend

to some urgent business. Before he left, he stuffed all the American bills from his wallet into Dudu's hands. Dudu, shocked, pushed them back. They struggled over them for a while. Eventually he shoved them into Dudu's breast pocket, and Dudu stopped resisting. Another long-lost memory returned to Brent. As kids, they'd pranked each other by stuffing live cicadas, frogs, and spiders—and a dead sparrow, once—into each other's shirts, in the warm places where the fabric touched skin.

BACK AT the hotel, he unzipped his suitcase. He threw aside all his clothes. From the bottom of the suitcase, he extracted a large manila folder. Inside the folder was a small plastic bag. Inside the plastic bag was a black velvet pouch. Inside the pouch was the flash drive. He'd been carrying the film with him everywhere, debating whether to watch it, waiting for the right time to watch it.

He called room service for water, ice cubes, and lemon wedges. He'd been sweating and weeping for so long that he felt dried up, like a piece of old leather left out in the sun. He immediately guzzled down two of the bottles so quickly that they flowed down his chin, washing away several dried crusts of salty tears, and soaked his shirt. By the time he was done with all that, the flash drive in his fist had turned warm, as if it contained secret mechanisms that were already ticking.

He shut every curtain and turned off every light.

In the dark, the screen burst into a fantasia of oversaturated colors:

Ding-ding-ding hello we are approaching our next station the top with its orange blue green blue rays on the tray table spinning spinning whirring *zzz zzz zzz zzz zoom* rainbow lights refracting off the window and the world outside is orange and inside there are white shirts red shirts green shirts shoes suitcase wheels rolling *hey that's my bag are we there yet are we sir can you help me* he's on the ground crawling the rainbow spins around a woman's black heels *ladies and gentlemen* the top wedged against an empty ramen bowl discarded on the floor with a red ring of oil on its rim and when he finally takes it into his hands and pokes his head from the world of calves he sees that the seat blue with a white strip down the middle the seat where Dudu just sat a moment earlier is empty *please gather your belongings* the world swings wildly everything blurs until that woman falls into sight and Dudu on her shoulder is waking sleepy eyes opening a slit with confused alarm *ladies and gentlemen* he is looking at Dudu and Dudu is looking at him *ding-ding-ding* in the glass is a reflection of his own little nose and mouth.

Brent grabbed the remote control. He rewound the tape until Dudu's drowning eyes came back into view. He let the tape play for a few seconds, then paused on his own reflection in the glass. Rewind, pause. Rewind, pause, zoom. In the reflection, the corners of his lips were turned upward. Rewind. Pause. Zoom. There was no scream. There was only a broad and unmistakable smile curling his lips like he was the destroyer of the world. There was no pounding of the window, no running after them. Zoom. Zoom. There were only his hands hanging loose by his sides, fingering his top. There was only a broad and unmistakable smile. *No no no no no.* The sound came from his mouth now, not the TV. He could feel the wet clay of his memory in real time, shaping, hardening, and he thought, *I must stop its formation.* He swiped his finger across the remote control, trying to turn off the TV, but the film continued to play behind pop-ups. He hurled the metal cup of ice cubes at the screen. There was a shower of glittering glass, a fist-size hole. Relief. He stared into the dark abyss of the hole and willed his mind into a vacuum.

For a moment he almost succeeded, but only for a moment. He heard Dudu's voice. *A punishment I deserved. You looked happy. All I could do was sit by his side and shiver.* Other evil, long-forgotten images began to pour into this abyss—as a child he'd once put a grasshopper into Dudu's mouth when it opened mid-snore; he'd slapped Dudu across the cheek, hard, the time Dudu nearly broke his walkie-talkie; he'd always picked fights with Dudu, shoving him to the ground, telling him he'd been adopted from a family of beggars, stealing his quail eggs at breakfast. The memories were coming back now. Yes, they were coming back. In the dark, he groped for a lemon wedge and stuffed it into his mouth. *A*

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STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION
1. Publication Title: The Atlantic. 2. Publication No.: ISSN 1072-7825. 3. Filing Date: 9/30/2026. 4. Issue Frequency: Monthly. 5. No. of Issues Published Annually: 12. 6. Annual Subscription Price: $99.99. 7. Complete Mailing Address of Known Office of Publication: 610 Water St. SW, 5th Floor, Washington, DC 20024. Contact Person: Elliné Concepcion. Telephone: 202-266-7782. 8. Complete Mailing Address of Headquarters or General Business Office of Publisher: The Atlantic Monthly, 610 Water St. SW, 5th Floor, Washington, DC 20024. 9. Full Names and Complete Mailing Addresses of Publisher, Editor, and Managing Editor: Publisher: Alice McKown, 130 Prince St., 3rd Floor, New York, NY 10012. Editor: Jeffrey Goldberg, 610 Water St. SW, 5th Floor, Washington, DC 20024. Managing Editor: John Swansburg, 130 Prince St., 3rd Floor, New York, NY 10012. 10. Owner: Emerson Collective Investments, LLC (majority owner, beneficially owned by Laurene Powell Jobs), 555 Bryant St., #259, Palo Alto, CA 94301; Bradley Media Holdings, Inc. (minority owner, beneficially owned by David G. Bradley), 600 New Hampshire Ave. NW, Ste. 900, Washington, DC 20037. 11. Known Bondholders, Mortgagees, and Other Security Holders Owning or Holding 1% or More of Total Amount of Bonds, Mortgages, or Other Securities: None. 12. Tax Status: Has not changed during preceding 12 months. 13. Publication Title: The Atlantic. 14. Issue Date for Circulation Data Below: October 2026.

	Average No. Copies Each Issue During Preceding 12 Months	No. Copies of Single Issue Published Nearest to Filing Date
15. Extent and Nature of Circulation		
a. Total Number of Copies (Net Press Run):	790,372	798,715
b. Paid Circulation (by Mail and Outside Mail)		
1) Mailed Outside-County Paid Subscriptions Stated on Form 3541:	652,675	671,254
2) Mailed In-County Paid Subscriptions Stated on Form 3541:	0	0
3) Sales Through Dealers and Carriers, Street Vendors, Counter Sales, and Other Non-USPS Paid Distribution:	56,956	58,006
4) Other Classes Mailed Through the USPS:	0	0
c. Total Paid Distribution [sum of 15b. 1), 2), 3), and 4)]:	709,631	729,260
d. Free or Nominal Rate Distribution (by Mail and Outside Mail):		
1) Outside-County as Stated on Form 3541:	10,433	10,848
2) In-County as Stated on Form 3541:	0	0
3) Other Classes Mailed Through the USPS:	0	0
4) Outside the Mail:	12,604	11,339
e. Total Free or Nominal Rate Distribution [sum of 15d. 1), 2), 3), and 4)]:	23,037	22,187
f. Total Distribution (sum of 15c. and e.):	732,668	751,447
g. Copies not Distributed:	57,704	47,268
h. Total (sum of 15f. and g.):	790,372	798,715
i. Percent Paid (15c. divided by 15f. times 100):	96.86%	97.05%
16. Electronic Copy Circulation		
a. Paid Electronic Copies	919,736	940,000
b. Total Paid Print Copies (15c) + Paid Electronic Copies (16a)	1,629,367	1,669,260
c. Total Print Distribution (15f) + Paid Electronic Copies (16a)	1,652,404	1,691,447
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The Atlantic (ISSN 1072-7825), recognized as the same publication under *The Atlantic Monthly* or *Atlantic Monthly* (The), is published monthly by The Atlantic Monthly Group, 610 Water Street SW, Washington, DC 20024 (202-266-6000). Periodicals postage paid at Washington, D.C., Toronto, Ont., and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: send all UAA to CFS (see DMM 707.4.12.5); NONPOSTAL AND MILITARY FACILITIES: send address corrections to Atlantic Address Change, P.O. Box 37564, Boone, IA 50037-0564. Printed in U.S.A. Subscription queries: support@theatlantic.com, *Atlantic* Customer Care, P.O. Box 37564, Boone, IA 50037-0564 (or call +1 855-940-0585). Privacy: We occasionally get reports of unauthorized third parties posing as resellers. If you receive a suspicious notification, please let us know at fraudalert@theatlantic.com. Advertising (646-539-6700) and Circulation (+1 855-940-0585): 610 Water Street SW, Washington, DC 20024. Subscriptions: one year $99.99 in the U.S. and poss., add $10.00 in Canada, includes GST (123209926); add $20.00 elsewhere. Canada Post Publications Mail Agreement 41385014. Canada return address: *The Atlantic*, P.O. Box 1051, Fort Erie, ON L2A 6C7. Back issues: For pricing and how to order, see TheAtlantic.com/BackIssues or call 410-754-8219. Vol. 335, No. 6, December 2026.

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Mittens

Ethel Dougan, watercolor and graphite on paperboard, circa 1940

By Susan Tallman

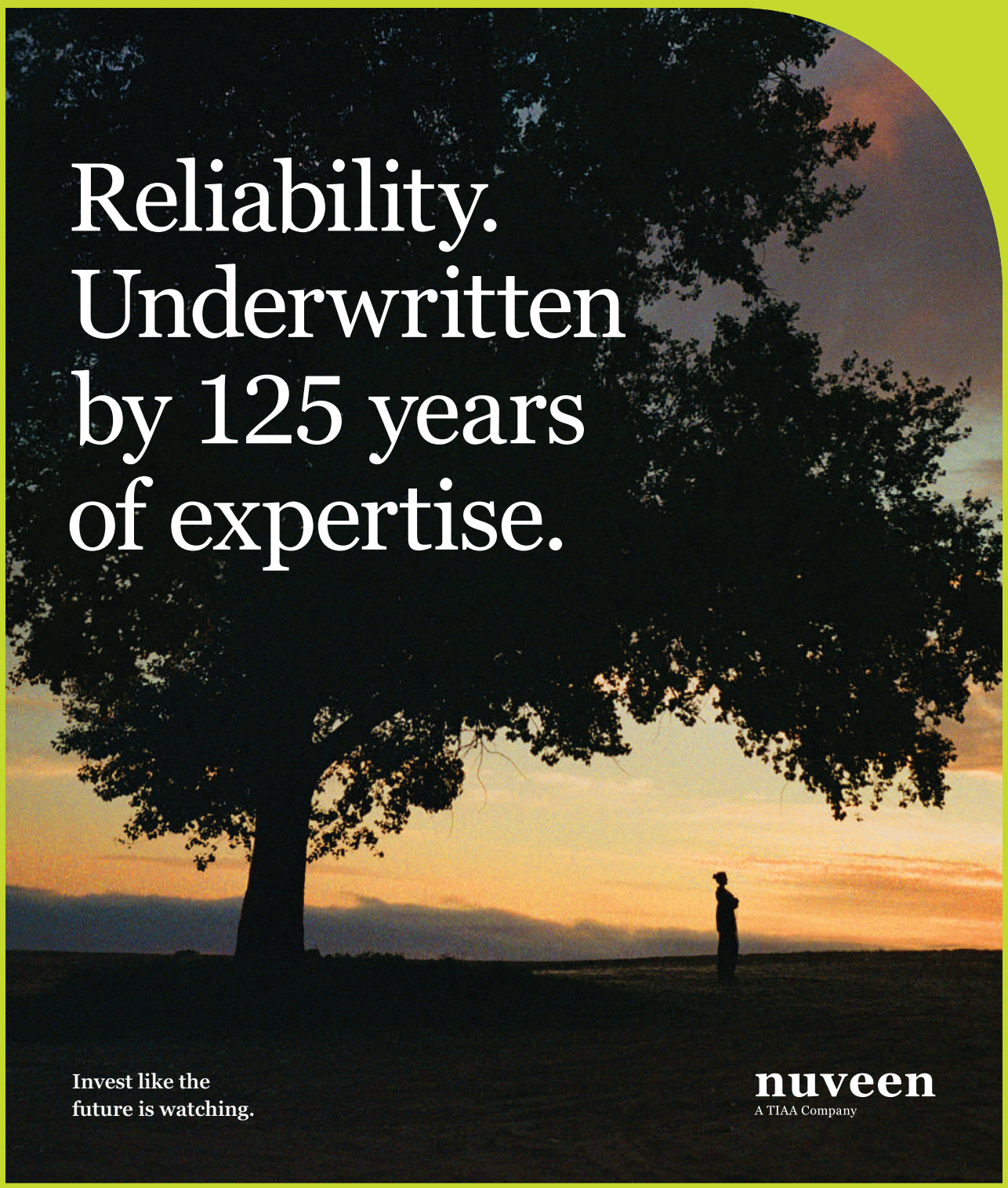
The mittens were almost 80 years old when Ethel Dougan painted this watercolor, one of more than 18,000 works by some 1,000 financially strapped artists commissioned by the Index of American Design. Part of the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project, the Index aimed to document historical American arts and crafts and provide inspiration for modern designers.

The mittens had been knitted by the fiancée of Private Franklin Martin Spaulding, an 18-year-old who had enlisted in the 6th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiment in August 1862. He had seen active service through that winter, as had his mittens. The black-and-white photograph archived with Dougan's drawing shows little more than a gray pile of moth-eaten wool. Her watercolor—now in the National Gallery of Art's collection with the rest of the Index—brings the mittens back to life. Worn and faded, certainly, they are nonetheless spirited, with a patriotic color scheme, embroidered stars, and rib-stitched stripes. Arranged on the page with fingertips touching, they seem to reach toward each other like children holding hands.

Dougan depicted the seams and rows with enough precision that an experienced knitter could re-create the design, but even a casual observer might note the mittens' odd silhouette. Nestled between the usual two pouches—a big one for the fingers and a small one for the thumb—is a third. It's there for the teenage soldier's index finger, so he could tear the end off a paper cartridge, load his rifle, and pull the trigger in the cold. *A*

Susan Tallman, an art historian, is a contributing writer at The Atlantic.

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