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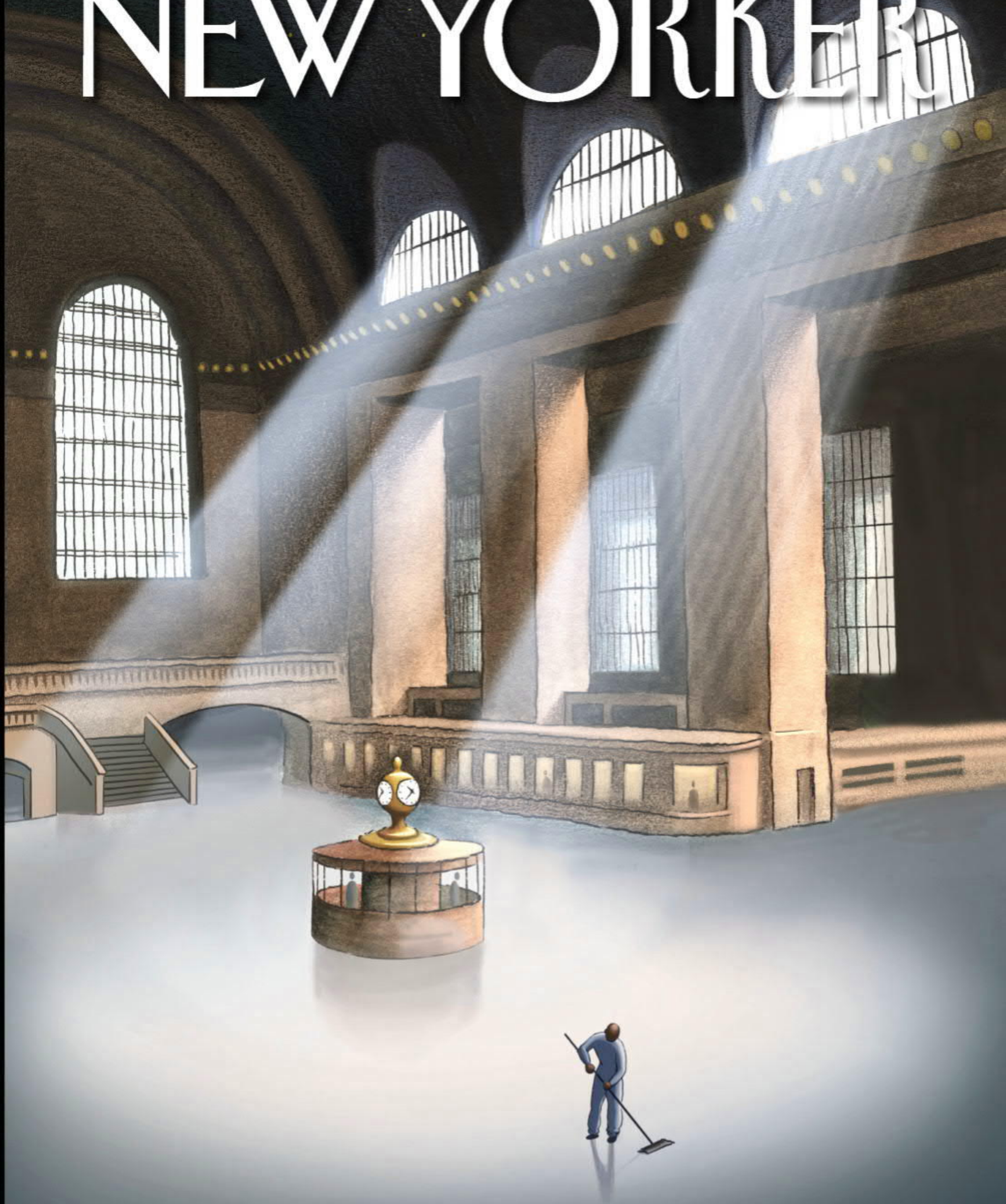

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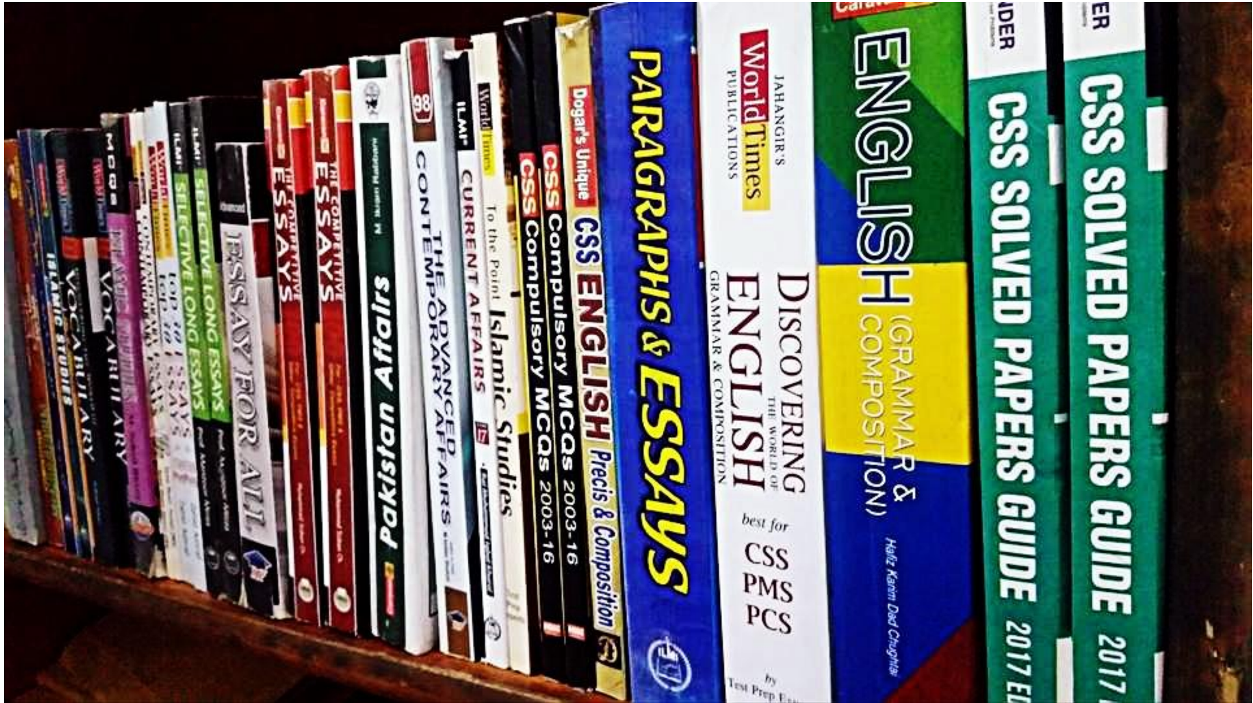

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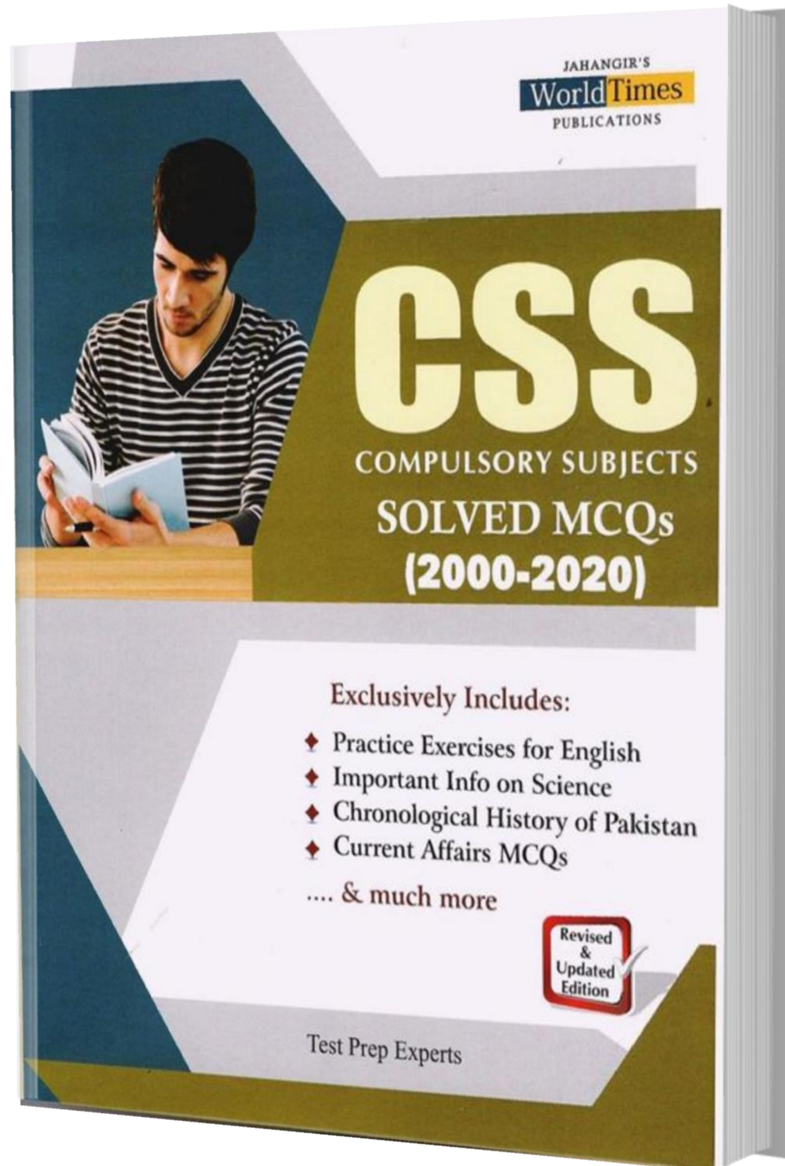

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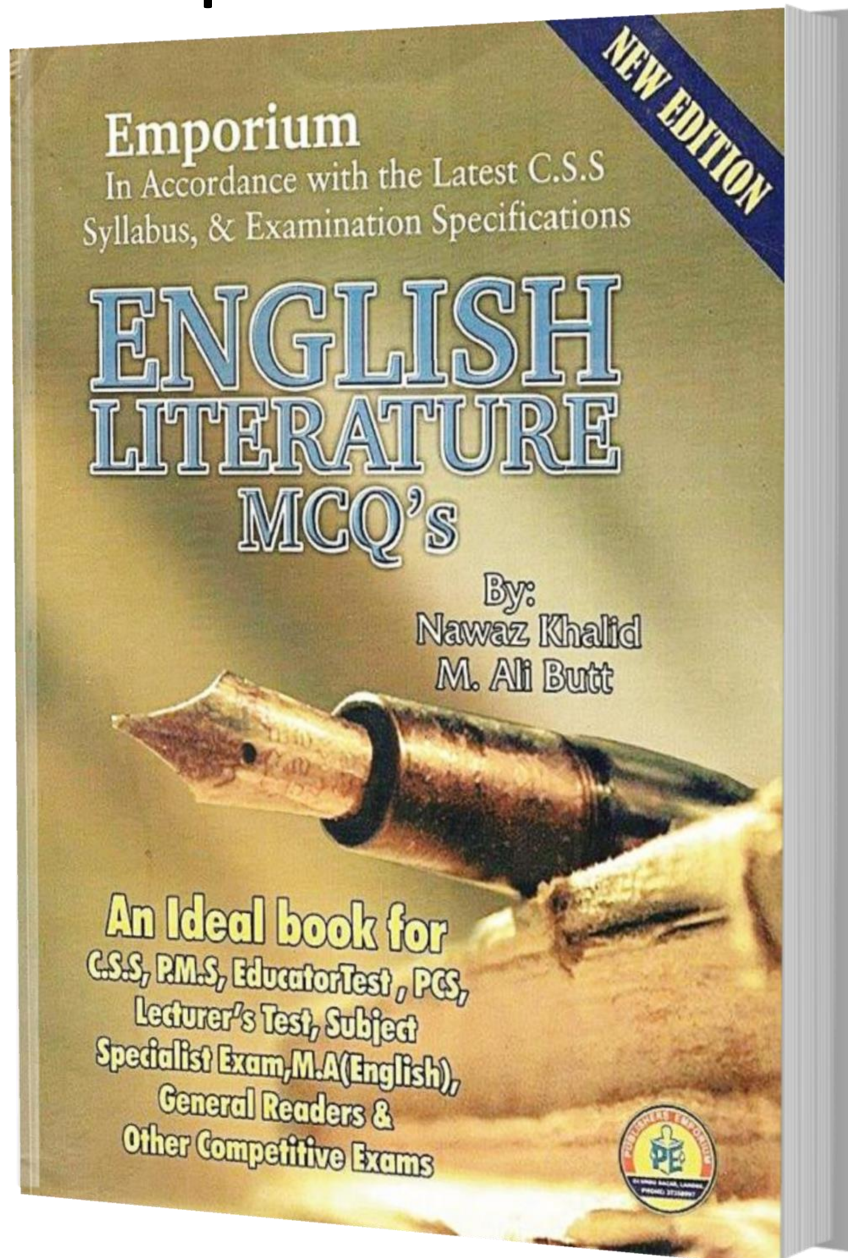

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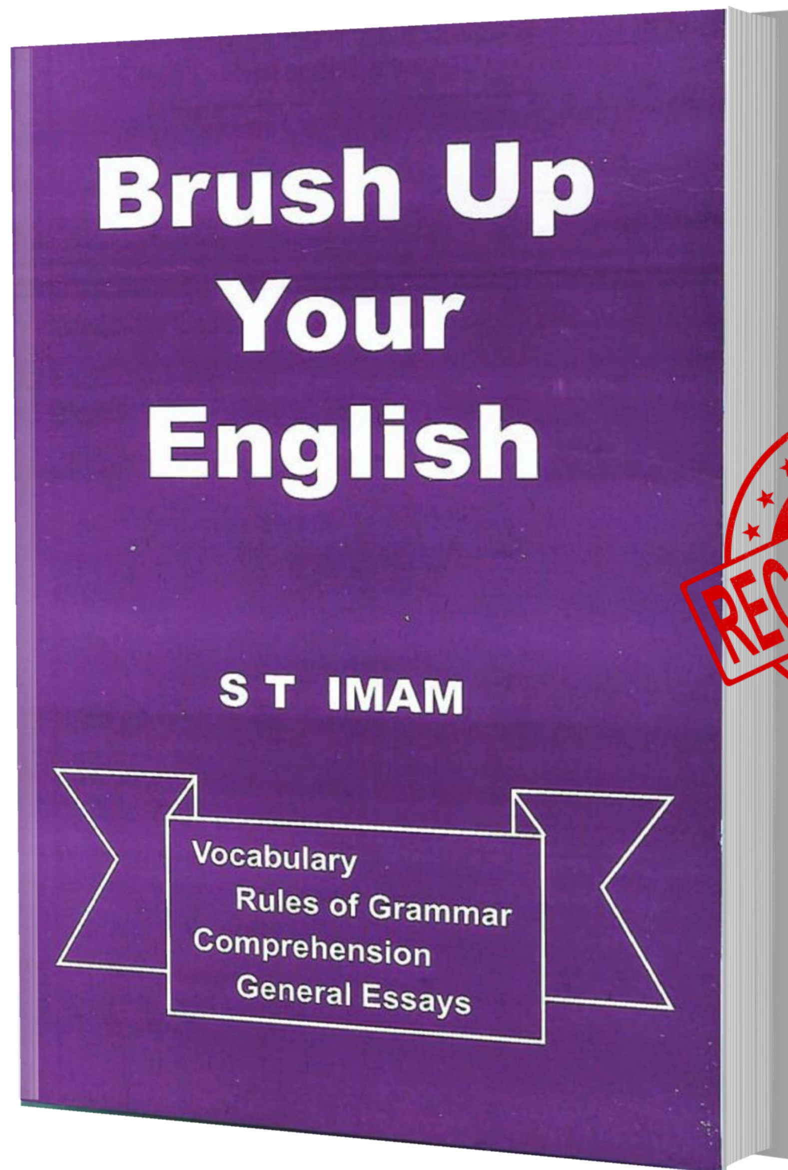

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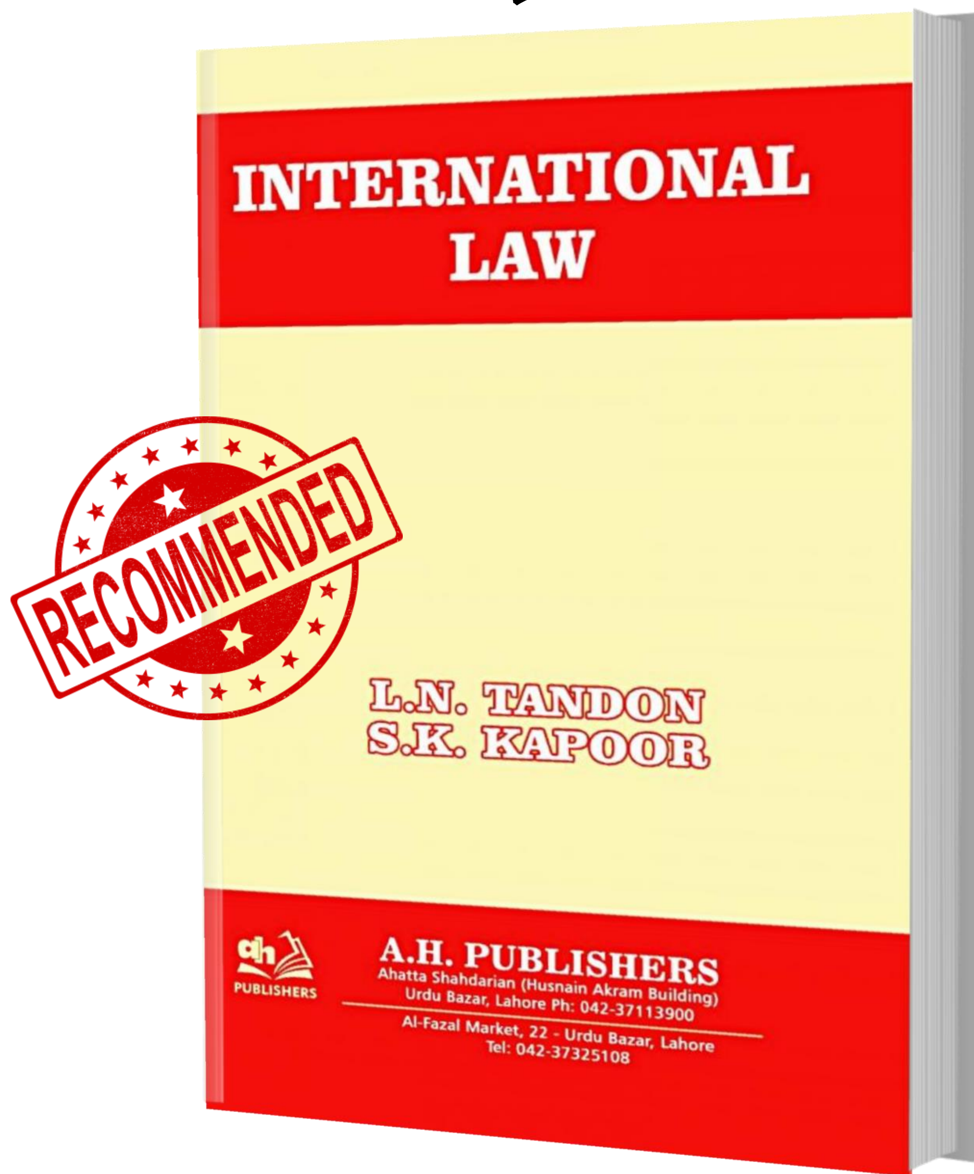

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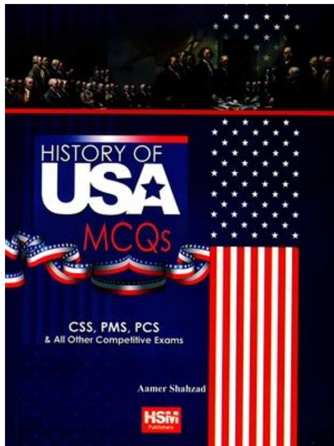

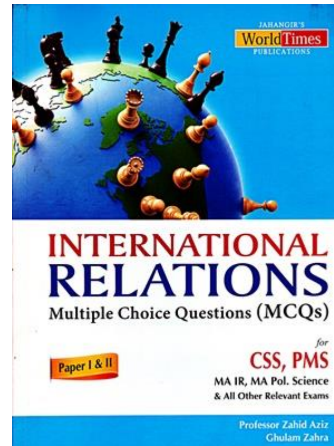

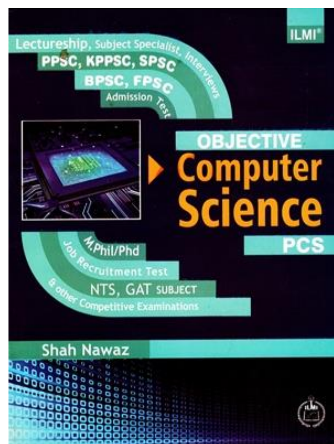

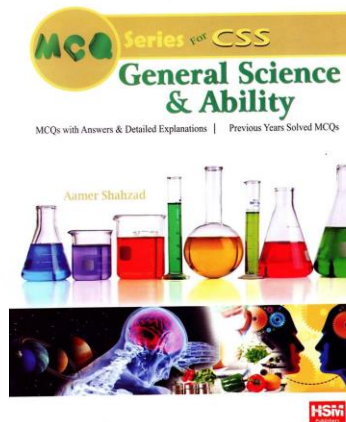

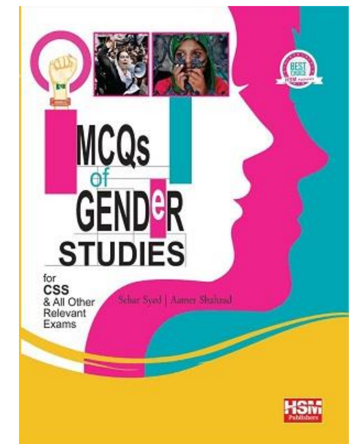

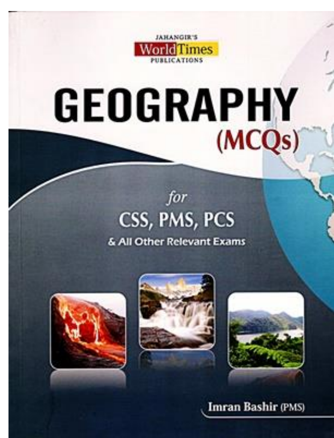

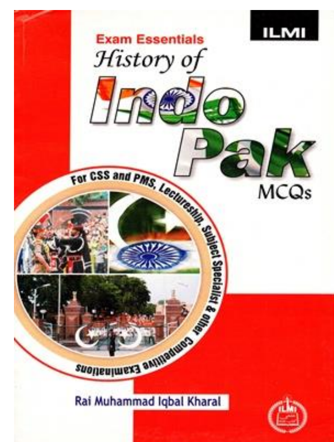

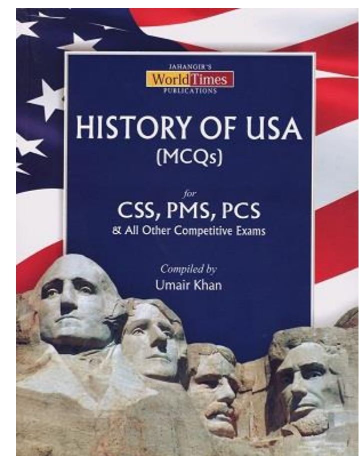

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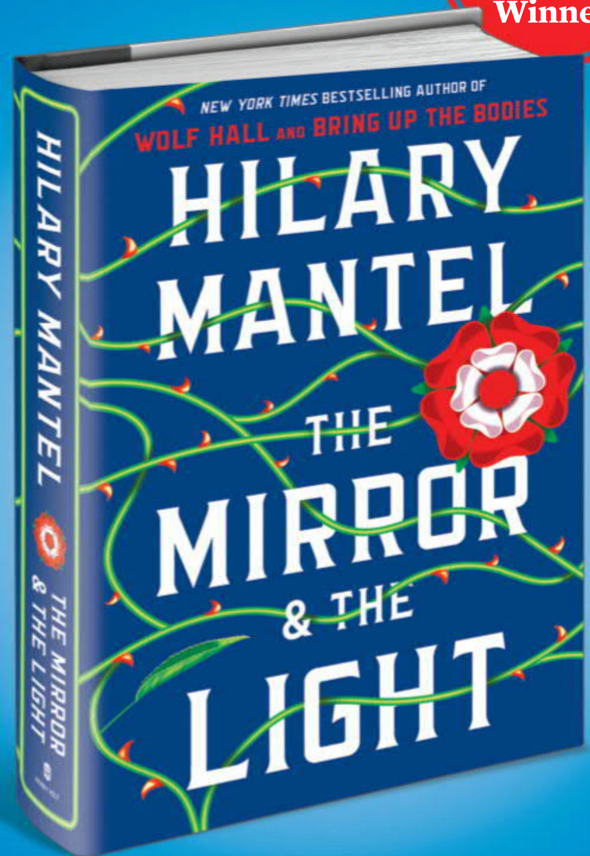

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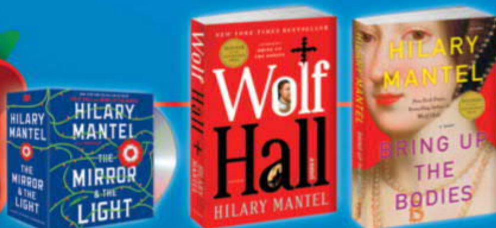

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Eric Drooker (*Cover*) is a painter and a graphic novelist. Recently, his drawings were on display at the Guggenheim Museum. This is his thirty-sixth cover for the magazine.

THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM

NEWS DESK
How can we keep physicians and nurses healthy amid the coronavirus pandemic? Atul Gawande reports.

ELEMENTS
Elisabeth Eaves on whether building more bio labs will help us fight outbreaks or result in catastrophe.

LEFT: TSUJI KEITH / ABACA / ZUMA; RIGHT: K. L. RICKS

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THE MAIL

WEIMAR IN L.A.

Alex Ross's piece about German writers and composers who fled to Los Angeles during the Second World War is fascinating ("Exodus," March 9th). He brings to life the émigrés' sense of dislocation, dissatisfaction, residual despair—and their infighting. As Ross mentions, many were rescued by Varian Fry, who helped artists and intellectuals escape France in 1940 and 1941. Not mentioned in Ross's account is Hiram Bingham IV, the U.S. vice-consul in Marseille, who, to the State Department's great displeasure, worked alongside Fry. Bingham issued thousands of U.S. visas to refugees, including Marc Chagall, Hannah Arendt, and ordinary people such as my mother and grandparents. He engineered the liberation of the German novelist Lion Feuchtwanger from Les Milles, the French concentration camp, by disguising him as a woman and then hiding him at Bingham's villa until Fry could get him out of France. For all this generosity, Bingham was abruptly transferred to Lisbon and then to Argentina. He warned the State Department about the arrival of high-ranking Nazis there—news the U.S. did not want to hear. Bingham eventually resigned, and returned to his family's farm in Connecticut. The trauma suffered by the rescued intellectuals who remade their lives in the U.S. was as enduring as it was for people like my parents. Of course, their horror was nothing compared with what was endured by those who could not leave Europe.

Jane M. Friedman
New York City

Ross paints a full picture of the lives of German émigrés in Southern California. One thing that is often overlooked in literary history is a small press, called the Pazifische Presse, that some of them established. Its stated mission was "to give testimony to the eminent cultural force that was expelled by Hitler and which found a future in America." It published eleven books—mainly fiction—between 1942 and 1948, by writers in exile such as Thomas Mann, Franz Werfel, Bruno Frank, Alfred Döblin, and Lion Feuchtwanger. Pazifische Presse books were handsomely printed in editions of a few hundred copies each. All the books were in German, an effort by the authors to keep the best of their culture alive "in the language of Goethe."

Victoria Dailey
Los Angeles, Calif.

PIKETTY'S POINT

In Idrees Kahloon's review of Thomas Piketty's "Capital and Ideology," he argues that Piketty's proposal to heavily tax the incomes of the top one per cent may be excessive as a means of solving the most serious social problems (Books, March 9th). He argues that, instead, we need to eliminate poverty and precariousness—without which, he implies, the extreme concentration of wealth at the top is not necessarily an issue. But inequality creates problems regardless of the exact financial status of those in the lower brackets. For one thing, extreme wealth allows some to exercise undue political influence. For another, living in a society of great inequality is a cause of stress for the less wealthy—regardless of their level of prosperity, or whether the poorest enjoy a reasonable standard of living. Such stress leads to a broad range of medical and psychological illnesses, as is shown by the work of Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett in their book "The Inner Level," and other studies.

John L. Hammond
Professor of Sociology
Hunter College and Graduate Center
New York City

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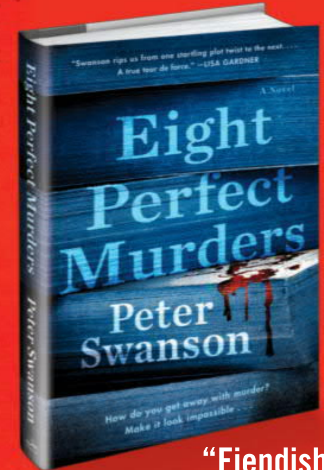

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In an effort to slow the spread of the coronavirus, New York City museums, galleries, theatres, music venues, cinemas, and restaurants have closed. Here's a selection of culture to be found online and streaming.

GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

Though the opening of **Catherine Deneuve's** latest film, "The Truth," has been postponed, many of her most celebrated movies are available to stream on the Criterion Channel. In one of the best of them, François Truffaut's macabre thriller "Mississippi Mermaid" (above), from 1969, she plays a mail-order bride who shows up at the Réunion Island estate of a wealthy planter (Jean-Paul Belmondo) with designs on his money. Truffaut transforms the crime drama into a desperate romance and a portrait of French social dysfunction.

MOVIES

A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood

Tom Hanks, starring in Marielle Heller's new film as the singular Mr. Rogers, complete with cozy knitwear and matching homilies, not only re-creates every quirk of the character's gestures and speech but prevents what could have been the mushiest of fables from sliding over the edge into sentimentality. The story turns on the plight of Lloyd Vogel (Matthew Rhys), a journalist who is sent to interview Fred Rogers and finds himself revealing the cause of his scars, both physical and emotional. This redemptive encounter is played out in a low and subtle key; Heller, as she proved in "Can You Ever Forgive Me?" (2018), has become something of a specialist in damaged souls. With strong support from Susan Kelechi Watson, as Vogel's wife, and Chris Cooper, as his sad and loutish father.—*Anthony Lane (Reviewed in our issue of 11/25/19.) (Streaming on Amazon, Google Play, and other services.)*

Eight Hours Don't Make a Day

The German director Rainer Werner Fassbinder's five-part, nearly eight-hour television series, from 1972—one of his most unusual and self-revealing projects—defies political shibboleths of his artistic milieu. It's centered on one extended family in Cologne, and on the romance between a factory worker named Jochen (Gottfried John) and a receptionist named Marion (Hanna Schygulla). Jochen, who's devoted to his job, designs a device to increase his colleagues' productivity—thereby threatening their bonuses. Meanwhile, his grandmother (Luise Ulrich) recruits the whole family to help her illegally turn an empty storefront into a nursery school. Fassbinder fills the series with ordinary troubles—the shortage of affordable housing, casual racism, hostile bosses—and dramatizes the practical power of working-class people to improve their circumstances. With grand cinematic flourishes—a gyrating camera on a factory floor and at a café table, rapturously colorful visions of romance, and hair-trigger comedy of pratfalls and narrow escapes—Fassbinder exalts the intrepid exploits of the hidden heroes of daily life. In German.—*Richard Brody (Streaming on the Criterion Channel.)*

Hail, Caesar!

Joel and Ethan Coen's inside-Hollywood comedy, set in 1951—amid McCarthyite inquisitions and sexual taboos—is scintillating, uproarious, substantial, and playfully personal. A handful of Hollywood Communists kidnap Baird Whitlock (George Clooney), the hunky star of a New Testament epic; Eddie Mannix (Josh Brolin), the studio fixer, needs to bring Baird back. Eddie, a devout Catholic in a Jewish-run business, has many other troubles to deal with, including a pregnant aquatic star (Scarlett Johansson), a Western singer (Alden Ehrenreich) cast in a drawing-room comedy, a pair of prowling gossip columnists (both played by Tilda Swinton), and a quartet of clergymen who vet the Christian drama's script. With loose-limbed performances and jazzy visual rhythms, the Coen brothers gleefully riff on the essence of Hollywood and the idiosyncratic personalities that find surprisingly free expression there. They contrast traditional belief systems, religious and political, with the new gospel of movies—their own American faith, which comes to life onscreen. Released in 2016.—*R.B. (Streaming on Amazon, YouTube, and other services.)*

Harlem Nights

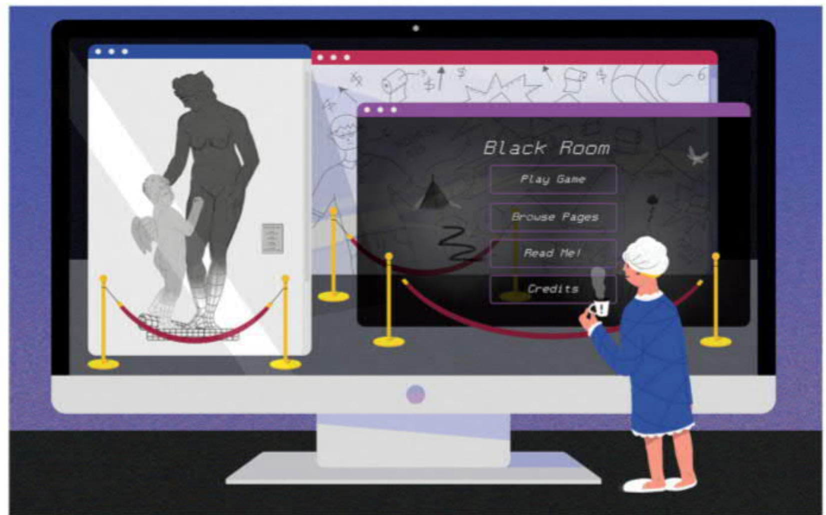
This boldly original, boisterously idiosyncratic, yet introspective drama—a gangland tale, set briefly in 1918 and then mostly in the nineteen-thirties—is the only movie that Eddie Murphy has directed to date. He also wrote the elaborate story, about a night club run by a gambling-ring operator named Sugar Ray (Richard Pryor), whose adopted son (Desi Arnez Hines II), a trigger-happy orphan, grows up to become his right-hand man, an impetuous troublemaker called Quick (Murphy). The film is a whirlingly divergent romp, blending agonizing violence with outrageous humor; above all, it has the feel of oral history, of lives and times rescued from oblivion. It features a host of extravagant, exciting performers (including Della Reese and Redd Foxx), and the plot involves some outlandish twists, but the comedy is dead earnest. With a labyrinth of brutal threats and subtle double-crosses, fatal misunderstandings and deft evasions, Murphy brings to life a teeming, fabled past that undercuts nostalgia with authentic visions of danger. Released in 1989.—*R.B. (Streaming on Netflix and other services.)*

ART

Deanna Dikeman

In 1990, when this photographer's parents were in their early seventies, they sold her childhood home, in Sioux City, Iowa, and moved to a bright-red ranch house in the same town. At the end of their daughter's visits, they would stand outside as she drove away, arms rising together in a farewell wave. For years, Dikeman captured those departing moments; the resulting portrait series, "Leaving and Waving," compresses nearly three decades of adieux into a deft and affecting chronology. The pair recede into the warm glow of the garage on rainy evenings and laugh under the eaves in better weather. In summer, they blow kisses from the driveway. In winter, they wear scarves and stand behind

ART ONLINE



OPPOSITE: EVERETT; RIGHT: ILLUSTRATION BY MENGXIN LI

In 1996, the prescient American artist Mark Tribe recognized that the Internet is more than a virtual showroom for conventional work—it's a category-evading artistic medium in its own right. He started a Listserv for like-minded thinkers and named it **Rhizome,** a botanical term (then in vogue with semiologists) that describes an unpredictable, always expanding network. Over the years, Rhizome has grown from an upstart into a stalwart nonprofit based in New York and affiliated with the New Museum. It commissions and preserves digital art, and exhibits it, too, notably in the continuing series "First Look: New Art Online" (at rhizome.org and newmuseum.org). The contents are as multifarious as the medium. Curious how pixels stack up to paint? Scroll through the eight-person show "Brushes," which ranges in tone from airy and calligraphic (Laura Brothers's "Deux Blue") to memelike and manic (Jacob Ciocci's animated GIFs). Binge-watchers can catch a three-part musical episode of Shana Moulton's surreal pseudo soap opera, "Whispering Pines," whose housebound heroine indulges in self-care routines that—spoiler alert—turn her into a goddess.—*Andrea K. Scott*

snowbanks. Inevitably, they age. A few pictures, cropped to include the car's interior, convey the parallel progress of Dikeman's own life. Early images show the blurred face of a baby, who, in later shots, as a young man, takes the wheel while Dikeman photographs her elderly parents from the passenger seat.—*Eren Orbey (deannadikeman.com.)*

Hannah La Follette Ryan

Since moving to New York City, in 2015, La Follette Ryan has photographed the hands of subway commuters: fists gripping bags, phones, and cash; lacquered nails and bitten cuticles; fingers curled around straps and splayed out protectively against another body. The images, which the artist posts to an Instagram account (@subwayhands), are not staged; she shoots the series primarily (and stealthily) with her iPhone. As one scrolls through the river of photos and videos—there are more than a thousand in all—the hands become alien and abstracted, assuming the air of uncanny sculptures. Recently, as the coronavirus pandemic has accelerated in New York, La Follette Ryan has begun to share emerging patterns: hands squeezing small plastic bottles of sanitizer, vigorously wiping down phones, wearing latex gloves, and clutching tissues. The urgency of the moment has shifted her series from a work of unconventional portraiture to one of artful photojournalism.—*Helen Rosner (@subwayhands on Instagram.)*

MUSIC

Selections to listen to online.

Anastassis Philippakopoulos: "piano works"

CONTEMPORARY CLASSICAL With tension on the rise, "piano works," a mesmerizing new collection of a dozen brief pieces by the Greek composer Anastassis Philippakopoulos, offers a needed refuge from turmoil and anxiety. Philippakopoulos is a member of the Wandelweiser Collective, a loosely knit international aggregate whose members are bound by their fascination with the philosophical weight and dramaturgical potential of silence. Each of his compositions, ranging from two to four minutes in length, reflects long months of labor and notes selected with a jeweller's exactitude. The album begins with seven works written between 2013 and 2018, in which single notes hang like pearls in monodic strands; in the first of "five piano pieces" (2005-2011), stark, dissonant clusters register with an almost shocking impact. Melaine Dalibert, himself a composer whose works similarly deal in patience and space, is an ideal interpreter of such beguilingly modest music, and this sensitive recording lets every detail resound.—*Steve Smith*

Ellen Reid: "p r i s m"

OPERA Ellen Reid won a Pulitzer Prize, in 2019, for her first opera, "p r i s m," an exploration of the shattered pieces of a sexual-assault survivor's world. The work opens with a cryptic spoken chant—misremembered words from the night of the attack—followed by a game called Rescue, in which the survivor, Bibi, and her mother, Lumee, replay the incident and give it a fairy-tale ending. These passages trigger momentary fantasies of intoxicating melody, but the comfort is short-lived, and the tone plunges again into paralyzing despair. This recording, from the Decca Gold label, tells the story as vividly as James Darrah's staging did at New York's Prototype Festival, last year. Reid's music is specific—the sound of bruised innocence struggling to heal—and the conductor Julian Wachner, leading NOVUS NY and the Choir of Trinity Wall Street, renders it incisively. Anna Schubert (a delicate Bibi) and Rebecca Jo Loeb (a monstrous Lumee) are responsive to the trauma swirling beneath the music's surface.—*Oussama Zahr*

Four Tet: "Sixteen Oceans"

ELECTRONIC Kieran Hebden, the prolific English producer known as Four Tet, recently extended his already prodigious catalogue with "Sixteen Oceans," a record that plunges deep into a weightless space between ambient radiance and minimal dance grooves. Songs such as "Baby," molded from the spliced vocals of the singer Ellie Goulding, drift into gleaming pop, a sound Hebden has always treated with tenderness, but the album soon careens into wistful, meditative abstractions that prove him to be electronic music's most deliberate daydreamer. His closing soundscapes are sparse and hypnotic, woven from lulling vocal samples and spangled synths that practically slow down time—a temporary sedation in this moment of sheer panic.—*Julyssa Lopez*

Howard Merritt: "Live at the Flamingo"

DISCO Under the name San Francisco Disco Preservation Society, the d.j. Jim Hopkins has spent the past several years digitally archiving club, radio, and promo mixes going back to the seventies—including, in some cases, a full night's audio. DJ Howard Merritt's "Live at the Flamingo (NY), New Year's Eve 1979-1980" is a prime example. Merritt played at several legendary gay venues, including the Flamingo, New York City's first exclusively gay disco, and, at more than five hours long, this set is as fascinating as documentary as it is as music. In the era before automation, lengthy overlapping segues between records were rare, but he executes several with aplomb here. His handoffs are smooth and surprising—Prince's quicksilver "Sexy Dancer" morphs into Michael Jackson's equally slippery "Off the Wall." It's a disco smorgasbord that helps make up for the Brooklyn Museum's Studio 54 exhibit being unavailable.—*Michaelangelo Matos*

HIP-HOP

Lil Uzi Vert's otherworldly new album, "Eternal Atake," (and its deluxe version, "LUV vs. the World 2") crash-landed onto Earth, much to the delight of anxious fans, and immediately sucked up all the oxygen. The breathlessness of its reception—almost as ebullient as Uzi's raps themselves—captures the energy of a moment that some had begun to believe would never come. Label trouble had beset the Philadelphia rapper for nearly three years, making "Eternal Atake" feel like a freedom song and a well-earned victory lap. One of music's most intriguing figures, Uzi both absorbs and creates trends and spits them out as magic: his melodies are more syrupy, his flows more slippery, his beat selections more irresistible. Above all, it sounds as if Uzi is having more fun than anyone else, and, in the midst of actual contagion, his is the kind of infectiousness we could all use.—*Briana Younger*

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ILLUSTRATION BY GABRIEL HOLLINGTON

PHOTOGRAPH BY ZACHARY ZAVISLAK FOR THE NEW YORKER; ILLUSTRATION BY JOOST SWARTE

TABLES FOR TWO

Nom Wah and the Coronavirus Restaurant Shutdown

A few Saturdays ago, I was surprised to find at least a dozen people milling around outside Nom Wah Tea Parlor, taking pictures and waiting for tables. On any other weekend, I wouldn't have batted an eye. Nom Wah, which celebrates its hundredth anniversary this year, has bragging rights as the oldest restaurant in Manhattan's Chinatown.

Situated on Doyers Street—a boomerang-shaped block once known as the Bloody Angle, for its history of gang killings—the dim-sum parlor is one of the neighborhood's most popular destinations, especially among tourists, who line up for dumplings and "OG" eggrolls. But I was there just as the COVID-19 pandemic was taking over the news, and Sinophobic paranoia was threatening Chinatown businesses across the country.

The persistence of the crowd was likely due to the media savvy of Wilson Tang, Nom Wah's forty-one-year-old proprietor, who had been drumming up attention on Instagram. "There is no coronavirus bs here," Tang captioned a post in February. "#Supportchinatown." This wasn't the first time the fate of the restaurant had been uncertain. Tang's uncle Wally started working there in 1950, as a sixteen-year-old Chinese immigrant, and bought it in 1974. But by the time Wilson, a telegenic former investment banker, took over, in 2010, it had fallen into decline.

Wilson upgraded the kitchen and transitioned from cart service to a made-to-order à-la-carte menu, but he also preserved the dining room's dated diner décor and the once red awning, which had faded to a dusty pink. Nom Wah became retro-chic—the perfect location for a Met Gala pre-party, in 2015 (the theme was China), and an Instagram darling. In the past four years, Tang has opened two outposts in Manhattan, one in Philadelphia, and three in Shenzhen, China.

On Sunday, March 15th, Mayor Bill de Blasio ordered all New York City restaurants to cease service, with the exception of takeout and delivery. By that point, several of the city's dim-sum parlors had closed of their own accord. When I spoke to Wilson the following morning, he told me that he would offer takeout and delivery from the Nolita location but not from Chinatown; many of his employees there, he explained, are Chinese-Americans who live in intergenerational households and are fearful of spreading the virus to relatives. In Nolita, his staff is much smaller and skews younger and more diverse. The revenue from to-go orders wouldn't even cover the labor it would take to fulfill them, but it was a way to use up inventory and "to wind down slowly and stop the bleeding."

Nom Wah has seen an uptick in sales of merchandise and gift certificates since the shutdown, but that won't help much, either. Still, Tang is better poised to weather the current moment than many others in the restaurant industry, which is in a state of panic and despair. In New York, restaurants are often forced to operate on razor-thin margins; without government assistance, many of them may never reopen. Tang's uncle owns the building on Doyers Street, so he doesn't have to worry about getting kicked out for failing to make rent. Taking his lead from "the big dogs," like David Chang, he planned to pay his salaried employees at least through April, and his hourly employees at least through the end of the week. After that, he said, "we'll play it by ear. We're in survival mode."

Asked about his neighbors in Chinatown, he sounded surprisingly optimistic. Small immigrant-run businesses tend to be "very resourceful and resilient," he said. "They don't have debt and they're living within their means." Nom Wah has survived for a century. The outposts in Shenzhen, which were closed for six weeks as the Chinese government fought COVID-19, reopened recently, and, so far, business hasn't been bad. "Confidence in dining out is slowly building there," Tang said. "Things are improving week by week."

—Hannah Goldfield

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THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
OPPORTUNISTIC INFECTIONS

Early last week, the Trump era—which defined itself by a lurid celebration of "alternative facts," a contempt for science, and an assault on global institutions and the "administrative state"—came to an end. Regrettably, Donald Trump remains in office, but, at least for the moment, he appears to have ceded the argument: he cannot bend the harshest realities of the world to his fantasies. The aggressive and deadly coronavirus is unimpressed and unimpeded by the bluster of a con. Yet the prolonged process of Trump's humbling, the time it took him to recognize the power of the global pandemic that has emptied our streets, has put untold numbers of Americans at risk.

The disease now known as COVID-19 was first identified three months ago, in the Chinese city of Wuhan. Much like SARS, which flared eighteen years ago, the likeliest breeding ground for the new coronavirus was a live-animal market. Like SARS, H.I.V., and Ebola, COVID-19, scientists believe, is a zoonotic disease, one that "jumps" from mammalian animal hosts to human beings. The coronavirus that causes COVID-19 soon made its way to nearly every corner and crevice of the planet.

For many weeks, the President resisted understanding the magnitude of the problems and the responsibilities of his office. In late January, he declared, "We have it totally under control. . . . It's going to be just fine." A month later, he told attendees at a White House celebration of Black History Month, "One day—it's like a miracle—it will disappear." Was he doing a good job? He gave himself "a ten." Those who raised concerns about the Administration's cuts in emergency preparedness or the outrageous failure to supply testing kits were promulgating "a hoax."

This blithe unconcern for the looming crisis was hardly limited to Trump. His satraps in the "alternative fact" industry took their cues from him to rest easy in a warm bubble bath of denialism. Rush Limbaugh, who received a Presidential Medal of Freedom at Trump's latest State of the Union address, told his immense radio audience that the virus was "the common cold, folks." And, by the way, "Keep in mind where the coronavirus came from. It came from a country that Bernie Sanders wants to turn the United States into a mirror image of: Communist China." Mark Steyn, filling in for Limbaugh one day, said that a shelter-in-place order had been issued in the Bay Area because "it's a big gay town, San Francisco, and they're the ones with all the compromised immune systems."

On "Fox & Friends," Ainsley Earhardt dismissed any cautions against travel—"It's actually the safest time to fly"—and her sidekick Pete Hegseth mentioned that he was starting to think that the Democrats were "rooting for the coronavirus to spread." Over on Fox Business, Trish Regan accused the liberal media and Democrats of trying to manipulate the news of the coronavirus as "yet another attempt to impeach the President."

Sean Hannity, who has the biggest ratings on cable news, invited Dr. Anthony Fauci, the most visible public-health official on the White House coronavirus task force, to appear on his show. But, in Hannity's world, as in Trump's, bloviation precedes fact. And so Hannity went first. "The standard flu every single year kills tens of thousands of Americans. Now, does truth matter? Does perspective matter?" Fauci, just as he does when standing beside the President, betrayed no sign of disdain, as he politely corrected the misinformation. "Sean, to make sure your viewers get an accurate idea about what goes on," he said, COVID-19 is "ten times more lethal than the seasonal flu."

Fake news and conspiracy theories are opportunistic viruses, and for many weeks there was no end to their spread. Jerry Falwell, Jr., one of Trump's leading evangelical supporters, repeated a theory suggested to him by a restaurant owner he knows: "You remember the North Korean leader promised 'a Christmas present for America back in December'? Could it be they got together with China and this is that present?" Ron Paul, a former Republican Presidential candidate and a physician,

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

wrote, "People should ask themselves whether this coronavirus 'pandemic' could be a big hoax, with the actual danger of the disease massively exaggerated by those who seek to profit—financially or politically—from the ensuing panic."

During this dangerous period, a range of polls revealed that Republicans, in particular, trust Trump's information on the virus more than that of the "lame-stream media." A Marist College-NPR-PBS poll found that more than half of this group thought the risk was being "blown out of proportion." The Trumpian efforts to downplay the threat to public health held fast among "the base."

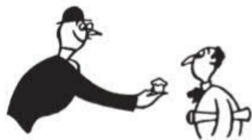
What finally shattered Trump's serene confidence and the consensus of his followers? Fauci and other officials on the White House task force certainly began to cut through his dismissals in their briefing sessions. An analysis from epidemiologists at Imperial College London, forecasting as many as 2.2 million American fatalities and a health-care system under siege, reportedly helped advance the argument for strict social-distancing measures. And, because this is Trump World, the President listened attentively when he received a visit at Mar-a-Lago from Tucker Carlson, who broke ranks with his Fox News colleagues and urged serious action.

Trump cannot be forgiven for his preening and his belatedness. And yet this least trustworthy of Commanders-in-Chief is entrusted by the authority of his office to make a series of critical decisions. In order to "flatten the curve," we have rightly set in motion a set of edicts that, while necessary to control the pandemic, will continue to batter the economy, create deep atomization, and cause all manner of suffering. The human need for solidarity is frustrated by the need for social distancing. An economy that seizes up entirely could, in theory, produce nearly as much suffering as the virus itself, particularly for the most vulnerable among us. A host of well-judged policy decisions must be made and executed effectively if the country is to be spared the worst. As recently as Friday, however, the President spent much of his briefing berating a reporter and further alarming the public. It is better to be lucky than good, the old saw has it. Trump is not good; we must hope that he will be lucky.

Right now, as we sit in our homes, washing our hands yet again, as we try to read the querulous expressions of our children, scientists and pharmaceutical companies are racing to develop anti-viral treatments and—what will be our most valuable weapon—a vaccine. But no such deliverance is likely to arrive in this calendar year. In the meantime, another form of protection has become more urgent than ever. Misinformation and cant, along with a kindred scorn for science and professional expertise: these things are pathogens, too. Counterfeit facts can polarize, alienate, disaffect, rouse misdirected rage, and foment social division. They have long come at a cost to our civility; at a time of pandemic, especially, they also come at a cost in human lives.

—*David Remnick*

LOCAL HEROES
HUNGRYTOWN



The new coronavirus has made all the easy stuff hard. The rules are shifting. Subways? Bad. Cabs? Murky. Mayor de Blasio says use them if you must and if you're alone, but he banned shared rides for everyone but families and what he, strangely, called "real couples." Takeout? The F.D.A. thinks the virus doesn't spread through food. Other experts say maybe make some ramen.

"New Yorkers are hungry," Lenin Cerón said last week. Someone has to get them their food. Cerón is one of those people. He is a courier for Relay, a delivery company that has instituted a "contactless delivery" system, a vital real-time experiment in safely feeding the shut-in city. "I take this very seriously," Cerón said. "When I get home, I have a bucket with soap and water, so I can step right into the bucket, and throw everything in. I wash my hands, take off my clothes. I clean all the knobs. Then I take a shower at night and in the morning. I disinfect the bathroom. I try to be as clean as possible." In his delivery bag, he'd stashed plastic gloves. Hand-sanitizer bottles were ready in a pouch on his vest. "You can never use enough," he said. Earlier in the morning, he'd bought a box of masks from a purported ninety-nine-cents store in Chinatown. "Fifty dollars!" he said.

It was the first night of the ban on eating in restaurants. Cerón, who is thirty-four and originally from Guerrero, Mexico, had commuted from the Bronx to Union Square with his electric bike. He is a recent vegetarian, and a frequent smiler, under the mask. He uses the word "O.K." to describe the many things he feels fondly toward: people, the city, the pride he takes after a day's work. "I'm very lucky," he said. "I still have one job. I have two beautiful daughters. And I'm healthy. I have to be extra careful for them. But I can't be stuck at home. I have too many responsibilities."

The night's first pickup was at Sticky's Finger Joint, nearby. Two paper bags were waiting on the counter. "I try not to take the bags by the handle," he said. That's where customers are most likely to touch. Instead, he grabbed them by the collar, like a nightclub bouncer. Then he hopped on his bike and zipped to the first drop-off. After an elevator tap with a gloved finger, he used the side of his cell phone to knock on the customer's door. He set down the bag and stepped back a safe distance. The door opened: Brandon, human-resources professional; spicy chicken, Cajun fries. Brandon was "a little weirded out," he said, when Cerón offered him a spritz of sanitizer. "But it showed he cared."

Next: chicken fingers downtown, Per-

Lenin Cerón

sian dinner uptown. Outside a teriyaki place, a man blew his nose loudly. Cerón flinched. Even on a good day, delivery is a tough job. "I heard this morning that de Blasio is going to go easy on us," he said. "I have three tickets. They want me to pay a thousand dollars!" He has also been in three accidents—scrapes, a cracked collarbone. "It's much easier now that the streets are empty."

The virus has added new complications. At around eight o'clock, Cerón cradled an order of Dallas BBQ near a housing project off Avenue D. "We don't usually go upstairs at this building," he said. "But in this situation, we need to." On the fourteenth floor, more bad news: for this order, Cerón needed the customer's signature. He slathered his phone and her hands with sanitizer. The woman wiggled a hesitant pinkie and signed. The delivery yielded six dollars, fifty-nine cents—worth it.

The night was slower than normal. Tippers were skimping. "The city that never sleeps is sleeping," Cerón said. He had thirty-five dollars. By this time on a regular night, he'd have sixty or seventy. "People are scared. Delivery guys touch too many things," he said. "I understand."

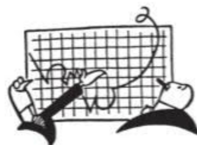
Three pizza orders came in. The last customer wanted to pay in cash. "I don't want to take cash right now, but I gotta take it," Cerón said. In the lobby was a dispenser of sanitizer. Cerón took a squirt, and then another. On the eighth floor was George, retired photographer, former "dogmatic commie"; plain pie with tomatoes. They exchanged the cash without touching fingers. Outside, Cerón put on new gloves.

He stopped for a final pickup, at a kebab joint. Emerging, he was excited. "See, my people are running New York!" he said. Delivery guys? "No," he said, pointing to the store. "Mexicans! They're making the food!"

The last delivery arrived safely, in NoHo, conveyed with no skin contact, but with a slight scent of rubbing alcohol. Cerón hopped back on his bike. He had made seventy dollars and seventy-one cents. It was almost an hour's ride home through empty streets back to the Bronx. "In one of the most humble jobs, I'm helping," he said, as he set off. "I feel O.K."

—*Zach Helfand*

EXTRACURRICULAR
TEEN TRACKER



Last week, as cities across the country shut down in an effort to slow the spread of COVID-19, President Trump said, "We have a problem that, a month ago, nobody thought about." Well, somebody did. On December 29th, as Trump vacationed with his family at Mar-a-Lago, Avi Schiffmann, a seventeen-year-old from Washington State, launched a homemade Web site to track the movement of the coronavirus. Since then, the site, ncov2019.live, has had more than a hundred million visitors. "I wanted to just make the data easily accessible, but I never thought it would end up being this big," the high-school junior said last week over FaceTime. Schiffmann, gap-toothed and bespectacled, was sitting on his bed wearing a blue T-shirt and baggy pajama bottoms. It was late morning. He was at his mother's house, on Mercer Island, outside Seattle. Somewhere in the room his cat, Louie, mewed. Behind him hung a Ferrari poster.

Using a coding tactic known as "web-scraping," Schiffmann's site collates data from different sources around the globe—the W.H.O., the C.D.C., Yonhap News Agency in South Korea—and displays the latest number of COVID-19 cases. It features simple graphics and easy-to-read tables divided by nation, continent, and state. Data automatically updates every minute. In a politicized pandemic, where rumor and panic run amok, the site has become a reputable, if unlikely, watchdog.

Schiffmann goes to Mercer Island High School. (Its mascot: Herbert the Snail.) He began teaching himself to code when he was seven, mainly by watching YouTube videos, and has made more than thirty Web sites. "Programming is a great creative medium," he said. "Instead of using a paintbrush or something, you can just type a bunch of funky words and make a coronavirus site." One of his first projects, in elementary school, was what he calls "a stick-figure animation hub." Later sites collated the scores for his county's high-school sports games, aggregated news of global protests, and displayed the weather forecast on Mars. "His brain is constantly going from one thing to another, which is good, but I also try to focus him in," his mother, Nathalie Acher, said. "I'm not techy at all myself. I see it as just really boring. He sees it as an art form."

Schiffmann created the virus project during a family ski weekend in Snoqualmie Pass. Acher, who is a primary-care doctor, said that, when he had finished building it (he'd skipped a ski day), "he was beaming as though he'd discovered the cure for cancer." Flattening the curve has been an isolating experience for many, but Schiffmann has

Avi Schiffmann

never had so much attention. "I'm getting e-mail after e-mail," he said. "Every couple of seconds it's a new one." Some people suggest changes to the site. "They're, like, 'Great Web site!'" he said. "And then they send a massive list of demands, and I'm just, like, 'O.K., later.'"

While his twelfth-grade friends worry about whether the prom will be cancelled, Schiffmann is navigating global fame. "I literally see myself on, like, African news Web sites, Thailand, Taiwan—like, everywhere," he said. He had two podcast interviews scheduled for that day. Then he was off to a photo shoot. "I want more professional photos, because I don't like the ones that the news places use." ("I look weird," he said.) A few days earlier, his school had shut down. But he had already skipped the

last week of classes to focus on the site, he said, "when it kind of blew up." His mother, whose medical colleagues use the site, had given up coaxing him to return. "Maybe learning algebra can come later," she said. (Her son is a C student.)

Schiffmann took the virus threat seriously before many others did. "I've been kind of concerned for a while, because I watched it spread very fast, and around the entire world. I mean, it just kind of went everywhere." He took his own precautions. "I got masks a while ago. I got, like, fifteen for seventeen dollars. Now you can't even buy a single mask for, like, less than forty." His mother chimed in. "I wish I had listened to him," she said. "But, in his teen-ager way, he'd come down the stairs with his eyes huge and be, like, 'There are fifty thousand more cases!' and I'd be, like, 'Yeah, but they're over there, not here.'"

Now that the grownups of the world are finally, and appropriately, freaking out, it is hard for Schiffmann not to feel righteous vindication. "If you told someone three months ago that we should spend, like, ten billion dollars in upgrading the United States' health care, they would have been, like, 'Nah,'" he said. "Now, everyone's, like, 'Oh, my God, yes.' But this is the kind of stuff we should have done a long time ago."

—*Brent Crane*

DEPT. OF REGRESSION
INTERROGATING THE T.P. PANIC

Because your Facebook feed leads you to believe that it's a commodity more precious than gold. Because you use the cardboard tubes for crafting. Because you like to wet it and then hurl it in a wad at annoying people in your coronavirus bunker.

The possible explanations for toilet-paper hoarding are myriad. Unlike hand sanitizer and test kits, toilet paper is not a commodity subject to increased need in the current crisis. Nevertheless, shoppers continue to express a panic mentality over bathroom tissue. The fallout: a newspaper in Australia recently ran eight mostly blank pages for its readers ("Run out of loo paper?" the tabloid asked. "The NT News cares"); determining your fair share of Cottonelle at your local Costco can now feel like Yalta.

What's fuelling all this obsessive-compulsive shopping? Randy O. Frost, a professor of psychology at Smith College, who has written widely about hoarding, said that most hoarders are motivated by a combination of three factors: emotional or sentimental attachment, aesthetic appreciation, and utility. But hoarders of toilet paper, Frost said, are compelled by only the third motivation. "One of the underlying characteristics of utility is an intolerance of uncertainty," he said over the phone. "The individual needs to feel absolutely and perfectly certain that some kind of negative outcome won't occur."

But let's dig deeper; let us ask the toilet-paper-stockpiling patient (in a calm voice), *"Vot ees trobbling you?"*

"Controlling cleanliness around B.M.s is the earliest way the child asserts control," Andrea Greenman, the president of the Contemporary Freudian Society, said. "The fact that now we are all presumably losing control creates a regressive push to a very early time. So, I guess that translates in the unconscious to 'If I have a lifelong supply of toilet paper, I'll never be out of control, never be a helpless, dirty child again.'"

Freud believed that human beings subconsciously equate feces with gold or money. In "On Transformations of Instinct as Exemplified in Anal Erotism," the father of psychoanalysis wrote, "Since his faeces are his first gift, the child easily transfers his interest from that substance to the new one which he comes across as the most valuable gift in life." The turning point in a child's so-called anal phase is when he learns to relinquish his "gift"—which, in turn, occasions a loss of self. Toilet paper is inextricably bound in our minds with defecation, and is one of our few public acknowledgments of it. Perhaps it makes sense, then, that a café in Australia recently decided to accept toilet paper as currency (three rolls for a coffee, thirty-six rolls for a kilo of beans).

Is the panic-buying of toilet paper primarily egoistic? Not according to Susan Signe Morrison, the author of "Excrement in the Late Middle Ages: Sacred Filth and Chaucer's Fecopoetics." "Jesus' corporal acts of mercy include caring for sick people. Wiping someone's bottom is not specifically mentioned, but when you think of tending to infants or old people who can't control their fecal production . . ." Morrison said, trailing off with a delicacy befitting the subject matter. "If we don't have toilet paper, will we revile our family members who aren't clean in the way we expect them to be?"

According to one anthropologist, an outer-directed motivation for toilet-paper hoarding might even skew political. "The places we see toilet paper mentioned are often tied up with politics, especially in the movies," Grant Jun Otsuki, a lecturer in cultural anthropology at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, said. "The turning point of the movie 'V for Vendetta' is when Evey discovers a letter written on toilet paper by someone oppressed under the totalitarian regime. Evey becomes politically awakened."

In a recent blog post subtitled "A Cultural Analysis of Toilet Paper," Otsuki teases out a hierarchy of household paper goods, from Bibles and diaries, at the top, to old newspapers, to paper towels and plates, down to toilet paper, noting that this lowest item on the chain could fairly smoothly perform many of the functions of items higher up on the list, but not vice versa. He concludes, "While we may use fancy paper and pens to write the basic laws of a nation, in some way those words have no meaning unless they could also be written on toilet paper and potentially carry the same force. Without the possibility of a constitution written on Charmin, modern democracy would be unthinkable."

—*Henry Alford*

THERE'S AN APP FOR THAT
TALKING TO STRANGERS

Danielle Baskin and Max Hawkins are multimedia artists who met at a Halloween party in San Francisco, in 2016. Baskin was dressed as a lion with skeleton arms. Hawkins, who does "software-based performance work," was

dressed as the John Mayer song "Your Body Is a Wonderland," a costume randomly assigned to him by a computer algorithm that he designed. He had just returned from a two-year trip abroad, during which his algorithm dictated where he lived, taking him to Dubai, Taipei, and rural Slovenia. At the party, Baskin gave Hawkins a tarot reading, and they hit it off. "We were both very interested in phone stuff," Baskin recalled recently.

Hawkins told her about Call in the Night, a short-lived project he had started a few years earlier. "You signed up with your phone number, and once a week, between 2 and 5 A.M., you would get this phone call that wakes you from sleep and connects you with a random stranger," he explained. Baskin was intrigued. She works from a garage studio—she specializes in "joke objects," such as bananas imprinted with the Nike logo—and liked the idea of spontaneous conversations during the day. Soon after, Hawkins moved to New York, and they used the app to stay in touch. Friends joined, and then friends of friends. Last year, they released the app publicly, under the name DialUp, with subgroups for people who wanted to talk to strangers about breakfast, politics, or the full moon.

Then COVID-19, and widespread quarantining, came along. "My girlfriend was telling me about her family in China, who'd been doing this for months, and all the stories of people who are just totally bored and stuck at home," Hawkins, who now lives in Los Angeles, said. On March 1st, he and Baskin launched a new DialUp application, called QuarantineChat, that connects sheltering strangers at arbitrary points of the day. There's no swiping right; the app decides who talks to whom, and when. "Something that's missing from your life when you're in isolation is that you don't have these random conversations," Baskin said. "You don't have that serendipity." Usage spiked in Iran, then spread to Hong Kong, Portugal, and London.

While self-quarantining, Hawkins has been busy fixing technical bugs, to keep up with demand, and Baskin has been making virus-inspired art objects, such as cling-on faux stained glass for nervous airline passengers to stick to their plane windows ("So when you're on the plane it feels more like a place of prayer"). Baskin said, "I've been trying to create projects that are sort of funny and dystopian." She also created a respirator mask with the user's mouth and nose printed on it, to help people unlock their phones using facial recognition. Both have been making friends on QuarantineChat. Baskin was connected to a family in L.A. that was rationing pasta sauce. Hawkins had talked to a Colombian woman studying in Paris, whose roommate had tested positive. "They'd just thrown a party the night before, and so everyone who was at the party had to go into self-quarantine," he said.

"I'd say my number-one issue is getting off the island, and then, after that, probably health care."

Early last week, a housebound New Yorker joined the app. The next afternoon, the phone rang. "Welcome to QuarantineChat," a recorded voice said. "We're about to put you on hold and connect you to someone else anywhere in the world. Your prompt today is to go look out the window and describe what you see to your partner." Some plinky music played, and then a woman answered. She introduced herself as Susan, a fifty-nine-year-old mother of three, who was hunkering down at her house in Missouri. "I have asthma, so I've been paying very close attention," she said. "I was very far ahead of this. My kids thought I was nuts. They don't think I'm nuts anymore!" She described what was out the window: bird feeders, a lake. "And we have some moles who have taken over my yard. They make a raised line in the grass, so you can see exactly where they've been, and they are so annoying."

Susan had Xanax and a plan to reorganize her closets. "I had decided that this was going to be my year, you know what I'm saying? I'm going to be sixty this year, which is freaking me out. And I thought, I'm going to hit sixty being one hot chick. I was going to get my cataracts fixed, my shoulder replaced. Of course, I'm cancelling everything." Her husband is a cardiovascular perfusionist at a hospital three and a half hours away. (They worried that the hospital would be short on masks, so Susan lent him one from her gardening supplies.) Their plan was for him to stay at an apartment near work if he got exposed. "When he leaves tomorrow, I might not see him for a long time," Susan said, glumly. "I made his favorite black-bean burgers and his cupcakes and stuff, to remember me. But it's a lonely thought. I will literally be alone. Just me, in this big, rambling house. So I will probably look forward to these calls more as time goes on."

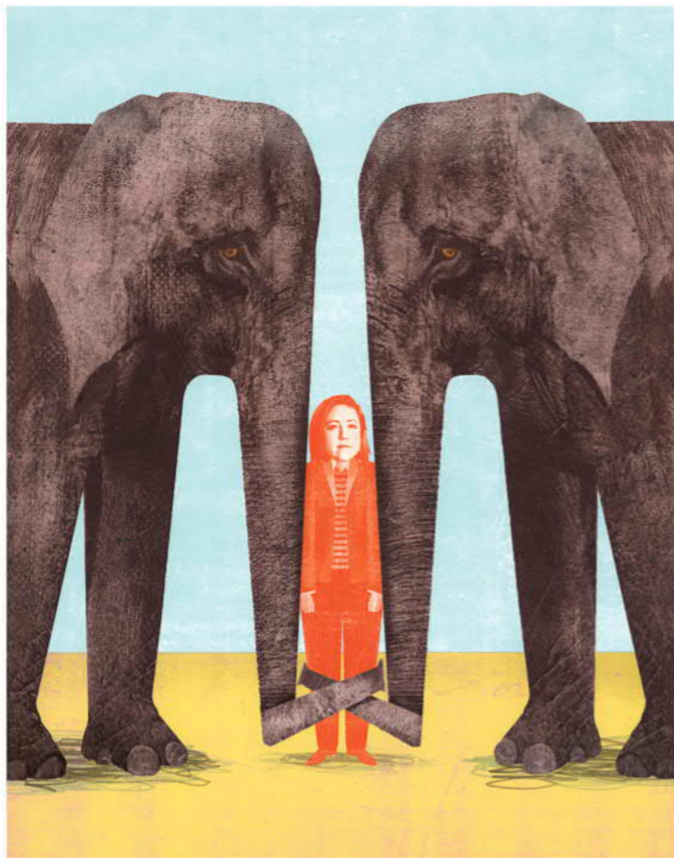
—*Michael Schulman*

THE POLITICAL SCENE

HOPE DIES LAST

The trials of a Never Trump Republican.

BY SUSAN B. GLASSER



For four years, Sarah Longwell has been hoping for Donald Trump's downfall. But nothing has triggered it. Not the Mueller investigation into his dealings with Russia. Not his coverup of hush-money payments to a porn star, or the profiting from his office to benefit his personal businesses. Not even a Ukraine extortion scheme that resulted in just the third impeachment and trial of a President in history. He has proved immune to every scandal. Will the coronavirus pandemic be any different?

I spoke to Longwell on March 13th, barely an hour after Trump declared a "national emergency" to combat a once-in-a-century outbreak that he had spent the previous few weeks claiming to have completely under control. Pundits were already calling Trump's botched initial handling of the crisis "the end of his Presidency." Longwell, a forty-year-old conservative Republican who has spent the Trump years in an increasingly isolated fight within her party to end his Presidency, was not yet convinced. "How many times have we seen that headline before?" she asked.

Longwell is a Never Trumper, one of the stubborn tribe of Republicans who have refused to accept the President as their leader. In 2016, virtually the entire Republican Party opposed Trump in the primaries, but since his Inauguration only a shrinking group has persisted in publicly taking him on.

To Donald Trump, the members of this small but highly visible resistance are his real enemy, even more than the opposition party. He often tweets his contempt; one day last fall, he described them as politically weakened and "on respirators," but nonetheless "worse and more dangerous for our country" than the Democrats. Trump concluded with a furious flourish: "Watch out for them, they are human scum!"

Longwell embodies Trump's darkest anxieties. Relentless in her loathing of the forty-fifth President, she has turned her Never Trump-ism from a passion project into a full-time profession. Starting last September, as Trump faced impeachment by the House of Representatives and a trial in the Senate, Longwell raised and spent millions of dollars on ads advocating his removal from office. After his acquittal, she launched a new effort, raising several million dollars in a matter of weeks to turn out "disaffected Republicans" in the Democratic primaries, a first step toward building a "coalition of the center" to defeat the President in November.

Longwell sees Trump's failure to respond early and decisively to the coronavirus as a case study in "the crisis of leadership" that she has warned fellow-Republicans about. She believes the new political reality of the pandemic moment is deeply problematic for Trump and for the Party leaders who have so fervently embraced him. As Trump was denying that the virus would afflict the country, millions of suburban voters—including many Republican women like Longwell—were helping former Vice-President Joe Biden take a commanding lead in the Democratic primaries over Bernie Sanders. She hopes now that Biden can be the instrument of Trump's defeat, enabling a "restoration" of the America she still believes in. Longwell told me that, for the Republican establishment, which has for all intents and purposes fully sold out to Trump, "this is their worst-case scenario."

A lifelong conservative, Longwell grew up in a Republican family and town in central Pennsylvania and began following politics in high school, during the impeachment, in 1998, of Bill

"For me, the world changed in 2016," Sarah Longwell says.

ILLUSTRATION BY CHRISTIAN NORTHEAST

Clinton. In her eyes, Clinton was a "dirtbag" for having an affair with a former intern who was not much older than she was. After graduating from Kenyon College, in Ohio, in 2002, she went to work for a conservative group, the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, in Delaware. She soon found herself promoting a book for "intellectuals who find Darwinism unconvincing" and went on tour with Senator Rick Santorum to help sell his book "It Takes a Family," whose retrograde views led a reviewer for the Philadelphia *Inquirer* to describe it as the product of "one of the finest minds of the thirteenth century." At the time, Longwell was coming out to her friends and family as a lesbian. She decided that she could no longer work at such an organization with someone she considered "the most visibly anti-gay politician in the country," and she quit.

Still deeply conservative, she moved to Washington in 2005, and was hired by Richard Berman as a junior staffer at his communications firm. Berman, a legendary Republican lobbyist turned P.R. man, specialized in helping food and beverage companies by setting up industry front groups to fight regulatory efforts. Longwell loved the work, and in the course of fifteen years she rose to become senior vice-president and was in line to run the company. Together, they opposed everything from raising the minimum wage to stricter drunk-driving laws. "Sarah always had a knife in her teeth," Berman told me.

Early in her time at the firm, Longwell persuaded Berman to agree to be interviewed by "60 Minutes." The story portrayed Berman as the "Dr. Evil" of the Washington influence game, willing, on behalf of a range of undisclosed corporate clients, to attack workers, healthy-eating proponents, and even activists for Mothers Against Drunk Driving. Berman still has a link to the "60 Minutes" episode on the firm's Web site, accompanied by a quote calling him "the industry's weapon of mass destruction." He keeps a "Dr. Evil" nameplate on his desk. "If they call you Mr. Nice Guy, would that be better?" Berman told me. "I don't think so."

Berman taught Longwell to discredit the opposition before it discredits you; to be edgy, memorable, and funny; and to always play offense, because, as Longwell put it in a 2014 presentation, "defense over time loses." He devised an acronym for the firm's approach to "managing" public opinion: FLAGS, for fear, love, anger, greed, and sympathy. Of those, he told me, fear and anger are the most effective: "Nobody likes negative ads, but everybody remembers them. I absolutely believe it."

Longwell readily acknowledged that Berman was "almost like a bogeyman" to opponents. But she admired him. "Rick is the kind of person who is, like, 'I will stand up, I will say what I think, and I will defend my positions.' I believe that, too," she said. "I believe that, if you are opposed to this President, there are so many people in this town, so many people in Congress, they want to say, 'I think he's terrible,' whatever. They won't say it out loud. I think that Rick helped me understand how to have the courage not just to say what I believe but, when people come at you for that, to say, 'Well, this is who I am, this is what I believe.'"

The experience of being a lesbian in conservative circles also taught Longwell the virtues of plain speaking. An advocate for marriage equality despite the Republican Party's stance against it, she married her girlfriend in 2013. "I got comfortable with everyone being mad at you," she said. "To be a gay Republican was to recognize that Republicans were going to dislike you because you were gay, and Democrats were going to dislike you for being Republican, and you had to walk your path because you felt like it was the right thing to do."

In 2016, Longwell opposed Trump in the Republican primaries but recognized the potency of his fear-and-anger platform. How could she not? It was as if he were working from Berman's playbook. During the campaign, Longwell happened to be the incoming board chair of the Log Cabin Republicans; she was the first woman to hold the post since the group was founded, in the late seventies, to advocate for gay and lesbian Republicans. The board felt intense pressure to endorse Trump, despite his selection of Mike Pence, an openly homophobic evangelical Christian, as his running mate. Longwell told me that she "basically lay on the tracks" to stop the group from backing Trump. Mostly, though, she watched the election unfold with dismay.

"For me, the world changed in 2016," Longwell said. That summer, her first son was born. "My wife's water broke the night of Melania's speech at the Convention," and a few nights later, after their son's birth, she watched on television at the hospital as Trump accepted the Republican nomination. "I remember just how bad he made me feel," she said. "That's what I remember. I remember holding a new baby and feeling like this can't be what's happening." On Election Night, she was at a party in Washington, texting with another anti-Trump operative, Tim Miller, the former spokesperson for Jeb Bush's short-lived Presidential campaign. "He's going to win," Miller wrote to her. As the news sank in, she went outside and bummed a cigarette, although she no longer smoked.

Many people who opposed Trump in 2016 have their version of this story: the Election Night disbelief and shock, the litany of outrages that followed. But, unlike many others in Republican Washington, Longwell did not make her accommodations, political and moral, with the new President. When, on his second weekend in office, Trump issued an executive order banning entry into the U.S. for citizens of seven majority-Muslim nations, Longwell decided that Trump really was a danger to the country. "I started thinking about: What can I do?" she recalled. "How can I get involved?"

In the fall of 2017, Longwell was invited to a session of the Meeting of the Concerned, a semi-secret group of disaffected Republicans that had started gathering every other Tuesday in a basement conference room near Capitol Hill. The Never Trumpers were hardly a real movement, less an organized cabal than a cable-news-savvy alliance. Among them were longtime Party operatives, such as Steve Schmidt and Rick Wilson, who became regulars on liberal-leaning TV shows, and public intellectuals, such as Eliot Cohen, a former Bush Administration official who now teaches at Johns Hopkins University, and Max Boot, of the Council on Foreign Relations, who stopped writing for the *Wall Street Journal's* increasingly pro-Trump editorial page and went to the Washington *Post*. With the exception of Senator John McCain, most Republican elected officials already either supported Trump or kept their mouths shut about

him. Inside the Administration, some had qualms about the President, but they soon were fired or marginalized, or quit. The official Party apparatus had been taken over by the President, and Republican lobbyists, consultants, political operatives, congressional staffers, right-wing media commentators, and government job seekers quickly identified where their interests lay.

Jerry Taylor, who helped found the Meeting of the Concerned and the Niskanen Center, the think tank that hosts it, told me about the first time Longwell showed up. "Sarah didn't know anyone in the group," he said. "She had never really travelled in those circles before." Many of the attendees were well-known denizens of Washington's TV greenrooms, who bonded over their disillusionment with the Party and saw "the election of Donald Trump as just the thin blue line between us and the abyss," as Taylor put it. Longwell wanted more than this talky self-styled resistance. She told me, "Everybody was sitting around having a conversation that I had heard lots of versions of at that point, which is: What happened to the Republican Party?" When Bill Kristol, a Republican pundit and the founder of *The Weekly Standard*, spoke up, Longwell recalled, she interrupted him: " 'Why don't we do something about it?' And he was kind of, like, 'Well, what would we do?' And I was, like, 'I don't know, but you're famous. You're Bill Kristol.' "

Kristol has been a leader of the hawkish neoconservative wing of the Party since arriving in Washington, as a member of the Reagan Administration. In 2016, he made a well-publicized attempt to recruit a last-ditch independent candidate to run against Trump. Having failed to find anyone of stature, Kristol settled on an obscure former C.I.A. officer and congressional staffer named Evan McMullin, whose candidacy never rose above the level of obscurity. After their initial meeting, Kristol and Longwell went out for coffee, and she urged him to take action again. They started brainstorming regularly at the Madison Hotel.

"Then Mueller happened," Longwell said, and the idea for their group, Republicans for the Rule of Law, was born. Trump's firing of the F.B.I. director James Comey, in the spring of 2017, had set off the first major crisis of his Presidency, leading to the appointment of Robert Mueller as special counsel. Longwell and Kristol decided that their group would try to insure that Trump did not fire Mueller or block the investigation; to do this they would pressure Republican officials in the capital. "I did think someone needed to fight the fight within the Republican Party, that you can't just give up even though it's a long shot against a Republican President," Kristol told me. "Sarah agreed."

In February, 2018, as Trump was publicly attacking Mueller, Longwell set up Defending Democracy Together, a 501(c)(4) nonprofit that could accept donations without having to disclose donors. Defending Democracy Together became the umbrella organization for Republicans for the Rule of Law and other like-minded projects that sought to combat Trump's policies. Longwell and Kristol worked his contacts and raised substantial sums of money, including from liberal donors such as Pierre Omidyar, the tech billionaire who funds the left-wing Web site the Intercept.

Starting that March, whenever Trump threatened Mueller or opened a new front in his fight against the Russia "hoax," the group ran TV ads defending the investigation, many of them featuring quickly produced clips of news footage or Trump's latest tweet, with urgent pleas to members of Congress to stop the President. All told, before the Mueller investigation was over, Republicans for the Rule of Law had run more than a hundred ads, aimed at a narrow but important segment of "persuadable Republicans" in key states, seeking to convince Party leaders that even Trump's base would not go along with his firing of the special counsel. In the hope of getting directly to the President, Longwell also ran the ads in Washington on Fox News, which Trump watches addictively.

In 2018, at a session of the Meeting of the Concerned, Longwell met George Conway, the husband of Trump's White House counsellor Kellyanne Conway. A prominent conservative attorney, he had accepted, then declined, a senior position in Trump's Justice Department. Earlier that year, Conway had started tweeting his dismay about Trump, thus setting off a marital-political drama worthy of a reality-TV Presidency. Like Longwell, Conway was invited into the capital's Never Trump circle, but he, too, decided that the meetings were often frustrating exercises in "therapy." He craved action. ("Look, there's a lot of benefit just to catharsis," Jerry Taylor joked to me, "especially given that the alternative is to become an alcoholic, which is easy to do in this town now.")

In November, 2018, as Trump attacked Justice Department norms and practices, Longwell helped Conway file the paperwork to start Checks and Balances, an anti-Trump group for conservative-minded lawyers, to counter the influential Federalist Society. It débuted with a splash, given the Conways' public split over Trump. Longwell was fast becoming the organizational heft behind the Never Trump movement. "Basically, if you want to set up a group," Conway told me, "she's the person who makes it."

Although Conway was constantly in the news with his tweets whacking his wife's boss, more and more of Longwell's Republican connections were being converted to Trumpism—deleting old Twitter posts critical of the President, making discreet job inquiries. By the second year of the Administration, she saw two kinds of Republicans in Washington: "the people who became Always Trumpers" and the group she called "the Anti-Anti-Trumpers, the people who were, like, 'Well, I'm not for Trump, but you guys are ridiculous, you guys have Trump Derangement Syndrome.' " Republicans she had been friendly with for years and who had been "vociferously" anti-Trump in 2016 now bashed her and other Never Trumpers on Twitter.

Kristol's *Weekly Standard* remained strongly anti-Trump, and by late 2018 he was struggling to keep it alive. When the magazine's owner, the conservative billionaire Philip Anschutz, threatened to shut it down, James Murdoch, the estranged son of its initial backer, Rupert Murdoch, approached Anschutz about buying it. But Anschutz refused to sell, and abruptly forced the *Standard*

to cease operations, transferring its assets to another property he owned, the Washington *Examiner*. Kristol assembled a small new team to run a Never Trumper Web site, called the Bulwark, which launched a month later. Longwell, with no previous experience in the media business, became its publisher.

James Murdoch was not able to save the *Standard*, but Kristol introduced Longwell to Murdoch's wife, Kathryn, and she became a major, six-figure donor to Republicans for the Rule of Law. Kathryn Murdoch told me, "Sarah gives me hope that there is going to be a post-Trump Republican Party that is principled and focussed on getting things done." Murdoch, who described herself as an independent, added, "Unfortunately, one of the most frustrating things right now is there's a big difference between the way Republican leaders speak behind closed doors and the way they speak in public."

Longwell and Kristol spent much of 2018 and the first half of 2019 trying to recruit a Republican to run against Trump in the upcoming primaries. At first, Longwell hoped for a big-name candidate: "I was, like, 'Maybe Mitt Romney'll do it, maybe Condoleezza Rice will do it.' And I subsequently realized that there really was a very narrow universe of people who were going to legitimately consider it. At the end of the day, none of them saw a path." John Kasich, the former Ohio governor, who ran against Trump in 2016, was interested, but even longtime financial supporters wouldn't back him. Longwell's "personal favorite" was Larry Hogan, the governor of Maryland, whose father had been the first Republican member of the House Judiciary Committee to call for Richard Nixon's impeachment. But, last spring, Hogan said that he wouldn't mount a "suicide mission" against the President. "Nobody wanted to cross this guy," Longwell recalled. "This American Life" compared her effort to that of the workers who tried to stop the meltdown at Chernobyl. And yet, Longwell noted, "it was easier to get three guys to go into Chernobyl than it was to get somebody to run against Trump."

By the summer of 2019, not even the Log Cabin Republicans wanted to oppose Trump anymore. Longwell found that her activism against the President was at odds with the majority of the board, and in August she resigned as chair. As soon as she did, the board voted to preëmptively endorse Trump for 2020. A half-dozen other board members ultimately quit in the rift over Trump, as did the group's first female executive director. Jennifer Horn, the former chair of the New Hampshire Republican Party, who had been recruited to the board by Longwell, told me, "We just could not remain."

By this point, Longwell had become all too familiar with what she often called "the soft bigotry of low expectations": the assumption that her fellow-Republicans would give in to Trump, whatever his latest outrage, and yet escape censure, since their capitulation was now merely the expected outcome. The impeachment drama, ignited by the disclosure, in September, of Trump's fateful call to the Ukrainian President, seemed as if it would provide yet more proof of this frustrating new Washington reality.

Despite the revelations about Trump's scheme to withhold U.S. military aid to Ukraine as he demanded politically beneficial investigations into Biden, Longwell knew that impeachment was almost certain to end with an acquittal in the Republican-controlled Senate. There were not twenty Republican votes to convict, and likely never would be. Still, on September 30th, less than a week after the House inquiry began, she wrote an opinion piece for NBC comparing the moment to Watergate, titled "Republicans Who Back Impeachment Can Save the Country—and the GOP." That day, she got an e-mail from Rick Berman, her boss, asking where she stood on impeachment. She replied that it was time for them to talk.

They met in his sunny corner office, and Berman made it clear that Longwell would have to choose between supporting Trump's impeachment and staying on at his company. Berman had allowed her to devote increasing time to anti-Trump causes during the previous few years, to the point of even raising money and working to recruit a primary candidate against him. But Berman could not abide her using his firm to run a campaign to remove a President of their party. "My red line was impeachment," he told me. They agreed that by the end of the year she would leave Berman's company and start her own political consulting firm, Longwell Partners.

Longwell said that her views had "changed a lot" since she first began working with Berman, but she still

"For health and safety reasons, we'll be transitioning to cyber crime."

shared his hard-edged approach to political combat. "Rick really taught me everything," she told me. "If you don't engage people and try to persuade them, the other side will."

As the impeachment proceedings began, Republicans for the Rule of Law rolled out video ads that detailed with biting humor the latest developments in the Ukraine saga. One of Longwell's staff members, Barry Rubin, started a Twitter account, focussing on the Senate Judiciary Committee chairman, called Lindsey Graham's Fake Conscience. Every day, he tweeted out old footage of Graham, now arguably Trump's most reliable Senate cheerleader, from his previous incarnations as a Trump basher (in 2016) and as a House impeachment manager against Bill Clinton (in 1999). In one clip that went viral, Graham talked with great emotion about how much he admired Joe Biden, the "nicest person" in politics. Rubin posted it on November 21st, the day Graham's committee began investigating Biden's dealings with Ukraine, just as Trump had demanded. The tweet said, "WHATEVER YOU DO, DO NOT WATCH THE VIDEO BELOW!! IT WILL MAKE ME LOOK LIKE A MONSTER." It has been viewed more than one and a half million times.

Still, it proved impossible to persuade Republicans to vote for impeachment. Longwell started out with a list of a few dozen House members who she thought might be persuaded to break with Trump. After one week of hearings, the list rapidly shrank. First to go was Elise Stefanik, a Harvard-educated junior member of the House Intelligence Committee, who sarcastically questioned witnesses and ranted about the Democratic-controlled process. "They just Trumpify themselves immediately," Longwell said. Stefanik was soon doing prime-time interviews on Fox News with Sean Hannity and tweeting nasty nicknames at her 2020 opponent, a Democrat she disparaged as "Taxing Tedra." Longwell likened the sudden shifts of Stefanik and others to "the Invasion of the Body Snatchers."

For as long as she had been fighting Trump, Longwell had been travelling home to central Pennsylvania, hoping to understand his appeal to Republicans. After the public impeachment hearings wrapped up, just before Thanksgiving, we drove two and a half hours from Washington to a storefront in New Cumberland, to find out if the base was fazed by the Ukraine scandal. Longwell grew up nearby, just outside Dillsburg, a small town of fewer than three thousand people. Her parents are retired lawyers and still live there. Dillsburg is conservative and Republican, the kind of place where the local elementary school closes for the first day of deer-hunting season. It went overwhelmingly for Trump in 2016.

Since the start of the Trump Presidency, Longwell has conducted regular focus groups of his voters from the area, trying to figure out what might move them to vote against him in 2020. The groups almost always comprise middle-class Republican women from the suburbs and exurbs—the most Trump-skeptical remaining part of the G.O.P., and the voters who may well decide the President's fate in November. One Republican who has been in many meetings with Longwell was struck by the personal nature of her project. Longwell has often joked that she was secretly doing this to convince her "parents that they shouldn't be supporting Trump," the Republican told me. (Longwell was reluctant to discuss her parents, except to say that she didn't ask her father if he had voted for Trump in 2016, "because I didn't want to know.")

At first, the two focus groups that Longwell had convened for our visit seemed to suggest that the President was in more political trouble than we had realized. The groups—all women, all Trump voters with varying degrees of regret about him—started out identically: when the moderator asked how many thought the country was going in the right direction, not a single hand went up. The reason was their concern about the President. In the second group, a retired nurse said, "He has ability, but he's also a narcissistic sociopath. And I voted for him! We all did." (When she said this, Longwell exclaimed from where we were observing, behind a two-way mirror, "We have a George!"—as in George Conway, who had recently argued in *The Atlantic* that Trump has narcissistic personality disorder.) Others spoke of the "degradation of the office of President," said that Trump was "just so full of hate," and bemoaned his "flamboyant obnoxiousness." Everyone said Trump's Twitter feed was a problem.

Two staffers from Longwell's team who watched with us were encouraged, but she warned them to wait for "the turn." It soon became clear what she meant: The women didn't like Trump, but they didn't like anyone else, either. They didn't trust the media, and they thought other politicians were just as bad as the President. Although they could not explain the details of the Ukraine scandal—except for one woman who had become an obsessive MSNBC watcher—they thought impeachment was costly and pointless.

Still, Longwell was not entirely discouraged. Trump had won Pennsylvania by only about forty thousand votes in 2016; he would need these women to vote for him again, and it was hard to imagine that all of them would do so. Before we left, the moderator asked the second group whether they would consider voting for a Democrat in 2020. Five of the nine said yes. "I'd vote for a dog over Trump," one said. Then the moderator asked who they thought would win if Biden was the Democratic nominee. They all said Biden.

Three weeks later, when the Democratic majority in the House impeached Trump, all of Longwell's initial targets—among them Adam Kinzinger, of Illinois; Will Hurd, of Texas; and Francis Rooney, of Florida—voted no, along with every member of the Republican caucus.

Longwell nevertheless kept her contrarian optimism, hoping that some new revelation could shift the political momentum in the upcoming Senate trial. "To me, the only thing that seemed like it could would be witnesses, hearing from people directly," she said. In the focus groups in Pennsylvania, the women had been shown a series of impeachment-related ads, and panned all of them, except for one pressing Trump to agree to witnesses. ("What is Trump hiding?" it asked, showing pictures of his advisers with duct tape over their mouths.)

Longwell planned to pressure Senate Republicans to summon witnesses whom Trump had blocked from testifying in the House. She was aware that

others might consider her "naïve and quixotic," or at least "annoyingly earnest," but she was not ready to give up. "I'm like Charlie Brown with the football, right?—me thinking that these guys are going to stand up."

As the House was conducting its impeachment vote, which Kellyanne Conway dismissed as the result of Democrats' "get-Donald-Trump obsession," her husband and other Never Trumpers announced the creation of the Lincoln Project, a group aimed at punishing Trump's "Republican enablers" in the Senate in the 2020 election. "There has to be some political price for putting party over country," George Conway told me. Earlier in the fall, he had talked with Anthony Scaramucci—who had flamed out as Trump's White House communications director after only eleven days and eventually became a biting critic of the President—about "ways to get under Trump's skin." Conway wanted to run TV ads targeted at the President that would feature an actor playing Trump's disapproving father—an idea from the political strategist Rick Wilson. Scaramucci wanted them to start a political-action committee. Instead, they created the Lincoln Project with an array of consultants who had worked on Republican Presidential campaigns, including Wilson and Steve Schmidt, as well as Jennifer Horn, who had served on the Log Cabin board with Longwell.

The new group ran scorching impeachment-related ads against Republican senators seeking reëlection in key swing states. It also touted, on its Web site, a comment by Trump's former strategist Steve Bannon, which underscored Trump's vulnerability. "We need the Republican establishment on board," Bannon told the Associated Press in January, noting Trump's narrow victories in Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin, the states that sealed his Electoral College win. "If these guys can peel off three or four per cent, that's going to be serious."

This was also Longwell's theory about 2020, and the reason for her focus groups. She didn't need to convert every Republican in the room, just a few of them. Longwell planned to assemble a database of disaffected Republicans and give them "permission structures" to vote for a Democrat. She already knew who they were: the audience of her Never Trump groups; the readers of the Bulwark, which receives about two million unique visitors a month and has had eleven million downloads of its podcast in the past year; and the more than three hundred thousand people who had signed petitions circulated by Republicans for the Rule of Law.

Longwell, right, doesn't need the whole Party to abandon Trump, just her slice.

PHOTOGRAPH BY CAROLINE TOMPKINS FOR THE NEW YORKER

But as she watched the Democratic Presidential race unfold, with its faltering front-runner and disjointed debates, Longwell became increasingly discouraged. For Republicans like her, the 2020 Democrats ranged from uninspiring (Biden) to terrifying (Sanders). Republican elected officials, meanwhile, seemed to be even more vocally pro-Trump than before impeachment. When Longwell and I returned to Pennsylvania in January for more focus groups, the women were still leery of Trump and the direction of the country, but this time the conversation was dominated by the most pro-Trump woman in the room. Sounding like a Fox News host on a roll, she said, "I think they hate him so bad because he threatens their liberal agenda. They want to get rid of him any way they can."

At this point, Longwell abruptly stepped out from behind the mirror and interrupted the focus group. "I'm from Dillsburg," Longwell told them. "I've been a Republican my entire life." Then she launched into a speech. "I've become persuaded that President Trump is very bad for the Republican Party, including the fact that he should be impeached," she said. She talked about the dangers of an out-of-control executive, the future of the Republican Party, and the hypocrisy of senators who claimed to believe in the rule of law for everyone except Trump.

Longwell seemed to want to convince someone, anyone, even a dozen suburban moms munching chips in a focus group on a Wednesday night. "I really believe character counts in a President," she said, "and I can tell you do as well." But, while most of the women did not love Trump, they did not really care about him, either, and Longwell did. The last word went to the President's most ardent backer. "I think Trump is the one who could bring us together if Democrats would stop fighting him so hard," she told Longwell. "He has to have been one of the most influential politicians of all time."

A few weeks later, on Friday, January 31st, Longwell and I met in her bright new office, overlooking McPherson Square, in Washington. The night before, Senator Lamar Alexander had put an end to the infuriating charade of a Senate trial, announcing that he

would oppose the Democrats' effort to force the Senate to hear testimony from new witnesses. It was only a matter of days until the President's preordained acquittal.

Despite Longwell's months of work, the President was emerging from impeachment emboldened and unchecked. Republicans for the Rule of Law had run about two million dollars' worth of impeachment-related ads in thirty-nine states and congressional districts, sixteen ads nationally, and twenty-eight digital billboards targeting Republican members of Congress in nineteen states. But they had been up against what Longwell's team estimated was almost certainly more than forty million dollars in ad spending by pro-Trump forces. Her mantra in politics was all about managing public opinion, yet public opinion about Trump remained essentially unchanged. "On an objective scale," she said that morning, of her impeachment campaign, "it was a failure."

She was also frustrated with the Democrats. "It has really started to feel like they decided to impeach but they never really invested in impeaching," she said. In key swing states, the ads from Republicans for the Rule of Law had been the only ones countering the Trump barrage. She pointed out that public support for impeachment shot up over fifty per cent after the Ukraine allegations emerged, but never moved after that. "Public opinion is like cement—it's soft at first and you can move it, and then it hardens," she said. By December, it had hardened. "The Democrats played no offense and the Republicans played a ton of offense, ultimately putting the Democrats on defense," Longwell said. For a disciple of Berman, that was unforgivable. When you are on defense, you lose.

She had mistakenly believed, she admitted, "that there were elected Republicans who want to do the right thing, to act as a course correction. That has not happened." Her allies agreed. "The capitulation has been amazing," Kristol told me. Conway said, when we met after the Senate trial, "The institutions of the Republican Party are completely at his beck and call. There's no erring whatsoever. No dissent is tolerated and it is absolute and complete."

I asked Longwell if she thought that at least Mitt Romney, the one Republican senator who had consistently sounded a publicly skeptical note about the President since John McCain's death, in 2018, might vote to convict Trump. "I do have a thought that he will," she said. "I think he may." I joked with her that she was a living example of the Russian saying "Hope dies last."

Five days later, on February 5th, Romney announced that he would vote to convict Trump on one of the two counts, abuse of power. It was a long way from the dozen or so Senate Republicans who were once Longwell's targets. Still, Trump did not get a unanimous Republican acquittal, which at that point counted as a victory for his opponents. "Mitt comes through!" Longwell e-mailed me. "Hope is not entirely in vain."

But new disappointments loomed. "Everything's bad," Longwell told me the morning the Senate trial came to an end. Bernie Sanders was leading in the polls heading into the New Hampshire primary, just days away. Even for a diehard Never Trumper, the Vermont socialist, who promised "a revolution" with trillions of dollars in new government spending, was a reach. Longwell was still, at least nominally, a Republican. "If you end up with a Bernie-Trump showdown, we're in such a fundamentally different place as a country, and I'll tell you that place is really far from where I am," she said.

Last April, Longwell wrote a piece for the Bulwark, warning Democrats, "DO NOT IGNORE BERNIE SANDERS. HE IS GOING TO WIN THE NOMINATION. AND HE IS NOT GOING TO BEAT DONALD TRUMP." When I asked that morning if she would vote for Sanders against Trump, she hesitated. "I don't know. I don't think so," she replied. She considered Sanders essentially a Trump of the left. "All of the things I hate about Trump I hate about Bernie, too," she said.

She had dedicated her career to fighting Trump's takeover of her party, but her plan rested on the premise that Democrats would offer a centrist alternative. She was willing to vote for Biden, but not Sanders. Longwell worried that she had built "a data machine to figure out how to swing voters, with no one to swing them to." After four years of setbacks, this looked increasingly like one final unwelcome turn. "It's like being shot or poisoned," she said.

But Longwell was not conceding defeat. A few days after the Senate trial ended, she launched an ambitious new get-out-the-primary-vote effort, which she called Center Action Now. Working with Tim Miller, the Never Trump activist from the failed Bush 2016 campaign, Longwell raised more than three million dollars and contacted her lists of Trump-dubious Republicans in states that allowed them to participate in Democratic primaries, among them Michigan, Texas, and Virginia. All told, Center Action Now logged eight hundred thousand phone calls and text messages as Longwell turned her new office into an impromptu call center and she and her staff activated the Never Trump network they had spent the past few years building.

In late February, Biden won a huge victory in the South Carolina primary, followed by a remarkable forty-eight hours in which he consolidated the Party's fragmented center behind him. Turnout surged in the Republican-leaning suburbs, and Biden, so recently written off as politically dead, won ten of fourteen states on Super Tuesday. Longwell and the Never Trumpers cheered Biden's resurrection—and their own.

Soon, the coronavirus pandemic and Trump's disastrously slow and dishonest initial response to it seemed to threaten his Presidency more than impeachment ever had. The inside game in Washington was still over and lost. The Republicans on Capitol Hill had made their choice to stick with Trump. But the election is another matter. Longwell does not need the entire Party to abandon the President, just her slice of it. At her most optimistic, she dreams of a "blowout defeat" to end Trumpism once and for all. But she would settle for persuading enough suburban Republican moms in places like Dillsburg, Pennsylvania, to vote against him this time. It might just be enough. In some Republican-leaning districts, turnout in the Democratic primaries was up a hundred per cent over 2016. "Hope renewed," Longwell wrote, when I e-mailed her after Biden's comeback on Super Tuesday. "We're back in the game." ♦

SHOUTS & MURMURS

GUIDELINES

BY JOHN KENNEY

Don't panic.

These are the two most important words to remember. There is no cause for alarm. The chances of you or someone you know contracting the virus remain extremely small. Though you probably will contract the virus at some point.

Wash your hands. These are the three most important words to remember. We know we just said that don't panic were the two most important words. But, if there were five words to remember, it would be those five.

While you are not panicking, take the time to wash your hands again. It's a simple thing we all do every day. And that doesn't have to change. Except for the number of times you do it. If you wash your hands, say, an average of five times a day, keep doing that. But add an additional thirty to forty times a day. It's that simple. There's no magic number. But close to fifty is a good place to be. And don't worry if you do it less than that. Though chances are good that if you do it less than that you will contract the most serious strain of the virus, which can result in death.

Again. What are the two to five words we must remember? Don't panic wash your hands. That's really all you need to know.

A lot. Let's add the words "a lot." Wash your hands more than you ever thought a person could wash his or her hands. Even if your hands start to bleed. Which they will. It is perfectly normal and not a cause for concern if the backs of your hands begin to get dry or crack or bleed profusely. That's fine. There's no law that says you can't walk around with bloody hands.

This isn't complicated. Some have made it sound complicated, but it's not. Except for the complication of us having no idea where the next breakout area will be. But you don't have to worry. It's a big country. Though it does look like the next major outbreak will be very close to where you are right now.

If you follow these seven simple words—don't panic wash your hands a lot never leave your home (let's add those four)—you will in all probability be fine, even though you will likely contract the virus but will have little memory of contracting it owing to your fever, loss of consciousness, and complete inability to use any part of your body.

How much should you not feel the need to panic? This much: you don't need a face mask. Think about that. Think about how safe you are if you can walk around without a face mask. And the reason is that a face mask does absolutely nothing but make you look silly. And by "walk around" we mean walk around your home, not outdoors, which without a mask would be akin to suicide.

But there's no need to panic. Yet. Low-level stress and anxiety are perfectly normal during a global crisis, which this is not. Stress is so normal that most Americans are feeling it right now. Which is a perfectly healthy response mechanism. And by "healthy" we mean incredibly dangerous, since stress is a leading cause of heart disease. The good news is that if you continue worrying you can avoid contracting the virus entirely by dying of a premature heart attack.

These few smallish changes to your daily life—hand washing, wearing latex gloves, not going out of doors, never touching another living being—don't have to be painful. Also, where possible, avoid surfaces of any kind, Trader Joe's products, and the earth's atmosphere, since all of those things might have been exposed to the virus.

Don't touch your face, which is now the most dangerous place in the world. If there are four words to use as a guide to remaining alive during this pandemic, it's these: don't touch your face. Add them to our list of other words. Don't panic wash your hands a lot never leave your home don't touch your face. Simple. If you do that, you will have, at best, a fifty-per-cent chance of living through the night. And that's great news.

Question: Is my mouth part of my face, and can I brush my teeth if I have washed my hands, donned surgical gloves, unwrapped a new toothbrush, and managed to rinse without touching my lips?

The answer is yes. If you have a death wish.

What if someone shakes my hand against my will?

Don't worry. That happens. It's important to go about your daily life and do the things you normally do. As long as those things involve not leaving your home. Ever. Somebody shook your hand, you say? You're fine. Wash your hands. But scratch the person first. Hard. On the neck. Then scream. You could say something like "You prick!" Or "What the fuck is wrong with you?!" Something like that. In fact, it might be good to add those words to the most important words you need to remember during this crisis. Then run and wash your hands and then wash them again and then pray to whichever god you pray to. But don't panic. These things happen.

When we said crisis just then, we certainly didn't mean a global emergency. We merely meant that the world, as you knew it, is over. But, again, there's no need for panic. If there are roughly nine words you should remember, it's these: This will all be over soon. Or possibly never. ♦

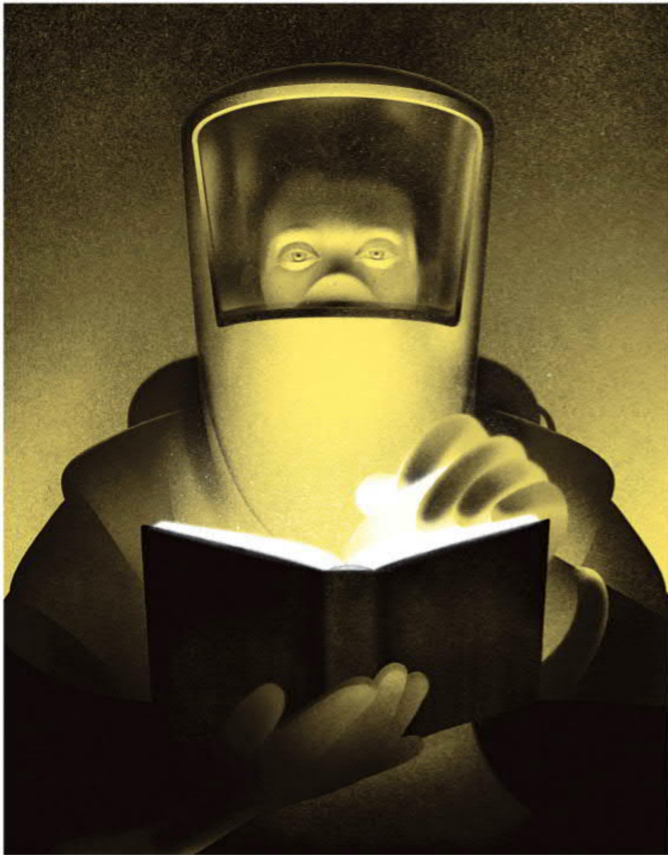
LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

ANNALS OF CULTURE

DON'T COME ANY CLOSER

What's at stake in our fables of contagion?

BY JILL LEPORE



When the plague came to London in 1665, Londoners lost their wits. They consulted astrologers, quacks, the Bible. They searched their bodies for signs, tokens of the disease: lumps, blisters, black spots. They begged for prophecies; they paid for predictions; they prayed; they yowled. They closed their eyes; they covered their ears. They wept in the street. They read alarming almanacs: "Certain it is, books frighted them terribly." The government, keen to contain the panic, attempted "to suppress the Printing of such Books as terrify'd the People," according to Daniel Defoe, in "A Journal of the Plague Year," a history that he wrote in tandem with an advice manual called "Due Preparations for the Plague," in 1722, a year when people feared that the disease might leap across the English Channel again, after having journeyed from the Middle East to Marseille and points north on a merchant ship. Defoe hoped that his books would be useful "both to us and to posterity, though we should be spared from that portion of this bitter cup." That bitter cup has come out of its cupboard.

In 1665, the skittish fled to the country, and alike the wise, and those who tarried had reason for remorse: by the time they decided to leave, "there was hardly a Horse to be bought or hired in the whole City," Defoe recounted, and, in the event, the gates had been shut, and all were trapped. Everyone behaved badly, though the rich behaved the worst: having failed to heed warnings to provision, they sent their poor servants out for supplies. "This Necessity of going out of our Houses to buy Provisions, was in a great Measure the Ruin of the whole City," Defoe wrote. One in five Londoners died, notwithstanding the precautions taken by merchants. The butcher refused to hand the cook a cut of meat; she had to take it off the hook herself. And he wouldn't touch her money; she had to drop her coins into a bucket of vinegar. Bear that in mind when you run out of Purell.

"Sorrow and sadness sat upon every Face," Defoe wrote. The government's stricture on the publication of terrifying books proved pointless, there being plenty of terror to be read on the streets. You could read the weekly bills of mortality, or count the bodies as they piled up in the lanes. You could read the orders published by the mayor: "If any Person shall have visited any Man known to be infected of the Plague, or entered willingly into any known infected House, being not allowed: The House wherein he inhabiteth shall be shut up." And you could read the signs on the doors of those infected houses, guarded by watchmen, each door marked by a foot-long red cross, above which was to be printed, in letters big enough to be read at a distance, "Lord, Have Mercy Upon Us."

Reading is an infection, a burrowing into the brain: books contaminate, metaphorically, and even microbiologically. In the eighteenth century, ships' captains arriving at port pledged that they had disinfected their ships by swearing on Bibles that had been dipped in seawater. During tuberculosis scares, public libraries fumigated books by sealing them in steel vats filled with formaldehyde gas. These days, you can find out how to disinfect books on a librarians' thread on Reddit. Your best bet appears to be either denatured-alcohol swipes or kitchen disinfectant in a mist-spray bottle, although if you stick books in a little oven and heat them to a hundred and sixty degrees Fahrenheit there's a bonus: you also kill bedbugs. ("Doesn't harm the books!") Or, as has happened during the coronavirus closures, libraries can shut their doors, and bookstores, too.

Stories of epidemics are stories of language made powerless and man made brute.

ILLUSTRATION BY KAROLIS STRAUTNIEKAS

But, of course, books are also a salve and a consolation. In the long centuries during which the plague ravaged Europe, the quarantined, if they were lucky enough to have books, read them. If not, and if they were well enough, they told stories. In Giovanni Boccaccio's Decameron, from the fourteenth century, seven women and three men take turns telling stories for ten days while hiding from the Black Death—that "last Pestilentiall mortality universally hurtfull to all that beheld it"—a plague so infamous that Boccaccio begged his readers not to put down his book as too hideous to hold: "I desire it may not be so dreadfull to you, to hinder your further proceeding in reading."

The literature of contagion is vile. A plague is like a lobotomy. It cuts away the higher realms, the loftiest capacities of humanity, and leaves only the animal. "Farewell to the giant powers of man," Mary Shelley wrote in "The Last Man," in 1826, after a disease has ravaged the world. "Farewell to the arts,—to eloquence." Every story of epidemic is a story of illiteracy, language made powerless, man made brute.

But, then, the existence of books, no matter how grim the tale, is itself a sign, evidence that humanity endures, in the very contagion of reading. Reading may be an infection, the mind of the writer seeping, unstoppable, into the mind of the reader. And yet it is also—in its bidden intimacy, an intimacy in all other ways banned in times of plague—an antidote, proven, unfailing, and exquisite.

Stories about plagues run the gamut from "Oedipus Rex" to "Angels in America." "You are the plague," a blind man tells Oedipus. "It's 1986 and there's a plague, friends younger than me are dead, and I'm only thirty," a Tony Kushner character says. There are plagues here and plagues there, from Thebes to New York, horrible and ghastly, but never one plague everywhere, until Mary Shelley decided to write a follow-up to "Frankenstein."

"The Last Man," which is set in the twenty-first century, is the first major novel to imagine the extinction of the human race by way of a global pandemic. Shelley published it at the age of twenty-nine, after nearly everyone she loved had died, leaving her, as she put it, "the last relic of a beloved race, my companions, extinct before me." The book's narrator begins as a poor and uneducated English shepherd: primitive man, violent and lawless, even monstrous. Cultivated by a nobleman and awakened to learning—"An earnest love of knowledge . . . caused me to pass days and nights in reading and study"—he is elevated by the Enlightenment and becomes a scholar, a defender of liberty, a republican, and a citizen of the world.

Then, in the year 2092, the plague arrives, ravaging first Constantinople. Year after year, the pestilence dies away every winter ("a general and never-failing physician"), and returns every spring, more virulent, more widespread. It reaches across mountains, it spreads over oceans. The sun rises, black: a sign of doom. "Through Asia, from the banks of the Nile to the shores of the Caspian, from the Hellespont even to the sea of Oman, a sudden panic was driven," Shelley wrote. "The men filled the mosques; the women, veiled, hastened to the tombs, and carried offerings to the dead, thus to preserve the living." The nature of the pestilence remains mysterious. "It was called an epidemic. But the grand question was still unsettled of how this epidemic was generated and increased." Not understanding its operation and full of false confidence, legislators hesitate to act. "England was still secure. France, Germany, Italy and Spain, were interposed, walls yet without a breach, between us and the plague." Then come reports of entire nations, destroyed and depopulated. "The vast cities of America, the fertile plains of Hindostan, the crowded abodes of the Chinese, are menaced with utter ruin." The fearful turn to history too late, and find in its pages, even in the pages of the Decameron, the wrong lesson: "We called to mind the plague of 1348, when it was calculated that a third of mankind had been destroyed. As yet western Europe was uninfected; would it always be so?" It would not always be so. Inevitably, the plague comes, at last, to England, but by then the healthy have nowhere left to go, because, in the final terror of pandemic, there is "no refuge on earth": "All the world has the plague!"

If, in "Frankenstein," Shelley imagined the creation of a man by the stitching together of body parts, in "The Last Man" she imagined the dismemberment of civilization. Death by death, country by country, the human race descends, rung by rung, down a ladder it had once built, and climbed. Shelley's narrator, the erstwhile shepherd, bears witness to the destruction and abandonment of all the "adornments of humanity" that had adorned his own naked self: law, religion, the arts, science, liberal government ("The nations are no longer!"), freedom, commerce, literature, music, theatre, industry, transportation, communication, agriculture. "Our minds, late spread abroad through countless spheres and endless combinations of thought, now retrenched themselves behind this wall of flesh, eager to preserve its well-being only." As the pestilence lays waste to the planet, those few who survive are reduced to warring tribes, until only one man, our narrator, is left, shepherd once more. Wandering amid the ruins of Rome, he enters the home of a writer and finds a manuscript on his writing table: "It contained a learned disquisition on the Italian language." The last book is a study of language, humanity's first adornment. And what does our narrator do, alone in the world? "I also will write a book, I cried—for whom to read?" He calls it "The History of the Last Man," and dedicates it to the dead. It will have no readers. Except, of course, the readers of Shelley's book.

The great dream of the Enlightenment was progress; the great dread of epidemic is regress. But in American literature such destruction often comes with a democratic twist: contagion is the last leveller. Edgar Allan Poe's 1842 tale "The Masque of the Red Death" is set in a medieval world plagued by a contagious disease that kills nearly instantly. "There were sharp pains, and sudden dizziness, and then profuse bleeding at the pores, with dissolution," Poe wrote. "The scarlet stains upon the body and especially upon the face of the victim, were the pest ban which shut him out from the aid and from the sympathy of his fellow-men." In particular, the rich have no sympathy for the poor. (Not irrelevantly, Poe's rich stepfather had entirely cut him off, leaving Poe penniless, and his wife was dying of consumption.) A haughty prince and his noblemen and women retire "to the

deep seclusion of one of his castellated abbeys," where they live in depraved luxury until, one night, at a masked ball, a figure arrives wearing a mask "made so nearly to resemble the countenance of a stiffened corpse that the closest scrutiny must have difficulty in detecting the cheat." The visitor is the Red Death itself. Everyone in the abbey dies that night. The nobility cannot escape what the poor must endure.

Poe's red death becomes a pandemic in Jack London's novel "The Scarlet Plague," serialized in 1912. (The disease is the very same: "The whole face and body turned scarlet in an hour's time.") The plague had come in the year 2013, and wiped out nearly everyone, the high and the low, the powerful nations and the powerless, in all corners of the globe, and left the survivors equal in their wretchedness, and statelessness. One of the handful of survivors had been a scholar at the University of California, Berkeley, a professor of English literature. When the disease hit, he hid out in the chemistry building, and turned out to be immune to the virulence. For years, he lived alone in an old hotel at Yosemite, availing himself of its stores of canned food, until, emerging, he joined a tiny band—the Chauffeurs, led by a brute who had once been a chauffeur—and even found a wife. When the novel opens, in the year 2073, the professor is a very old man, a shepherd, dressed in animal hide—"about his chest and shoulders hung a single, mangy garment of goat-skin"—and living like an animal. He tells the story of the scarlet plague to his grandsons, boys who "spoke in monosyllables and short jerky sentences that was more a gibberish than a language," but who are very handy with a bow and arrow. Their primitivism distresses the professor, who sighs, as he looks out across what was once San Francisco: "Where four million people disported themselves, the wild wolves roam to-day, and the savage progeny of our loins, with prehistoric weapons, defend themselves against the fanged despoilers. Think of it! And all because of the Scarlet Death."

London stole the red death from Poe and took the plot of "The Scarlet Plague" from "The Last Man"—except that London's argument, about the decline and fall of humankind, is far less subtle than Shelley's. "The human race is doomed to sink back farther and farther into the primitive night ere again it begins its bloody climb upward to civilization," the professor explains. For London, it's industrial capitalism and imperialism, not the Enlightenment's engine of moral progress, that drive the climb from savagery to civilization and from scarcity to abundance. London's descent of man is a descent into a very particular age-of-empire heart of darkness: the professor's grandsons have "brown skin." Before the plague came, capitalists and imperialists amassed staggering fortunes. "What is money?" the boys ask their grandfather, when he uses that word to describe a coin they find, minted in 2012. ("The old man's eyes glistened, as he held the coin.") All this—the white skin, the fortunes—was lost! The professor's greatest distress concerns the onetime chauffeur's having wed, by force, the former wife of a magnate: "There she was, Vesta Van Warden, the young wife of John Van Warden, clad in rags, with marred and scarred and toil-calloused hands, bending over the campfire and doing scullion work—she, Vesta, who had been born to the purple of the greatest baronage of wealth the world had ever known." Equally distressing, having conquered the continent, the white man has, in the end, lost the West, and the East, too. The professor attempts to describe to his savage grandsons the fall of American cities, whose fate he learned of in the earliest days of the pandemic, when news could still reach California from other parts of the country, before the last telegraph operators died:

> New York City and Chicago were in chaos. . . . A third of the New York police were dead. Their chief was also dead, likewise the mayor. All law and order had ceased. The bodies were lying in the streets un-buried. All railroads and vessels carrying food and such things into the great city had ceased running, and mobs of the hungry poor were pillaging the stores and warehouses. Murder and robbery and drunkenness were everywhere. Already the people had fled from the city by millions—at first the rich, in their private motor-cars and dirigibles, and then the great mass of the population, on foot, carrying the plague with them, themselves starving and pillaging the farmers and all the towns and villages on the way.

All the cities burned. Even the dirigibles of the rich exploded into flames, the world a Hindenburg.

"The Scarlet Plague," published right before the Great War, also contains a warning about the cost of world war, the cost, even, of living in a world. "Long and long and long ago, when there were only a few men in the world, there were few diseases," the professor explains. "But as men increased and lived closely together in great cities and civilizations, new diseases arose, new kinds of germs entered their bodies. Thus were countless millions and billions of human beings killed. And the more thickly men packed together, the more terrible were the new diseases that came to be." His grandsons cannot fathom any of this. "The census of 2010 gave eight billions for the whole world," he tells them. They can hardly believe him, and have no idea what a billion could be, or a census, or a world.

"Ten thousand years of culture and civilization passed in the twinkling of an eye," the professor says. He has made it his life's work to become a librarian, to archive those ten thousand years. In a cave on Telegraph Hill, he has stored all the books he could find, even though he is the only man living who knows how to read. "In them is great wisdom," he tells his grandsons, in the novel's final chapter, explaining that he has left, as well, a key to the alphabet. "Some day men will read again," he promises them. They have no idea what he is talking about. Still, the reader does.

The structure of the modern plague novel, all the way to Stephen King's "The Stand" and beyond, is a series of variations on "A Journal of the Plague Year" (a story set within the walls of a quarantine) and "The Last Man" (a story set among a ragged band of survivors). Within those two structures, though, the scope for storytelling is vast, and so is the scope for moralism, historical argument, and philosophical reflection. Every plague novel is a parable.

Albert Camus once defined the novel as the place where the human being is abandoned to other human beings. The plague novel is the place where all human beings abandon all other human beings. Unlike other species of apocalyptic fiction, where the enemy can be chemicals or volcanoes or earthquakes or alien invaders, the enemy here is other humans: the touch of other humans,

the breath of other humans, and, very often—in the competition for diminishing resources—the mere existence of other humans.

Camus, in his 1947 novel, "The Plague," sets the story within the walls of a quarantined French-Algerian town during the Second World War (the year is given as "194-"). With all its omens, prophecies, and scapegoats, it might as well have been London in 1665. Dr. Bernard Rieux, along with everyone else, at first fails to read the signs. (The novel purports to be written from Rieux's notebooks, his journal of a plague year.) He watches a rat stumble, at his doorstep:

> It moved uncertainly, and its fur was sopping wet. The animal stopped and seemed to be trying to get its balance, moved forward again toward the doctor, halted again, then spun round on itself with a little squeal and fell on its side. Its mouth was slightly open and blood was spurting from it. After gazing at it for a moment, the doctor went upstairs.

Rats come out from cellars and die on the streets, in heaps. And yet neither the doctor nor anyone else does anything at all, until after the first human death, of a concierge. Then remorse dawns: "Reviewing that first phase in the light of subsequent events, our townsfolk realized that they had never dreamed it possible that our little town should be chosen out for the scene of such grotesque happenings as the wholesale death of rats in broad daylight or the decease of concierges through exotic maladies."

Soon, we learn, "the whole town was running a temperature." The number of cases rises, and then it leaps. Eleven deaths in forty-eight hours, then more. The government health committee wishes to avoid using the word "plague," but unless it is used emergency measures cannot be put in place. Notices are posted, but only in obscure places, and in very small type, and, as the doctor observes, "it was hard to find in these notices any indication that the authorities were facing the situation squarely." Finally, in desperation, the government adopts a policy of "deratization" and, when thirty people die in a single day, closes the town.

The plague is, of course, the virus of Fascism. No one in the town gives much thought to the rats until it's too late—even though the plague "rules out any future, cancels journeys, silences the exchange of views"—and few pay sufficient attention to the rats even after it's too late. This is their folly: "They fancied themselves free, and no one will ever be free so long as there are pestilences."

"The Plague" does not chronicle a pandemic, in the sense that the plague never escapes the town, and yet Camus's plague is a plague without end. But Rieux learns, from reading history, that there really is only one plague, across all of human history, travelling from place to place, through the passage of time, from "Chinese towns cluttered up with victims silent in their agony" to "the damp, putrefying pallets stuck to the mud floor at the Constantinople lazar-house, where the patients were hauled up from their beds with hooks," to "cartloads of dead bodies rumbling through London's ghoul-haunted darkness—nights and days filled always, everywhere, with the eternal cry of human pain." Next on the list? Auschwitz, Dachau, Buchenwald. The plague is man.

Haunted by this knowledge, Rieux, locked in an unwanted asylum, suffers from an extremity of solitude and from the alienation and brutality of modernity:

> Sometimes at midnight, in the great silence of the sleep-bound town, the doctor turned on his radio before going to bed for the few hours' sleep he allowed himself. And from the ends of the earth, across thousands of miles of land and sea, kindly, well-meaning speakers tried to voice their fellow-feeling, and indeed did so, but at the same time proved the utter incapacity of every man truly to share in suffering that he cannot see.

For those in isolation, there is no world: "the plague had swallowed up everything and everyone." They are saved, at the last minute, by a serum, and the town erupts in joyful celebration. In the novel's closing words, the doctor thinks of his reading. "He knew what those jubilant crowds did not know but could have learned from books: that the plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good . . . and that perhaps the day would come when, for the bane and the enlightening of men, it would rouse up its rats again and send them forth to die in a happy city." Men will always become, again, rats.

Camus's observation about "the utter incapacity of every man truly to share in suffering that he cannot see" is the subject of José Saramago's brilliant and devastating reimagining of the plague tale, "Blindness," from 1995, in which the Defoe-like doctor is an ophthalmologist and the disease that reduces humans to animals is the inability to see. As historical parable, "Blindness" indicts the twentieth-century authoritarian state: the institutionalization of the vulnerable, the ruthlessness of military rulers. When the disease strikes, the government rounds up all the blind and locks them up in a mental asylum, where, blindly, they go to war with one another. They steal, they rape. "The blind are always at war, always have been at war," Saramago writes, in the novel's darkest observation.

But "Blindness" is far darker than any history lesson. For Saramago, blindness isn't a disease; blindness is the human condition. There is, in the novel, only one person left with sight. She reads to the blind, which, for them, is both a paradise and an exasperation: "This is all we are good for, listening to someone reading us the story of a human mankind that existed before us." And that, in the modern plague novel, is the final terror of every world-ending plague, the loss of knowledge, for which reading itself is the only cure. It is this realization that grips Saramago's ophthalmologist, at the very moment that he loses his sight, before the disease is known: the understanding of the preciousness, beauty, and fragility of knowledge. Puzzled by a patient who has come to his office after being stricken suddenly and inexplicably blind—he sees not black but only a milky whiteness—the eye doctor goes home and, after dinner, consults the books in his library. "Late that night, he laid aside the books he had been studying, rubbed his weary eyes and leaned back in his chair," Saramago writes. He decides to go, at last, to bed. "It happened a minute later as he was gathering up the books to return them to the bookshelf. First he perceived that he could no longer see his hands, then he knew he was blind."

Everything went white. As white as a blank page. ♦

LETTER FROM CHENGDU

LIFE ON LOCKDOWN

Forty-five days of avoiding the coronavirus in China.

BY PETER HESSLER

On the twenty-seventh day of the coronavirus lockdown in Chengdu, in southwestern China, five masked men appeared in the lobby of my apartment building in order to deliver a hundred-inch TCL Xclusive television. It was late morning, and I was taking my nine-year-old twin daughters, Ariel and Natasha, outside to get some air. The three of us also were wearing surgical masks, and we stopped to watch the deliverymen. I had never seen such an enormous TV; it arrived in an eight-foot-long box that weighed more than three hundred pounds. Two of the deliverymen stood inside an elevator with a tape measure, trying to figure out whether the box would fit. Otherwise, it was going to be a long haul up the stairs to the twenty-eighth floor.

By that point, the country was deep into the most ambitious quarantine in history, with at least seven hundred and sixty million people confined largely to their homes. The legal groundwork had been established on January 20th, when the National Health Commission designated the highest level of treatment and control to fight the new coronavirus, which eventually became known as COVID-19. After that, provinces and municipalities issued their own regulations, and the Chengdu government passed its first measures on January 24th. They were tightened seven days later, when it became clear that the epidemic had reached a point of crisis: during that week, the number of reported deaths in China had increased more than sixfold. By the end of January, there were a total of 11,791 confirmed cases, with two hundred and fifty-nine deaths.

My family rents an apartment in a nine-building complex not far from the center of Chengdu, where I teach writing at a local university. We chose the place, last September, primarily for its location: the apartment blocks are situated beside a pleasant, tree-lined stretch of the Fu River, and there's a subway stop outside one of the side gates. But, after the quarantine began, the subway was deserted and both side entrances were chained shut. Anybody who arrived at the main gate was greeted by an infrared temperature gun to the forehead. The gun was wielded by a government-assigned volunteer in a white hazmat suit, and, behind him, a turnstile led to a thick plastic mat soaked with a bleach solution. A sign read "Shoe Sole Disinfecting Area," and there was always a trail of wet prints leading away from the mat, like a footbath at a public swimming pool.

Compared with other places, our compound's restrictions were relatively light. We could leave and return as often as we pleased, provided that we carried passes that had been issued by the neighborhood committee, the most local level of the Communist Party. The majority of my friends in other parts of China were restricted to one individual per household going out every two days, and often that person had to tell the authorities where she was headed. Even at our complex, which has few foreign residents, it was rare for people to go outside. All restaurants, government offices, and most shops had been closed, and, after the Lunar New Year holiday ended, in February, all schools would be suspended indefinitely. One of the new Chengdu measures even banned "every sort of group dinner party."

Most of my neighbors ordered things on Taobao, one of the world's biggest e-commerce sites, and they got their food delivered from Fresh Hema, a nationwide grocery chain that has a branch nearby. (Both Taobao and Hema are owned by the Alibaba Group, a Chinese technology company.) All day, motorcycle deliverymen handed off items to the security guards, who trundled through the compound's grounds with

Masks were required, and they made it easier

for people to ignore one another. The costumes of the quarantine, along with other restrictions, turned people inward.

ILLUSTRATION BY ANUJ SHRESTHA

dollies and shopping carts, dropping off boxes and bags. In my lobby, the most packages I counted at any time was a hundred and twenty-five, all of them marked with apartment numbers in black ink. Sometimes it was possible to see what was inside. On the morning that the Xclusive TV was delivered, the contents of other packages reinforced the impression that people had settled in for the long haul: two electric power strips for Apartment 1101, three bottles of Omo laundry detergent for 3003, a huge box of fresh ginger for 3704.

I tried to strike up a conversation with one of the TV deliverymen. He was standing near the elevator door, and he wore his surgical mask in the position that I call "the holster." This is when a man keeps the straps around his ears but pulls the mask down beneath his chin, usually so that he can spit or smoke a cigarette. Another Chengdu measure demanded that citizens stop spitting, but I still occasionally saw people holstering their masks and hawking loogies. I asked the deliveryman what he would do if the TV wouldn't fit inside the elevator.

"It'll fit," he said. "No problem."

He pulled the mask back over his face. People were much warier of strangers than usual, and sometimes if I got in the elevator with another resident he turned his back to me. Most people were aware that our compound was, at least by local standards, a hot spot. On the various apps that mapped the government-issued statistics for coronavirus cases, our compound lit up bright red. There had been a positive test for a resident somewhere in the complex—the only one in our neighborhood.

The deliverymen weren't making fast progress with the TV, and Ariel and Natasha were eager to leave, so we went out the gate. Next to the river, a long row of ride-share bikes had hardly been touched for weeks, and I used my phone to unlock one. The twins liked the challenge of riding the adult-size bikes—they took turns wobbling along the empty riverside path. After that, we visited the zombie subway station. It was still operating, but the place was silent except for a public-service message, played on an endless loop, that warned nonexistent passengers to watch their step. Ariel and Natasha ran up and down all the escalators in the wrong direction, laughing. This was our usual morning routine during the lockdown. They hadn't seen another child their age for nearly a month.

After we returned to the compound, and had the infrared gun pointed at our foreheads, and crossed the bleach footbath, the deliverymen were returning with the empty box on a dolly. The man wearing the holster explained that once they'd removed the top half of the box and stood the TV on its end they'd been able to fit it in the elevator. He still didn't seem very eager to talk.

Last September, my wife, Leslie, and I enrolled the girls in the third grade at a local public school, in part so they would learn Chinese. Like the other students, they also took English, and Unit 2 in their textbook was titled "My Body." All anatomical vocabulary was taught in the context of injuries, illnesses, or mishaps. There were cartoons of children lying in hospital beds, with labels that identified the patient, the age, and the symptom: "Bill—8 years old—foot hurts"; "Ben—10 years old—leg hurts"; "Lily—9 years old—ear hurts." One lesson read:

> In the morning, I play with Lucky. He bites my hand! It really hurts.
> At lunchtime, I bite my tongue. It really hurts.
> In the afternoon, I play football with Andy. He kicks my leg. It really hurts.
> This is a very bad day!

For weeks, Ariel and Natasha returned home imitating the class's taped dialogues, which invariably ended with the phrase "I'm going to the hospital!" It seemed to confirm an unscientific impression that I've long held of the Chinese view of health: namely, that people are even more fearful about children's safety here than they are in other places I've lived. My daughters often complained that at recess the simple jungle-gym equipment at their school was strictly limited to sixth graders, because teachers believed that younger children would injure themselves.

After the epidemic began, though, I saw that recurring phrase—"I'm going to the hospital!"—in a new light. The textbook was accurate: if somebody's ear hurts, often her only option is to go straight to the hospital. In China, there's no comprehensive primary-care system, which is one reason that the coronavirus spiralled out of control so quickly in Wuhan, the capital of Hubei Province, where the epidemic started. Some of the most awful images from the early days were videos of mob scenes at hospitals, where terrified citizens, many of them sick, clamored to be tested and treated. Contact in these crowds undoubtedly accelerated the rate of infection.

A number of the earliest cases occurred in people who worked at the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market, which sold live fish and animals. Epidemiologists told me that they still don't know the nature of the spillover event—the moment when the disease leaped from animals to humans. Scientists believe that the virus began in bats and likely passed through an intermediate host; some speculate that this may have been pangolins, scaly anteaters that are sometimes consumed as a delicacy in China.

By December, the disease had started to spread among people. Some early victims included medical staff who, unaware that they were dealing with a new strain of virus, lacked appropriate protective gear. In Wuhan, a small number of doctors tried to report what they were seeing, but officials suppressed their comments. Li Wenliang, an ophthalmologist, warned his colleagues via WeChat. Li was subsequently summoned by the police, who forced him to sign a confession saying that he had "seriously disturbed the social order." Li became seen as a martyr after his death from the disease was announced, on February 7th, and local officials eventually issued an apology to his family.

The coverup gave the virus more time to spread unabated. But, in early January, once Chinese health officials grasped the seriousness of the situation, they moved quickly. "Within three days, they had scientists who were able to sequence and characterize the structure of the virus, which is unheard of," Wafaa El-Sadr, the director of ICAP, a global-health center at Columbia University, told me. She said that recent advances

in technology made the sequencing possible, a crucial step that allowed scientists to develop ways to diagnose the disease and to start to identify methods of treatment.

But for Wuhan it was already too late, because the first wave of infections overburdened hospitals. With many health-care workers falling sick, and with an urgent need for more support, reinforcements were sent from other parts of China. During the quarantine, I sometimes talked on the phone with an I.C.U. physician from Huaxi, a Chengdu hospital that is recognized as the best facility in southwestern China. After volunteering to go to Wuhan, seven hundred miles east of Chengdu, the I.C.U. physician was assigned to the Red Cross hospital, which is less than a mile from the seafood market where the virus first took hold.

"It was like the epicenter," he told me, during one of our conversations. "There are a little more than four hundred beds, but they were getting two thousand patients a day. They were adding beds, and some sick people just found places to lie down."

Like other people in Wuhan with whom I communicated, the doctor asked me not to use his name. Since the initial coverup, the Chinese government has seemed determined to report numbers openly, but it still attempts to control the human narrative. "Keep yourself politically disciplined," an internal notice from Xiangya Hospital, an institution in Hunan Province, informed staff who had gone to Wuhan. "Do not talk to outsiders in private."

The I.C.U. physician was one of about two hundred Huaxi staff who had been sent to Wuhan, and when I talked to him on February 22nd he said that none of his colleagues had been infected. He seemed confident that they would stay healthy, and he attributed the high death rate in Wuhan to the time it took to recognize a new disease. The difference from the rest of China was striking: on February 29th, when the government issued an analysis of more than fifty-five thousand confirmed cases, 5.8 per cent in Wuhan had resulted in death, compared with 0.7 per cent in other parts of China. The latter number seemed likely to decline significantly over time—in part because treatment was improving, but also because the early testing didn't include many people who were mildly sick or asymptomatic. (The percentage of infections that are asymptomatic is one of the major unanswered questions about the virus.)

The reaction of medical staff in Wuhan was sometimes angry. I frequently exchanged messages with a Wuhan hospital pharmacist whom I'll call Zhang, who had seen a dozen colleagues fall sick. One remained in critical care. "We didn't have enough protective devices and we weren't cautious enough," he wrote. When I asked about the root cause of the epidemic, he was blunt:

> My personal opinion is that the government has always been careless and they suppressed dissent. Those are two of the direct causes. Because of this, they lost the golden opportunity to control the virus. . . . I don't believe the state-run media or read their reports. On the contrary, I pay more attention to what my friends say. You asked about my first reaction? In fact, even now I am not very frightened by this disease. I just take necessary precautions. But I'm worried sick that if I get it I might infect my family.

Zhang was still working long hours, and he had a wife and an eleven-year-old daughter at home. He had considered checking into a hotel to isolate himself from family, but the few places that remained open required special approval; the city had been shut down more completely than anyplace else in China. Fearing a run on necessary goods, the government had stepped in. Like Chengdu, Wuhan is the capital of a populous inland province, but now the two cities seemed to belong to different worlds, different eras. A few days after the hundred-inch TV passed through my lobby, Zhang described how Wuhan's neighborhood committees had taken charge of all purchasing and delivery arrangements:

> Our basic needs are met (at least food and clothing are enough). It feels like the era of planned economy when I was little. . . . There are barely any cigarettes, alcohol, tea, snacks, drinks, or pet food available. Maybe things will get better later, who knows?

On the thirty-ninth day of the lockdown, the packages in my lobby included a box of houseplants for 3703 and some flowers for 2903. It was now March, and sometimes I saw people on their balconies, tending plants. But it still seemed rare for residents to leave

"Set oven to five hundred degrees. While preheating, get stepladder and turn off smoke alarm. Then season brisket, chop herb medley, and turn off smoke alarm again. Resume chopping herb medley, peel potatoes, slip off stepladder while angrily trying to remove the battery from the smoke alarm . . ."

I WON'T LIVE LONG

enough to see any of the new
dreams the hundreds of new kinds of suffering and weeds birds animals shouldering their
demise without possibility of re-
generation the heart in your tiny chest opening its new unimaginable ways of
opening and to what might it still
open. Will there still be
such opening. Will you dare. I will not be there
to surround you w/the past w/my ways of
knowing—to save
you—shall you be saved—from what—
home from fighting are you, remembering how he or she or they looked at you
while you both fed the machine or built the trough in dirt
where it will be necessary to
plant again—will it open—will the earth open—will the seeds that remain—will you know to
find them in
time—will those who have their lock on you
let the openings which are
chance unknowing loneliness the unrelenting arms of
form, which knows not yet the form
it will in the end
be, open and
form? Will there be islands. Will there be a day where you can afford to think back far
enough to the way we loved you. Words you said
for the first time
as we said them. *Mystery* your grandfather said one day, after saying *shhh* listen to the
birds & you sat so still,
all your being arcing out to hear,
and the bird in its hiding place gave us this future, this moment today when you can recall—
can you—his saying, *there,*
that's a mystery.
And you said the word as if it were new ground to stand on,
you uttered it to stand on it—
mystery. *Yes, mystery* he said. Yes mystery you said
talking to it now as it
took its step out of the shadow into the clearing and there you
saw it in the so-called in-
visible. Then when the wave broke the first time on what had seemed

the compound. When women went downstairs to pick up packages, it wasn't unusual for them to be dressed in pajamas, even in the afternoon. In the lobby, management provided a spray bottle of seventy-five-per-cent-alcohol solution, and sometimes I saw a masked, pajama-clad resident standing in a puddle of the stuff, spraying her hands, packages, shopping bags, whatever.

People rarely spoke in these situations. There were no greetings, no jokes, no moments of commiseration. Part of it was the masks, which were an obsession. On my floor, residents wore them even if they were merely dropping off garbage, ten feet from their door. Mask-wearing, after all, was required by the new measures, and people were diligent: I often saw motorcycle deliverymen helmetless and fiddling with their phones at thirty miles an hour, their masks safely in place. When I went running along the river at dawn, the few other people who were out sometimes shouted at me for being bare-faced. Ariel and Natasha despised the things, and I gave them permission to go with the low-rider—this is when you pretend that you are obeying the rules but actually tug the mask down so that your nostrils are uncovered.

Health-care professionals told me that masks have no value in uncrowded outdoor settings, where infection isn't a risk, and most people wore them improperly even when they weren't holstering or low-riding. The notion of these things playing a talismanic role isn't new. In "The Plague," published in 1947, Albert Camus described two characters in a hospital:

terra firma and you knew as he held your hand
insisting you hold your ground
that there was foreclosure,
there was oldness of a kind you couldn't fathom, and there was the terrifying
suddenness of the
now. Your mind felt for it. It felt the reach from an elsewhere and a dip which cannot hold.
Splash went the wave.
Your feet stood fast.
Your hem was touched.
We saw you watch.
We felt your hand grip
but not to move back.
Can you find that now now, wherever you are, even a candle would be a gift I know
from there. *Shhh* he said so you could hear it. *Pity* he said
not knowing to whom.
Pity you said, laughing, *pity pity*, and that was the day of
your being carried out
in spite of your cold, wrapped tight, to see the evening star. And he pointed. And you
looked up. And you took a breath I hear even now as I go
out—the inhalation of dark secrecy fear distance the reach into an almost-touching
of silence, of the thing that has no neighbors and never will, in you,
the center of which is noise,
the outermost a freezing you can travel his arm to with your gaze
till it's there. The real. A star. The earth is your
home. No matter what they tell you now and what program you input via your chip or port
or faster yet, no, no, in that now I am not there
in, to point, to take your now large hand and say
look, look through these fronds,
hold your breath,
the deer hiding from the hunter is right here in our field,
it knows we are too,
it does not fear us.
Be still. Wait. And we, we
will be left behind.
Except just now. If you still once.
That you might remember.
Now. Remember now.

—*Jorie Graham*

He opened one and took two gauze masks out of a sterilizer, offered one to Rambert and asked him to put it on. The journalist asked if it served any purpose and Tarrou said no, but that it inspired confidence in others.

Masks also make it easier for people to ignore one another. If residents passed me in the courtyard, they avoided eye contact; some wore see-through plastic gloves and surgical booties in addition to the masks. These costumes of the quarantine, along with all the other restrictions, helped turn citizens inward, and people directed their energy toward whatever space was left to them. Among the packages in my lobby, I noticed many home furnishings and cleaning implements: a Pincai-brand storage cabinet for 602, a Deema vacuum cleaner for 2304, a giant carpet, wrapped in tape and plastic, for 303. There was home-office equipment (wireless mouse, 4201; file cabinets, 301). By the forty-fourth day, somebody in 3704 had felt the need to buy an electric footbath machine from Kosaka. ("Powerful by Dreams.")

From what I could tell, the lockdown diet of my neighbors was remarkably healthy. If quarantined Americans were forced to survive on delivery food, health officials would want to track the X curve of body-mass index rising across the drop in coronavirus cases. In Chengdu, though, my neighbors were obviously cooking: lots of fresh vegetables and fruit. I never saw evidence of alcohol going anywhere other than 1901: my apartment. The government had strategically allowed cigarette and alcohol shops to remain open—these were among the very few places of business that never shut down. But, when I talked to store owners in my neighborhood,

“I think my dad is losing his memory—he keeps forgetting to say he’s proud of me.”

they said that sales were terrible. There are many types of loneliness in this world, but it’s a unique sensation to feel that you are the only individual in a forty-three-story building who is drinking his way through a quarantine.

I seldom saw children. I knew they were up there: a Mini Table Football game to 2703, a Huanqi toybox to 1804. The compound printed out documents on request, and sometimes the lobby contained homework assignments for kids who were attending school online: for 2102, a chapter on chemistry; for 3802, a handout on poems from the Northern and Southern dynasties. But, in the early weeks of the lockdown, children didn’t even venture into the courtyard, because parents were so frightened of the disease. I had no idea what they were doing for exercise. Even with our trips to the bikes and the subway station, I usually put my daughters on our treadmill every three days or so. In Wuhan, Zhang the pharmacist was also doing the best he could:

> People who spend a lot of time in a confined space tend to become lazy and depressed. It’s not easy to motivate them. I’m now teaching my daughter to practice Ping-Pong against the living-room wall. My childhood school didn’t have so many Ping-Pong tables. We used to do that a lot. Now she is quite skilled at it. Other times, I encourage her to stand up and play the guitar, moving to the beat, like a real band guitarist.

It was widely acknowledged that China’s measures had been remarkably effective at halting the advance of the disease. In mid-February, the World Health Organization sent twenty-five Chinese and international experts to visit medical facilities around the country, including in Wuhan and Chengdu. In a subsequent report, the W.H.O. announced, “In the face of a previously unknown virus, China has rolled out perhaps the most ambitious, agile, and aggressive disease containment effort in history.” One member of the delegation, Dale Fisher, a professor of medicine who specializes in infectious disease at the National University of Singapore, told me that China’s actions prevented hundreds of thousands of cases and thousands of deaths. “I can look at the epidemic curve,” he said, citing the government-issued statistics. “I can look at the trajectory it had and the trajectory that appeared after January 23rd, and there’s no doubt.”

But other scientists wondered about the sustainability of the effort. Wafaa El-Sadr, the epidemiologist at Columbia, told me that drastic measures had been necessary in Wuhan, because the health-care system had been so overburdened. But she wasn’t certain that the same approach made sense in a place like Chengdu, which had a population of sixteen million and had seen a hundred and forty-three cases and three deaths by the beginning of March. “You don’t need to have a complete shutdown of a city like Chengdu,” she said. “What you need is very focussed intervention. Identify cases early, and manage them and their contacts appropriately.”

Jennifer Nuzzo, an epidemiologist at the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security, believed that China’s quarantine would inevitably be a temporary solution. “As soon as schools open, and as soon as people get back to work, and as soon as people start circulating in the world—China is a global country—the virus will be back,” she told me. “I don’t fully understand what the endgame is in terms of these measures.”

Marc Lipsitch, an epidemiologist who directs the Center for Communicable Disease Dynamics, at Harvard University, was more positive about China’s strategy. But he noted that the next step was difficult—he compared it to letting the air out of a balloon slowly. “I think it will bounce back,” he said, of the virus. “But you will have delayed things, and, if you don’t let it bounce back too much before you put the clamps on again, then you may spare the hospitals from getting overwhelmed. But it’s a really painful process,

and people are going to get tired of it."

In the meantime, there were no announcements of how long schools would be closed, or when the lockdown might be lifted. Many measures seemed likely to continue indefinitely. Every day before noon, like many workers across the country, I was required to take my temperature and submit it in a standardized form to my employer. The form also required me to testify that I'd had no personal contact with people from Wuhan or elsewhere in Hubei in the past fourteen days.

That part was easy, because it was rare to have an old-fashioned mask-to-mask conversation with anybody. Apart from home life, my interactions were mostly by e-mail, phone, or WeChat, and often the subject of these exchanges was the isolation itself. A former student of mine wrote, after her husband returned to his factory job, "When it's time to work, he needs to wear a gas mask that covers the whole head." She described the scene during lunch break:

> [He] takes a seat alone at a table, which is set far apart from another one. And he has to face the same way as other workers. No talking. People say on Internet that the way they eat reminds them of the way they took the College Entrance Examination.

I taught all my writing classes online. I had met only one of the students before, and I never saw any of their faces. We interacted over audio and text. I tried to have discussions, but it was time-consuming to switch back and forth between different microphones; the classes were too large to have everybody on at once. Last semester, the students had lived in dormitories in Chengdu, but now they were scattered across the country, in their home towns. The most distant was in Jilin, not far from Siberia. Of my sixty-plus students, nobody personally knew someone who had contracted the virus. A number of them told me that they had not set foot outside their apartments for more than a month.

Quite a few had learned to cook. One boy happily reported that, because his home had a treadmill and some dumbbells, he had lost twenty pounds. Another described a day when he and his father, after a month of being restricted to their building, took turns cutting each other's hair. Some had been reading books or watching movies and shows that made them think about fear or claustrophobia: "Chernobyl," "Parasite," and another South Korean movie, called "Flu."

For the first week of class, I assigned John Cheever's "The Enormous Radio." In the story, a couple acquire a radio that allows them to listen to the conversations in other apartments in their building. After reading it, my students mentioned things that they had noticed around their homes: how people cringed if you happened to cough in the elevator, or how, when there was a report that a family was under observation for the virus, they were shunned by neighbors. There were also moments of brightness: one student described how the rooftop of his apartment block had become a communal space for people to relax and socialize, because they were restricted from leaving the building. Some students reported that the experience of the past month had brought them closer to their parents. Any complaints tended to be leavened with humor. One student began a paper:

> This is a really special time. Almost all the people in China have to lock themselves at home, just because of a tiny coronavirus. People hate this coronavirus, hate bats carrying this coronavirus, and hate other people who eat these bats.

At the entrance to my compound, the Communist Party's neighborhood committee erected a series of information boards. They displayed the new epidemic measures, along with an organizational chart for an entity called the Communist Party Service Team for Home Quarantine. Head shots and cell-phone numbers of seven officials were included.

I had never lived anywhere in China where such information was posted in public.

One afternoon, I dialled the number at the top of the chart. The quarantine-team leader picked up immediately, and, after I introduced myself, she promised to arrange an interview; within an hour, I received a call from the neighborhood committee's Party secretary. He told me to stop by his office the following morning, which was a Saturday.

Our conversation was masked on both sides. He was middle-aged, a serious man in a blue blazer with a safety-pinned armband that said "Party Member Service Team." He had grown up in the neighborhood, where his father had also worked for the government. The old man had come out of retirement to don a hazmat suit during the epidemic—he was one of the volunteers who checked temperatures in front of apartment buildings.

The office contained a narrow vinyl-covered couch, and the Party secretary told me that he had slept there for the first two weeks of the quarantine, when he was working from 8 A.M. to midnight every day. His home was in a distant northern suburb, and he couldn't afford the time to commute. In Chengdu, there are 1,685 neighborhood committees, and each had prepared a quarantine team like the one near my home. Most details of our local lockdown—the information boards, the hazmat thermometer workers—had been managed by the team, which consisted of thirty-eight people, mostly volunteers. In a jurisdiction of nearly six thousand residents, there had been exactly one case of coronavirus: the person in my compound.

The Party secretary explained that the resident had travelled to his home town, in Hubei, during the Lunar New Year holiday. In the early days of the epidemic, the government tracked such links so intensively that locals became terrified by the sight of a car with Hubei plates. Many Chengdu hotels turned away guests from Wuhan, so the government finally designated twelve lodgings to accept them. A friend of mine in another part of the city passed along a WeChat conversation that had occurred among people in her compound:

> Resident 1: Yesterday somebody said there was a car with Hubei plates at the underground car park of Building 2.
> Property Management: O.K., I will send somebody immediately to check it out.
> Resident 2: What the fuck? This is not funny!
> Resident 1: Please have the door guard pay attention . . .
> Resident 2: I think that now we should show our I.D. card to go in and out!!!
> Resident 3: Quickly, call 110 [police] or 120 [emergency ambulance].

In my neighborhood, the Party team

organized periodic door-to-door surveys, which was how they learned of the resident's Hubei trip. Thus far, people had come to my apartment three times, and they always asked about Hubei and Wuhan. Their policy was to call the community's Health Service Center if anybody had visited those places.

"They came and checked his temperature—it was 37.1," the Party secretary told me, using the Celsius figure. (The temperature was normal.) "He didn't feel sick, but the health officials tested him for the coronavirus, and it was positive." Later, the man showed mild symptoms, which meant that the team had caught him at a critical time: he'd appeared normal but may have been contagious. He spent ten days under observation in the hospital, and then he was quarantined at home for fourteen days.

I asked the Party secretary when we would be allowed to enter our compound without the passes, and he said, "I think it will be two fourteen-day periods." He seemed to think in this unit of time, which is the standard span of a stringent quarantine. He estimated that my daughters' school wouldn't resume until mid- or late April—three more fourteen-day units. When I asked if there had been much resistance to the new policies, he shook his head. "Ninety per cent of the population agrees," he said. "We have some people who think it's not convenient, and they want to go out and play mah-jongg or something. But most people follow the rules."

From what I had seen, he wasn't exaggerating. The overwhelming compliance was one of the most impressive features of the lockdown, along with the dedication of grassroots officials. In Wuhan, the government had sent eighteen hundred teams of epidemiologists, each consisting of at least five people, to trace the contacts of infected citizens. The W.H.O. report noted that the containment effort had been possible because of "the deep commitment of the Chinese people to collective action." At the individual level, though, people occasionally expressed reservations. During one of my exchanges with Zhang, the pharmacist in Wuhan, I mentioned that most people I knew were supportive. He wrote back:

> Everyone grumbles a lot, but everyone obeys the rules strictly. It's very contradictory, but it's China. Our cultural traditions dictate our thinking. We will use the word "victory" to describe the final end of the epidemic, although I personally don't like that description.

It was common for Chinese leaders to speak in such terms—President Xi Jinping had declared that the country would "defeat the virus." Eventually, President Trump's Twitter feed would adopt a similar tone. ("WE WILL WIN!") I asked Zhang to explain what he meant.

> There is a bad tendency in China right now for the state propaganda department to turn what should be remembered as a sad incident into a comforting one. They are accustomed to using the word "victory" toward everything, the so-called man can conquer nature. I don't think there is joy in such an incident. So many people died, and their families won't think this is a victory whatsoever.

During the lockdown, the Ministry of Education estimated that more than two hundred and twenty million children and adolescents had been confined to their homes. At our daughters' school, for the first three weeks of the semester there were no online classes for the younger grades, although they were given some materials, including a school project titled "The Coronavirus and Everybody's Battle Against the Epidemic." Then the school started holding short lessons online, but Leslie and I thought that children of that age shouldn't be engaged in remote learning.

We organized things as best we could, using the school's assignments and finding other projects. Ariel and Natasha usually worked well in the morning, and then, around ten or eleven o'clock, when we started to hear sounds of roughhousing, I took them out for our morning walk. In the afternoon, we sent them to play in the compound courtyard, where it was common for passersby to lecture them about the dangers of being outdoors or of wearing their masks improperly. The latter criticism probably should have been directed at me, because I had made the mistake of telling the twins about the flapjack, in which you allow the mask to dangle from one ear in order to answer a cell phone on the other side.

In a four-room apartment, with one adult writing a book and another teaching full time, none of this seemed sustainable, but we had made the decision to stay. The girls' foreign friends had all been evacuated at the beginning of the quarantine, and the families of their Chinese classmates weren't meeting with anybody. All over the city, children remained isolated.

I suspected that this was particularly hard on middle- and high-school students. Young people in general suffer significant stress in China, where suicide is the leading cause of death among those aged between fifteen and thirty-five. In the nineteen-nineties, I was an instructor at a teachers' college in Fuling, a small city less than three hundred miles east of Chengdu, and most of my students now teach in middle and high schools. They often live in third- and fourth-tier cities, where the shift to remote education seemed problematic. "As for the classes online, it couldn't be much worse," a high-school teacher wrote me. "The students can't control themselves." He said that all his students followed lessons on mobile phones, which seems common in smaller cities, where families often don't believe that a spare laptop or tablet is necessary. And it requires significant discipline to focus on online lessons. My current students seemed to handle the adjustment well, but they are at one of China's better universities, and all of them have computers.

As March progressed, certain aspects of the lockdown eased, and many people began to return to work. It was similar to the idea that Marc Lipsitch had described: letting the air out of the balloon slowly. But schools weren't part of this process, which meant that many children remained at home alone after their parents went to work. Willy, a former student who now teaches in Zhejiang Province, estimated that eighty per cent of his ninth-grade pupils were unaccompanied during the day.

Parents often called him to complain. "People say their kids are *shenshou*," he said, using a word that means, roughly, "mystical beasts." "They say, 'We want the mystical beast to go back to the cage.' The cages are the school." He described the family situation of one of his colleagues: "His son had been good, and he was hardworking. But in

COMICS & STORIES

SELF-ISOLATING

PANDEMIC **SPECIAL!**

ARMAGEDDON, 2020 A.D.

HOLY **COW**... THE WHOLE **WORLD** HAS ESSENTIALLY SHUT **DOWN**!

THIS IS **GREAT!** **FINALLY**, MY LIFE STYLE HAS BEEN **VINDICATED!**

THIRTY YEARS OF AVOIDING OTHER HUMAN BEINGS... **VALIDATED!** THE CARTOONISTS HAVE WON!

BUT PEOPLE ARE CONFUSED AND UNDERSTANDABLY SCARED, SO AS A **PUBLIC SERVICE** I OFFER THE FOLLOWING HANDY HINTS TO THOSE TOO ATTRACTIVE OR OTHERWISE SOCIALIZED TO HAVE CULTIVATED AN "INNER PLAN" OF THEIR OWN...

WORKING FROM HOME AND NEVER SEEING OTHERS* CAN BE BOLSTERING AND BRACING IF YOU FOLLOW THESE FEW SIMPLE RULES:

*SPOUSES, CHILDREN & POSTMAN excepted.

DO: "WORK" FOR SHORT PERIODS AT A TIME (LIKE, 30 SECONDS OR LESS)

THEN, CHECK YOUR PHONE!

SOMETHING MAY HAVE **HAPPENED** IN THE WORLD!

DON'T: KEEP SNACKS IN THE HOUSE; YOU **WILL** EAT THEM!

CRNCH CRNCH

mgmh

KA-

REMEMBER, IT'S **FUN** TO RECOIL FROM MEMBERS OF YOUR OWN SPECIES AND SPEND YOUR TIME IMAGINING WHAT IT'D BE LIKE INTERACTING WITH THEM INSTEAD!

JUST USE PLENTY OF **HAND SANITIZER!**

OH BOY! THE MAIL'S HERE!

DON'T: LOOK AT YOUR OLD SCHOOL YEARBOOKS (THEY WON'T HELP)

sob cry

DO: BEND ALL OF REALITY TO SUIT YOUR OWN PERSONAL SOLIPSISTIC NARRATIVE

THE CORONAVIRUS IS REALLY ABOUT **ME!**

CHAS. M. SCHULZ

HATED PUBLIC FUNCTIONS AND HOTELS, PREFERRING TO SLEEP IN HIS OWN BED INSTEAD!

sigh

R. CRUMB

MOVED TO **RURAL FRANCE** OVER 25 YEARS AGO!

SMART GUY!

MAIS OUI!

APOLOGIES TO THOSE ATHLETES DONATING TO ARENA STAFF AND EMPLOYEES: YOU GIVE ME HOPE FOR HUMANITY, UNLIKE OUR PRESIDENT.

PLUS

SPORTS HAVE BEEN CANCELLED! LIKE, **EVERYWHERE!**

HAVE I DIED AND GONE TO **HEAVEN?**

HEAVEN

SOUNDS **AWFUL!**

WHO **ARE** ALL THESE PEOPLE?!

WRITERS AND ARTISTS

ARE ALSO PRETTY GOOD AT THIS, BUT THEY LIKE COCKTAIL PARTIES AND "OPENINGS" TOO MUCH TO QUALIFY AS TRUE AUTHORITIES

PERFECTLY NICE FOLKS

GOOD CITIZENS

sob WHAT A BUNCH OF **ASSHOLES!**

THE **END!**

the past forty or fifty days he has been doing online courses, and he spends so much time online. His father said he's very likely to lose his temper. He goes crazy. He shouts. It's because of using the mobile phone too much." Willy's own two children also had classes on phones, and he had noticed a rapid deterioration in his teen-age daughter's behavior. "We don't know exactly when she is having class and when she is using the mobile phone to chat or play games," he said. "She is right now out of control."

One of the most striking characteristics of the new coronavirus is the vastly different susceptibilities of different age groups. Over all, more than eighty per cent of known cases show only mild to moderate symptoms; older people are much more likely to develop serious cases, especially if they suffer from other health problems. According to the W.H.O., by February 20th, children under the age of nineteen represented only 2.4 per cent of the reported cases in China. Of the few children who get sick, the cases tend to be mild. Last week, *Pediatrics* released a study showing that, in a set of seven hundred and thirty-one confirmed cases of coronavirus among children, ninety-seven per cent were asymptomatic, or had mild or moderate symptoms. Thus far, in all of China, there has been only one death in this age group, a fourteen-year-old boy.

Fisher, the infectious-disease specialist from Singapore who accompanied the W.H.O. mission, told me that he opposes school closings. From the early case studies, Fisher predicts that children get infected at the same rate as adults yet tend to show mild symptoms or be asymptomatic. And although there is evidence of asymptomatic transmission, such events seem unusual and, in the analysis of the W.H.O., have not played a major role in the spread of the disease.

But a more difficult issue is presymptomatic transmission. There seems to be a brief window—perhaps two or three days—when people are infectious but not yet showing symptoms. Gabriel Leung, the dean of medicine at the University of Hong Kong, told me that he believes between twenty and forty per cent of infections come from people who don't yet seem sick. "They could be spreading it through droplets, say during eating or speaking," he said. "These droplets could contaminate surfaces, and this is how it spreads."

The role that children play in this process remains unclear. Fisher pointed out that there's no evidence that they have helped spread the disease in China or elsewhere. The W.H.O. report noted that, during the mission's nine-day trip, none of the Chinese medical personnel who were interviewed could recall a case in which transmission occurred from a child to an adult.

"My view on schools is that children aren't at risk of severe disease," Fisher said. "They don't amplify the spread, they don't amplify the transmission. They are kind of bystanders while it goes on. There's no good reason to keep them out of school, unless the society is in total lockdown. I'd rather see just a modification of school activities."

But Leung cautioned that nothing is definitive at this point. He was currently analyzing how the disease spreads within households, which could reveal information about which ages are most infectious, but he wouldn't finish until later this month. He thought that an ongoing Chinese analysis of serology, or antibody patterns, could provide some clearer answers to the question of children's role in the epidemic. But this research would probably take at least a few more weeks.

Leung noted that, in the absence of clear science, political pressures have a

large influence on school closures. Hong Kong closed schools, but Singapore did not, relying instead on measures that more carefully limited and screened arrivals, used targeted testing, isolated known cases, and protected high-risk groups. Taiwan followed a similar strategy, allowing schools to reopen after a two-week extension of the Lunar New Year holiday. All three places seem to have managed the situation effectively. The Centers for Disease Control in the United States has noted that countries that closed schools at an early stage have not necessarily handled the epidemic better than those which didn't, and such closures likely have to be longer than four weeks to have any benefit.

In the short term, China's all-out lockdown wasn't surprising after the country caught a glimpse of the abyss in Wuhan. But, as time passed, there didn't seem to be much evolution in strategy. "We have to fully have a conversation about the cost," Nuzzo, the epidemiologist at Johns Hopkins, told me. In her opinion, the extremely positive W.H.O. report had missed an opportunity to point out some negative impacts of the Chinese strategy.

She noted that the virus can always return, and that it will probably take one or two years to develop a vaccine. In her opinion, instead of relying on overwhelming measures, the Chinese should develop strategies that might be more flexible and sustainable. The effects of enforced seclusion, stressed children, and distrust of neighbors can't be quantified as easily and as quickly as cases of infection and death. Even many things that can be counted are simply not prioritized at such a time. I had a feeling that people would be shocked if they knew how many Chinese schoolchildren—many tens of millions, undoubtedly—are currently being educated entirely through mobile phones.

Some critical numbers remain unknown for other reasons. During the fourth week of online classes, a friend in Fuling reported that a teen-ager in the northern part of the city had jumped out of his fifth-floor apartment. Apparently, the middle-school student had been fighting with his father, who was trying to get him to focus on his online lessons. My friend sent me a cellphone video taken by somebody who lived nearby.

In the video, two people crouch over a motionless form at the base of a building. Police cars have arrived, along with an ambulance; three men in masks approach with a stretcher. Bystanders engage in a terse dialogue:

"The feet hit the ground first."

"How can the family take this? My God! This is so sad."

"Jumped from the fifth floor, right?"

"The fifth floor."

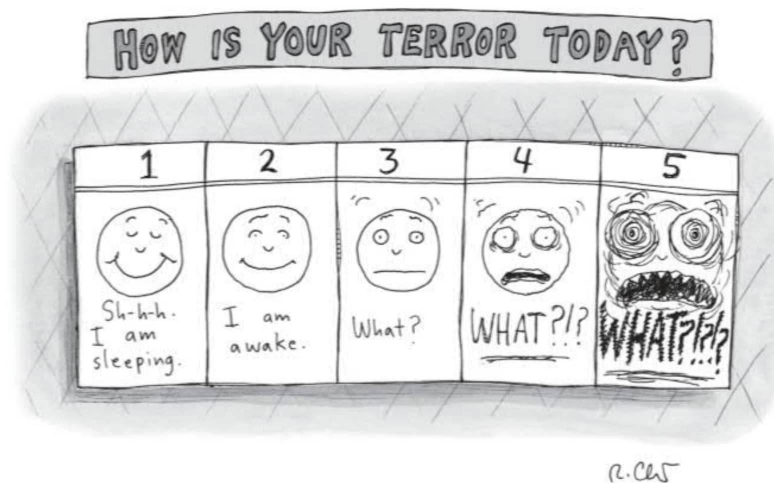
This single incident in one small city equalled the nationwide death total from the coronavirus in children under the age of nineteen. Earlier this month, there was at least one other suicide, when an elementary-school student in Hebei Province, having been scolded for using his phone to watch videos instead of for remote classes, jumped from a building. If such things were happening elsewhere, they were probably kept quiet. There was no report in the Fuling press, and, if anything was posted on social media, it was quickly taken down. "The online classes are like a campaign that we have to win, just like we must defeat the virus," my friend explained. "So this kind of thing should not drag it down. This is why I can't find the information about the incident online, I think."

In the neighborhood, a few people told me the building and apartment number of the confirmed case in my compound. Such details had a way of getting out, and I observed people behaving in ways that seemed unusually vigilant around the building in question. Once, a woman wearing a mask, plastic gloves, surgical booties, and pajamas walked past me holding a package, a bottle of disinfectant, and a cotton swab. I saw her enter the building and gingerly use the swab to call the elevator, so that even her gloved hand didn't touch the button.

One afternoon, I went up to the apartment, where I heard voices behind the numbered door. A rack of shoes outside: at least one child lived here. I knocked, and a man called out in a gruff voice, "Who is it?"

I explained that I was a neighbor, and the man opened the door. He was middle-aged, with the kind of paunch that in China is often associated with business careers. He was wearing clear plastic gloves and smoking a cigarette. I introduced myself and said that I had been told a resident had had the virus.

"Nobody here has had it," the man said.



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I tried to put him at ease, explaining that I understood that the case had been mild, and that I just wanted to learn about the recovery process.

"Of course," he said. "If I were a neighbor, and if somebody had been sick, I'd want to know, too. But nobody here has had it."

"So you've never heard of anybody in this building getting infected?"

"No," he said. His face was unmasked, but I couldn't read anything in his expression. He politely said goodbye and closed the door. On the way down, the elevator reeked of seventy-five-per-cent-alcohol disinfectant.

On the forty-fifth day of the lockdown, our family went out to dinner for the first time. Businesses had slowly started to open, according to the logic of the Party. Barbershops were among the first, probably because there was no online alternative. Banks came later, and then a barbecue place across the river opened its doors. My daughters still hadn't interacted with another child their age, and there had been no announcement about school.

At the restaurant, the hostess shot Ariel and Natasha with an infrared gun, and then Leslie and I took our turn. The hostess carried a clipboard on which we wrote our names, cellphone numbers, and temperatures: Ariel, 36.5; Natasha, 36.2; Leslie, 36.2; me, 36.0. We sat down and unmasked. This place had always been popular, but tonight it was half full. Across China, there had been more than eighty thousand confirmed cases and 3,119 deaths, but the rate of increase in both figures had slowed dramatically. Chengdu's last death—its third, total—had happened more than three weeks before. The three victims had been aged sixty-four, seventy-three, and eighty, and all had suffered multiple chronic health problems before becoming infected.

The restaurant was trying hard. After we ordered, a manager called me over with what I believe to have been a conspiratorial smile, although only his eyes were visible. He handed me a silver tray with a sprig of flowers, a bowl of glutinous rice, and a red Valentine's-style card.

"It's March 8th!" he said.

I had forgotten—International Women's Day.

He pointed at the rice and the card. "It's free," he said. "Write a message to your wife!"

I stared at the red paper. Then I wrote something to the effect that this was the most romantic period we had shared since the 2013 coup in Cairo. I walked back to the table carrying the silver tray while the masked manager took pictures with his cell phone. A waitress brought the bottle of beer we had ordered, and I filled Leslie's and my glasses. Soon, the waitress reappeared with another Tsingtao. "It's free," she said. "Because of the epidemic!" She opened the bottle and we shared that one, too. ♦

OUR LOCAL CORRESPONDENTS

ABUNDANCE OF CAUTION

Entering a time of containment, New York is at its best and its worst.

BY ADAM GOPNIK

PHOTOGRAPHS BY PHILIP MONTGOMERY

Plagues happen only to people. Animals can suffer from mass infections, of course, but they experience them as one more bad blow from an unpredictable and predatory natural environment. Only people put mental brackets around a phenomenon like the coronavirus pandemic and attempt to give it a name and some historical perspective, some sense of precedence and possibility. The coronavirus, indifferent to individuals, has no creed or moral purpose, but it becomes human when it hits us—neither microscopic nor historic, just the size we are as we experience its effects. As Albert Camus wrote in "The Plague," the 1947 novel that's becoming to this disruption what W. H. Auden's "September 1, 1939" was to the aftermath of 9/11, the microbe has no meaning; we seek to create one in the chaos it brings.

The final weekend of semi-ordinary life in New York arrived on Friday the 13th. In the week that followed, New York became a ghost town in a ghost nation on a ghost planet. The gravity and scale of what is happening can overwhelm the details of daily life, in which human beings seek a plateau of normalcy in abnormal times, just as they always have in blitzes and battles. Nobody has any confidence at all about whether we are seeing the first phases of a new normal, the brief calm before a worse storm, or a wise reaction that may allow, not so horribly long from now, for a renewal of common life. Here are some notes on things seen by one walker in the city, and some voices heard among New Yorkers bearing witness, on and off the streets.

It happened slowly and then suddenly. On Monday, March 9th, the spectre of a pandemic in New York was still off on the puzzling horizon. By Friday, it was the dominant fact of life. New Yorkers began to adopt a grim new dance of "social distancing." On a sparsely peopled 5 train, heading down to Grand Central Terminal on Saturday morning, passengers warily tried to achieve an even, strategic spacing, like chess pieces during an endgame: the rook all the way down here, but threatening the king from the back row. Then, when the doors opened, they got off the train one by one, in single, hesitant file, unlearning in a minute New York habits ingrained over lifetimes, the elbowed rush for the door.

In the relatively empty subway cars, one can focus on the human details of the riders. A. J. Liebling, in a piece published in these pages some sixty years ago, recounted the tale of a once famous New York murder, in which the headless torso of a man was found wrapped in oilcloth, floating in the East River. The hero of the tale, as Liebling chose to tell it, was a young reporter for the great New York *World*, who identified the body by type before anyone else did: he saw that the corpse's fingertips were wrinkled in a way that characterized "rubbers"—masseurs—in Turkish baths. Only someone whose hands were wet that often would have those fingertips. On the subway, in the street, nearly everyone has rubbers' hands now, with skin shrivelled from excessive washing.

At the other end of the day, in Central Park late at night, the only people out were the ones walking their dogs. Dogs are still allowed to have proximity, if only to other dogs. They can't be kept from it. The negotiations of proximity—the dogs demanding it, the owners trying to resist it without being actively rude—are newly arrived in the city. Walking home down the almost empty avenues, you could see the same silhouette, repeated: dogs straining toward dogs on long-stretched leashes, held by watchful owners keeping their distance, a nightly choreography of animal need and human caution.

At J.F.K., in Queens, during that strange weekend, people huddled and waited anxiously for the homecoming of family members who had been stranded abroad, with the understanding that homecoming now comes at a cost: arriving passengers have been asked to self-quarantine for two weeks. J.F.K. had been spared some of the nightmarish lines and confusion seen at Dulles, in Washington, and O'Hare, in Chicago, following Donald Trump's abrupt decision the previous Wednesday (relayed in a garbled announcement) to suspend most travel from Europe. But no one is spared the emotional ambivalence of the moment: every feeling pulled out hard, like an attenuated nerve. Parents are keenly aware that, in bringing their children home to what is meant to be safety, they are bringing them to an increasingly unsafe place.

"Barren" was the word that Lisa Cleveland, who lives in New Jersey, used for the normally bustling airport. She spent part of Saturday morning waiting for her teen-age children Zoë and Xander, who had been staying in the Netherlands. Their father is a Dutch citizen. "I'm still trying to understand the risks, but he's been tracking this for more than two months," Cleveland said. "He's *that* guy." Getting the kids back to the U.S. before further barriers went up wasn't easy. "Xander and Zoë—she likes the double dot over her name, otherwise it becomes a Dutch word that rhymes with 'cow'—were in Amsterdam. We struggled and struggled to find them tickets home. Someone told us that one

Friday, March 13th: *A passenger on an uptown F train wears a makeshift mask.*

Thursday, March 12th: *An empty J train in the morning, near Manhattan's financial district.*

Never
SWIPE AGAIN
again.

Thursday, March 12th: *A cleaning-company employee sanitizes a handrailing at Port Authority.*

of the airlines was going to go bankrupt."

When she saw Zoë and Xander at last, Cleveland said, "it was just such an enormous relief. And more emotion than you can easily imagine. This is the first day I've been able to smile in weeks. But now they have to do a mandatory self-quarantine for two weeks."

Zoë said, "Not that I'm not glad to be home, but I'll miss school. The mood on the plane was weird—half the plane was wearing masks." Because safety masks were sold out in Amsterdam, she and her brother decided to wear masks that their parents had bought them out of an abundance of caution. They were 3M respirators, the kind an industrial worker might wear in the presence of toxic aerosols. "I felt people were judging us," Zoë said. "It's a crazy mask. No one else on the plane had on such a *serious* mask."

Crises take an X-ray of a city's class structure. After 9/11, it was the Middle Eastern and South Asian taxi-drivers who suddenly became visible, lining their cabs with American flags for fear of being taken for jihadis. Now particular visibility falls on bicycle deliverymen, Mexicans and Indians, the emissaries of Seamless, who modestly shoulder the burden of feeding the middle class. On the East Side, outside a Thai restaurant at 7 P.M. on Saturday, a single deliveryman balanced five bags of food hanging from his handlebars. His livelihood hinges on his getting meals to people who are self-isolating, a luxury he doesn't have. Although he was grateful for the work, he said, he was a little frightened about his own exposure. Asked how many more sacks he ferries during his shift these days, he shrugged and said at least ten times the usual load.

Just as the medical system depends on the lowest paid of the health workers—the orderlies and custodians—the food system, now that restaurants have been limited to takeout and delivery, depends on a whole cadre of men pedalling bicycles. They are literally overburdened, and, that night, this one got off to an unsteady start, like a plane in wartime trying to take off with too large a load of refugees. He glanced up at a high-rise condominium being built on Madison Avenue and Eighty-ninth Street. Construction work continues right through the closures—no letup in the noise and activity, even on the weekend. The workmen, in their puffy vests and hard hats, were side by side, though they didn't seem particularly worried, or constrained. The exigencies of Manhattan real estate and development are evidently undeterred by the crisis.

What's strange about this energetic construction of more luxury housing is that, in the existing apartment buildings nearby, on the impossibly wealthy blocks of Fifth Avenue, scarcely a light can be seen. Nobody's home. Most of the truly wealthy have gone, by helicopter or private jet, to the Hamptons or to an island somewhere. There can be something vexing about the thought that those whose wealth relies on the intense,

Saturday, March 14th: *Diminishing supplies at a Western Beef supermarket in Queens.*

close-ordered entanglement of the city abandon it in its hour of need, or dread, but they do. Still, who would not decamp to a remote island if she had one? "Boccaccio-ing," someone calls this business of fleeing the city, in honor of the Italian author, who wrote of fleeing Florence during the Black Death, and telling stories with his companions for ten days up in the hillside villas of Fiesole.

In West Harlem, Sam Rivera certainly can't leave. At a residential facility run by the Fortune Society and known as the Castle, his job is to oversee the rooms and the souls of about eighty-five men and women, almost all released from prison not long ago, some as recently as this month. They come in and out of his office all day, seeking help and solace. "It's crazy, but the system is still churning," Rivera said. He is a huge man, with a beaming, steady smile. "They're still discharging people from Rikers and elsewhere, even as we go through all this. So we have a steady inflow of people coming home, even while we're trying to lock down the people we already have."

This is Rivera's second plague. Incarcerated himself when H.I.V./AIDS hit New York's state prisons, in the nineteen-eighties, he still remembers the shock of working in the isolated wards where those who fell ill with the disease were sequestered: "Everyone was so frightened that they pretty much put on a hazmat suit to go into those places. Except me." His experience led him, once he was out of prison, to join the AIDS-care movement, where he met and worked with Anthony Fauci, the current director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. Now that Rivera is responsible for the residents of the Castle, he thinks hard about what to do. His memories of the AIDS epidemic are strong, and they give an oddly positive cast to his take on today's crisis.

"We've stockpiled three weeks' worth of food, and we're sending staff to screen visitors at Rikers," he said. (City jails have since suspended in-person visits.) "But it's not a deadly virus for most people—it's not as deadly as AIDS. I think we'll get to the point where the next announcement will have to be, What are we doing for people who have to manage the elders and those with compromised immune systems? I'm coping two ways. I'm not overthinking it. I expect to get it one day. I'll feel sick, and I'll manage it, I'll come through it, and my body will build immunities to it. And that will be a blessing."

Despite his brio in the face of the virus, Rivera worries about the vulnerable residents in his charge. "We have a number of people in the Castle who are living with H.I.V., and we're *really* monitoring where and how they are," he said. "The problem is that they don't like following up. Most of them have had bad experiences with the medical system, or sometimes no experience with it. But,

Wednesday, March 18th: *Nancy Landau-Gahres, an eighth-grade teacher in Sunset Park, in an empty science lab.*

NATIONAL
ANIMAL SENSES
The Plant Kingdom
Animals
Plants
Scientists
Ecosystems
Misc.
Super
Insects, Bugs
811
815

Saturday, March 14th: *Erika and Gino Brian stock up on groceries in Queens.*

if anyone has flu-like symptoms, then we are able to get a test, right now, at Columbia Presbyterian, which is great. All we can do is watch and move forward, day by day."

Panic-buying has been in evidence all over town, if unevenly executed. Many chain supermarkets and food stores are stripped bare of groceries, in a way that calls to mind the days just after 9/11. Back then, people gathered "Armageddon baskets," filled with expensive things—steak and Perrier. Now they assemble survival kits. Toilet paper and canned beans are treasured. (There is no chance, the grocers assure the city, of running out of either.) Still, there's a pattern to the emptying of the supermarkets. Every potato, every carrot, every onion in a West Side Citarella is gone, as is every package of pasta and every jar of tomatoes in an uptown Whole Foods. Yet many of the less tony supermarkets, the nearby Key Foods and Gristedes, have remained well stocked and serene throughout the rush.

"You realize what this means?" a college student who grew up in New York said, about the depredations of upscale shoppers. "It means they believe that it's every man for himself. They don't really believe in community or that people will or can share. Their instinct, despite living in one of the more affluent spots in the world, is that they're on their own." The plague, as Camus insisted, exposes existing fractures in societies, in class structure and individual character; under stress, we see who we really are. The secession of the very rich, the isolation of the well-off, the degradation of social capital by inequality: these truths become sharply self-evident now.

The current crisis is, in some respects, the mirror image of the post-9/11 moment. That turned out to be a time of retrospective anxiety about a tragedy unforeseen. The anticipatory jitters weren't entirely unfounded—anthrax killed a hospital worker in Manhattan—but they arose from something that had already happened and wouldn't be repeated. By contrast, the COVID-19 crisis involves worries about something we've been warned is on the way. The social remedy is the opposite of the sort of coming together that made the days and weeks after 9/11 endurable for so many, as they shared dinners and embraced friends. That basic human huddling is now forbidden, with the recommendations for "distancing" bearing down ever tighter: no more than five hundred people together, then two hundred and fifty, then fifty, then ten.

At the same time, the emphasis on social distancing and even isolation is part of an epidemiological study in statistical probability. If we delay the communication of the virus from patient to patient, the curve of new cases may flatten, so that fewer people at any time will need hospitalization, reducing the stress on the system and keeping health services available for all the other countless ailments that strike a city of eight million. In a way, the self-seclusions are exhibits not of personal panic but of public-minded

Monday, March 16th: *The last customer at a Jackson Heights restaurant before citywide closures took effect.*

prudence: we are trying to save the lives, above all, of the most vulnerable. But, of course, the plague-in-progress may progress despite it all.

"Love in the Time of Cholera" is Gabriel García Márquez's great novel of another plague time—with cholera, we're told, referring to both the name of the terrible disease and the condition of being *colérico*, angry and impassioned. Love in the time of coronavirus was bound to happen—in crisis and despair is born desire—and it already has. Kids forced to leave college and return home to the city talked about long-sought last-minute assignations on the night before the general expulsion.

Sometimes desire in anxiety can be more delicate. In Grand Central Terminal, what some call "the tile telephone"—the whispering gallery in front of the Oyster Bar, under the beautiful basket weave of arches—has never been so clear. The noise of the station is usually so intense that the tiled ceiling turns mute. Now, for the first time in forever, the abatement in the roar and press of people allows couples' murmured endearments, spoken into one corner, to race up through the solid Guastavino tile and carry all the way over to the diagonally facing corner.

A pair of young friends encountered there that Friday weren't out-of-towners; this was Kyle and Leah, and they're New Yorkers through and through, who decided that this was the moment, finally, to really see Grand Central. The appetite for the joys of structured sightseeing is indomitable. Another young woman, Amaya—visiting from Durham, North Carolina, and crushed to find the city so inhospitable—stood in the corner, smiling and singing to a friend on the other side.

But it was on Saturday, when the sky was blue and the temperature hovered in the fifties, that the irresistible urge to find pleasure brought out flocks of young people to various outdoor spaces. "I've noticed that a lot of people my age are headed to Prospect Park and are taking advantage of a beautiful day, a large space where they can mingle," a thirty-one-year-old woman said, early on Saturday afternoon. "They sort of keep social distance, but also connect." Many photographs, shared widely on social media, seemed to show the millennials lounging thoughtlessly close, prompting a Twitter uproar.

The uproar did seem to reflect a determination on the part of young people in New York to go on living like young people in New York. "Last night I went out to a restaurant," the same woman said. "And the wait was half an hour. So we went to a different restaurant, and at that one, when the waitress was bringing out drinks, she got confused about where to go, since they had just changed their seating—I think to have more space between tables."

Like life-hardened Sam Rivera, these younger New Yorkers have touching if perhaps worrying faith in their own invulnerability. "I don't think people in my cohort are that terrified," the woman went on. "Most

Wednesday, March 18th: *Freddy Ruiz holds his daughter while picking up donated groceries in Sunset Park.*

people seem to believe that they will get the virus and they will survive having it. The vibe is pretty much one of acceptance, even a little bit of excitement. I hate to say this, but it's become a distraction from the election. Also, a lot of my friends are cooking. Like ambitious stockpot recipes—soups and stews—and a lot of baking, too. Pies and cookies. I myself am currently deep-cleaning my apartment, knowing that I'll be stuck in it." Meanwhile, she said, "my family is from New York, and my father has been fearlessly going to the gym. I think there's a bit of YOLO fear to it—he wants to make the most of his life. But I have pleaded with him to stop."

That same Saturday, Maggie McGlinchy, a bartender, worked all evening at Bernie's Restaurant, on the border of Greenpoint and Williamsburg. "It was full," she said on Sunday. "But it doesn't take much to fill the restaurant. The actual volume was low, and it seemed as though no one wanted to be seen to be fully enjoying themselves. I sold a *lot* of Martinis that night—mostly Martinis, or Old-Fashioneds or Manhattans. No wine or artisanal ale. Everyone was trending the spirits.

"At Bernie's, I'm on a first-name basis with possibly a third of the customers—it's definitely a home base. In the past two nights, a lot of my customers are people who wanted to come in and support us. Most of my tips were over twenty per cent. That's the other thing about social distancing—so much of what it means to be comforted is to be . . . not distant. Stay positive, I'd say—we're feeling well right now and let's hope it stays positive and do you want another drink?" But by Sunday night all the bars and restaurants in the city had been ordered to stop table service in the next few days, an unimaginable act a week earlier, as strange as if the island of Manhattan had floated out to sea.

McGlinchy said that she is looking for a new job, but there are no new jobs for bartenders, because there are no bars. "What do I have going forward? I have a month's rent and a warm e-mail from my former employer," she said dryly on Tuesday morning. "I've had some regulars send me twenty bucks over Venmo. Last tips."

The full weight of the shutdown will fall most heavily on the Maggies of the world, who have little or no financial cushion. (Later, Bernie's set up a GoFundMe campaign for the staff.) Hundreds of thousands of people in the service and entertainment industries—from bartenders to the "swing" theatre actors who pride themselves on leaping into whatever role has been left open by an unwell lead—are out of work, for a time that has no known limit.

There are, as well, the small, crushing disappointments that, though reasonably lost in the larger life-and-death clamor, are very real to the people they have happened to. The actress Ilana Levine had just opened in a new play, "The Perplexed," by Richard Greenberg—a comeback of sorts for her—when all theatres, concert venues, and night clubs were closed. "You know, I had been on Broadway a lot when I was younger," she said. "But then came L.A. and children. . . . And out of the blue I got this call to do this play of Richard's, with the idea that, after all this time, I'd be back on the stage in New York, which I missed desperately. So all of these things I'd been dreaming of happened, and with it came so much fear and anxiety: 'Can I make it work?'" She laughed at the idea of what fear and anxiety meant a few days earlier—having too much to memorize.

"The play is about family and struggle and old hurts and people having to be, in this sort of Sartre way, perpetually closed off in the space of one room with each other," she continued. "So now the play and the reality are one, in ways I could never have imagined. Except I don't get to do it in this world, with an audience." The evocative set, designed by Santo Loquasto, of a New York town house, has not yet been struck from the Manhattan Theatre Club stage, she said. "So all of us keep thinking of that set, and how we want to get to it, be on it—the company, even without an audience, just to work together on it. Actors are not people who know how to isolate. We are suddenly physically frozen at this moment."

The young musical-theatre actress Abena Mensah-Bonsu, cast in a significant role in a new show, "Nollywood Dreams," had been commuting in from New Jersey, feeling all the ancient excitement of a big break. Now she sits at home and is eager to get back to the theatre. "Acting is the opposite of social distancing," she said, echoing Levine. "Even if you're introverted, as I am. So, when we sit in place, we long to be engaged with someone." On Broadway, the theatres are empty, but the lights have still been on, as though the theatres were willing the shows to continue.

One irony of this pandemic is that, while it exposes the gaps in our social and medical safety nets, it also punishes people for behaving well. Communities with the healthiest intergenerational relationships seem to be at greater risk than those that sequester older people in nursing homes. Italy, one study shows, has been so hard hit by the coronavirus because there the young and the old have the beautiful habit of mingling together. Grandparents are accustomed to being with their grandchildren.

In the days before the shutdown, the Lubavitcher community in Crown Heights became a virus hot spot, perhaps because the Hasidic sects, too, have kept at bay the alienation of generations that is so much part of American life. "Do you want to know how things appear, or how they *are*?" Mica Soffer, the editor of a Jewish news Web site, said that Sunday. "It's been extremely hectic. As far as the community itself, I guess we weren't so much prepared. It's in China, it's in Europe—we didn't realize how quickly it would get here. Our community is so connected. We live in an urban area—you're always around people. It's Brooklyn, after all! Late last week, I had a shiva call, a wedding, and an engagement party. Everyone has a million things they need to go to—families are large."

She went on, "Most families here have elderly parents and grandparents—it's a big part of life. Purim was last weekend—you're talking about people being exposed. We didn't realize at first. We didn't know. There

Saturday, March 14th: *An American Airlines employee returns from a break at J.F.K. Airport.*

Thursday, March 12th: *Outside the New York Stock Exchange, on one of the worst days on Wall Street since 1987.*

Thursday, March 19th: *Gail Sirignano being tested for COVID-19 in a parking lot in Jericho, New York.*

was a lot of contact. Very much part of our day-to-day life—especially with the men going to shul three times a day, and Torah classes every single day. One of the things that's so amazing is that everybody kicked into high gear to put up yeshivas online within two days.

"In Crown Heights, davening still goes on, it always has to be there, within the realm of whatever number the health department says. No more than ten people in Israel. A rabbi told me, 'Faith is not the absence of reason.' We don't give up on the interventions. God blessed us with doctors, not as something apart from us but as something there to help us. My father told me this: God is in charge, and God watches over us. Every time I get really panicky, there's that sense that God is taking care of us. I'm an anxious person and it's not easy. But I have to access that. Rabbi Nachum said, '*Gam zu l'tovah*'—'This, too, shall be for the good.'" On Tuesday, rabbis closed the Crown Heights synagogues. "Now," Soffer said, "many people are praying outdoors, six feet away from each other."

The self-exile of the very wealthy from the city that made them rich is hardly uniform. A feeling of social responsibility, of solidarity, is embodied by Elizabeth Smith, who is the head of the Central Park Conservancy. She and her husband, Rick Cotton, the head of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, became among the first public officials in New York known to have COVID-19. Now all she wants is to get back to the Park.

"I've never been in the tabloids before," Smith, who is in her late sixties, said from her Manhattan apartment, where she was convalescing, and in her second week of seclusion. "In my family, you're in the paper when you're born and again when you marry. And the fact of the matter is that the virus gets . . . very virulent. I wasn't feeling well on Saturday—all the typical flu symptoms, like a fever, but a relatively mild case of the flu for me. I stayed in bed, had my moments of panic, but I was fortunate to be paired with Rick, who was positive but asymptomatic. And I was well enough to stay in touch with the Conservancy and find out how everyone was faring—the morale and the health of the staff—and the Park itself, too. It has the tremendous power of offering peace and respite to people. The amazing people are the city workers. They keep showing up. They show up at work and they do the right thing. There are lots of selfless people, lots of people who take public service seriously."

Even if she hadn't fallen ill, Smith said, she would have wanted to stay in the city. "We have a big responsibility to the public," she said. "You know, when Frederick Law Olmsted made the Park, it was just with that in mind: most people don't even have a chance of leaving New York. It's for all those people who couldn't leave the city, to get to the Adirondacks." Smith is the chair of the Library of America, which published a collection of Olmsted's essays, letters,

Tuesday, March 17th: *Elizabeth Smith has been quarantined in her Upper East Side home since falling ill with COVID-19.*

and other reflections in 2015. "Believe it or not, I never quite got through Olmsted's writings," she admitted. "He was a genius and a beautiful writer." She is now immersed in the volume: "I'm not in the Park but I can stay in the Park."

Emptiness and absence contradict the very concept of the city. The point of a city is social proximity; to see people deliberately spaced out, like the walking but never intersecting figures in a Giacometti, is to see what cities aren't. In a historical sense, cities are always organisms of a kind, like coral reefs, where a lot of people come together to barter spices and exchange ideas and find mates, and endure the recurrent damage of infectious disease.

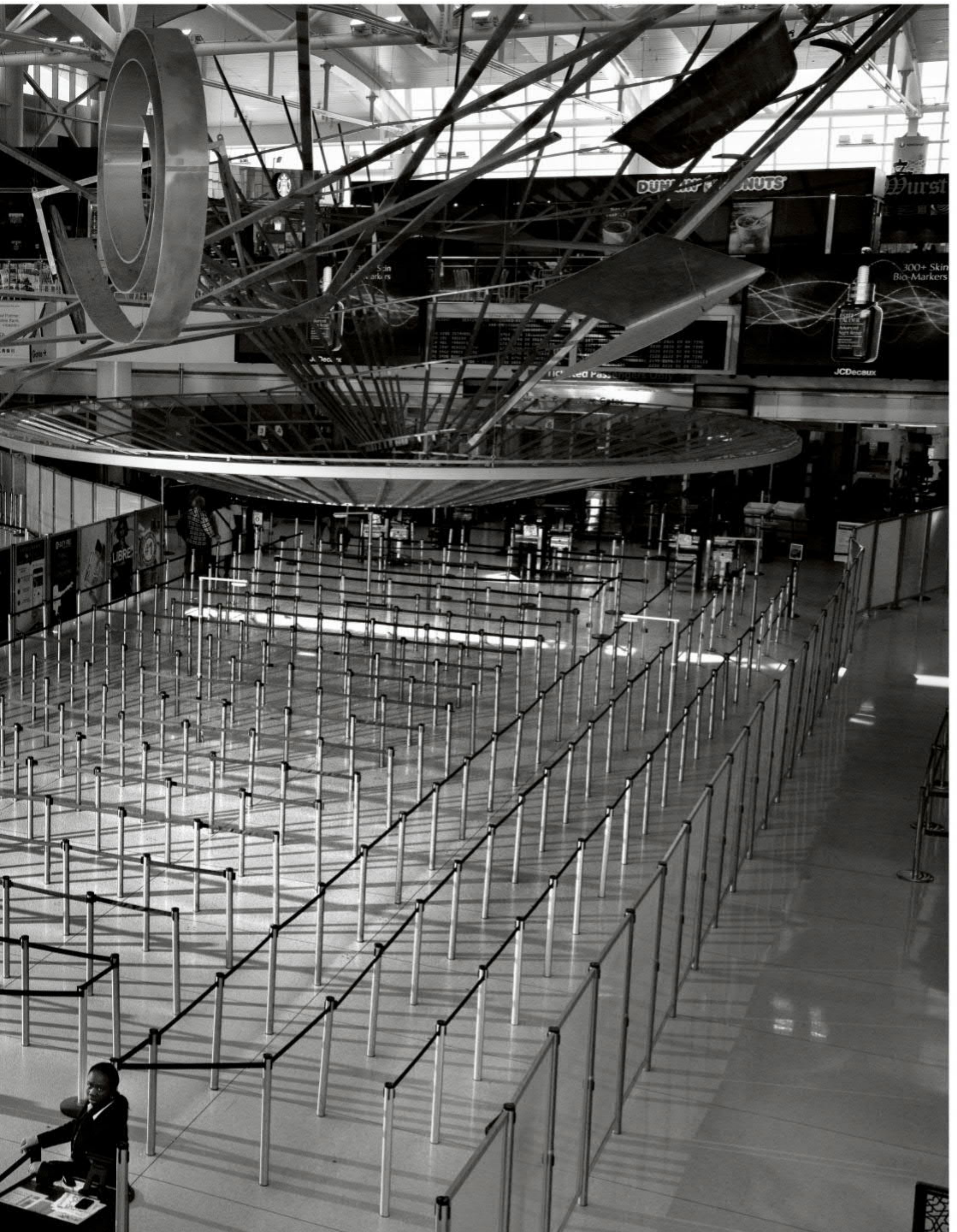
The question is whether the current upheavals could somehow alter New York forever. Some beloved places may stay closed. Some new practices may be perpetuated. The digital trends toward disaggregation of experience may get a boost, at a cost to everything we love about the city. There's an eerie gap between the raucous and argumentative world of the Internet and the silence of the streets. Outside, new patterns of wider spacing and greater caution assert themselves: Is that masked man contagious and to be avoided by crossing the street? Did we forget to sanitize after touching the gate to the park? And, with them, the terrible self-monitoring of plague times: Do I feel normal? Is my temperature high? Feel my forehead.

Until last week, no one ever thought that Camus's "The Plague" was about the plague. It was the text through which generations of high schoolers were taught how *not* to read literally. It was always taken as a fable or an allegory, specifically of the German occupation of France. The people in Camus's plague town of Oran did not in any way deserve to suffer from the disease, but the crisis revealed all the various human responses of cowardice, denial, and courage. The point was not that actual plagues tell us much, but that the pressure of extreme and unexpected events forces the flaws in our common character to the surface.

This plague has proved an equal-opportunity evil, striking theocratic states like Iran and authoritarian ones like China, and more open ones like our own and those in Europe. Some hard balance of authority and openness is obviously essential to going on at all, but this is not news. We have always known that having the confidence to act, and the clarity to see if the way we act is good, is vital to our continued existence. Our continued existence! It used to be a kind of metaphor, really meaning "the easy perpetuation of our familiar way of life." No more.

By midweek, even the dance of wariness was muted: New Yorkers, largely sheltering in place, still allowed themselves to walk their dogs, but walked them alone on each street, with the next dog and owner at least a stoplight away. The dogs, puzzled not to have the greetings of others of their animal kind, sniffed doggedly in the dark, though now only at the scent of their solitary owners. ♦

Saturday, March 14th: *J.F.K. Airport, three days after Donald Trump's decision to suspend most travel from Europe.*


300+ Skin
Bio-Markers
JCDecaux

Futures Han Ong

ILLUSTRATION BY LEONIE BOS

Did you check his phone?

I told you, I'm not gonna do that!

But it's so easy.

They are not talking about Martin. Toby pronounces it Mahr-*teen*. Because that's how Martin himself pronounced it, being from Chile. It was only last year that Martin stayed with them, and Toby's father was crazy about the young tennis player. Since then, disillusionment has spoiled his father's gaze, and every tennis player after Martin can only be a reminder of him, and an object of suspicion.

I don't think I could live through that again, Toby's father says, and switches back to the subject of the new guy: How difficult could it be? Just ask to borrow his phone. Say you want to play a game. Say I don't allow you to on your own phone. Then take a look at his messages for anything iffy. Head things off at the pass.

He'll know I went through his messages!

Tell him you touched it by accident! Do I have to feed you everything?

Toby has only his father, and his father has only Toby. Plus their palatial estate in La Jolla. Many months out of the year, Toby is left alone with a groundskeeper and a companion—all right, a nanny—while his father is in Macao tending to his casinos and his other businesses. But this is the part of the year that they always spend together—roughly from the beginning of March to late April.

For as far back as Toby can remember—since he was six or so—his father has signed them up to host a visiting player at the local event, the Diamond Club Challenger, in which Toby's father is an investor, of sorts. Toby is now eighteen and taking a year off before deciding on college, maybe longer. Of course, he'll go—he's Chinese, and whoever heard of a Chinese without a college degree? And, besides, he does not have the option of becoming a tennis player. He simply is not good enough.

There's been, let's see, Pratesh, Liam, Manolo, Manuel, that Indian guy (the one after Pratesh, with the complicated name that you couldn't shorten), the Moroccan guy who wanted to be left alone because he was in a mid-divorce funk (though that didn't stop him from trying to get into the pants of one of the event sponsors), Apichat, Albert from Canada (which was how Toby's father, riffing on the way the young man had introduced himself, referred to him behind his back), the three Chinese guys in a row—Wuyang, Zuhan, and Louie—or, technically, four, since Albert was Chinese-Canadian, and, of course, most eventfully (though not at the time), Martin, just last year.

It was Apichat who taught Toby to drive when he was thirteen. Apichat, with electric-blue hair that he claimed nobody in the streets of Bangkok gave a second glance to, was originally going to drive Toby to the mall, as a distraction from his second-round loss, but instead they circled the family compound over and over again, Toby in the driver's seat being instructed by Apichat. They wound up sitting on the beach, people-watching, commiserating over the unfairness of life, Apichat sharing a joint. Two firsts on that day: his first drive and the first of many tokes.

Although the tournament administrators told him that they couldn't accommodate the request, his father had insisted on hosting any Asian players in the tournament, on the no-need-to-speak-it assumption that Toby would benefit from exposure to an older-brother figure, to make up for his lack of a mother. Though, to be honest, it was also to compensate for his having a ghost as a father, since Toby's father, even when in residence at the family manse, is always out making his deals, driving from meeting to meeting, and, when he's home, holing up in the game room in front of his wide-screen TV, on which he can monitor the floor action at his Macao casinos, as well as his cashiers' booths, his office with the two safes, and, most important, his general managers' quarters.

Besides, Toby's father is an alcoholic, and by noon on most days, if he notices Toby at all, he does so through a scrim of wooze, on wobbly feet. When operatic-drunk, his father likes to quote a line he says comes from his favorite movie star, Steve McQueen: "If you're looking for trouble, you've come to the right place."

One way that Toby bonds with the visiting players is by betraying his father—as when, with Pratesh, he spied on his father, dressed in nothing but boxers, making circuits around the perimeter of the pool, a full tumbler of Scotch attached to his hand. His father would take a sip, walk a few steps, then stop and say, to no one, to the air, to an antagonist in the air, If you're looking for trouble, you've come to the right place. He repeated this routine for nearly half an hour, until there was nothing left in the tumbler and he let his hand drop. He'd forgotten that he'd had the entire place, including the pool area, fitted with cameras—or maybe he didn't care—and Toby and Pratesh sat in Toby's bedroom cackling over the sad-comic spectacle on Toby's laptop.

It was worse when they had the swans, who, for two years, owned the pool. His father would taunt the birds, pitching ice cubes into their habitat, making them honk and flutter their insane wings, goading them to come after him, which they did less and less as time passed. They were supposed to mate, but, when a guy from the zoo came to collect them, it was discovered that Toby's father had been harboring two males—imagine his peeve. Faggots, he told Toby. All this time! Which is among the reasons that Toby has not told—and probably will never tell—his father about his own possibly irreversible gay tendencies.

It was Apichat who, intuiting those tendencies, had jacked him off by the pool very late at night, before flying to Florida to compete at another Challenger event. Where was his father then, that Toby could be so brazen? Probably knocked out in his bedroom, on the other side of the property. Or indulging one of his club jaunts. Toby remembers being so wrapped up in 420 and lust, it was as if he were swaddled in blankets even when he was naked. The lights were off, and he was being pleasured by a ghost made of white eyeballs and electric-blue hair. Thinking of that night now never fails to give Toby an erection. Apichat rested his wireless speakers on a lounger, and the same song kept playing over and over: "Abracadabra," by the Steve Miller Band, a tune that

haunts Toby still; when he wants to get into a mood, he puts it on repeat on his iPod.

That evening, he brings the fruits of his research to his father as they eat one of the cook's fancy, unappreciated creations—chicken done with many extra touches—but it's the plain rice that is actually finished by both father and son.

There's this app called Viber. People can text each other and it disappears without a trace. So even if I check his phone—

You don't even try!

Not everyone is like Martin, O.K.? Also, this guy's been climbing the rankings—he's not going to risk everything.

You don't know that!

Maybe we should stop hosting them, then, Toby says.

Is that what you want?

Not me. But it seems like you don't want to anymore.

I do this for you. Everything I do is for you. Toby's father punctures the space between them with a fork—each *you* a thrust, as if he means to dig the tines into his son's flesh.

Stop saying that!

Doesn't matter if you don't want to hear—is still true.

Let's stop hosting them, then, Toby repeats. After Pavel—goodbye to everything.

After a moment, Toby's father says, again, Is that what you want?

No! Of course not! But that's what you're forcing me to say!

Frankly, Toby doesn't like this year's visitor, the Czech Pavel, who is either being served his own meal in the visitors' wing of the house or is outside, returning balls from one or both of their ball machines on the hard court, to train for his first-round match. Tough to get away from the stereotypes that are a by-product of being a United Nations over the years: the Eastern Europeans are prickly, moody; the Canadians are super friendly; the Indians are open, a smile in their speaking voices; the Africans and South Americans are full of swagger, and they tend to stand far behind the baseline when playing. The Chinese who came up in the national academies—they are traditionalists, counterpunchers, while the one who sought training abroad, away from the government minders, styled his game on Laver, Sampras, aiming to be part of the new-old wave resurrecting a serve-and-volley M.O.

You wait and see, Toby's father says.

See what?

This guy? He will disappoint us, too.

Toby doesn't say, He already has. Because, as soon as Toby picked Pavel up at the airport, he knew there would be no late-night toking sessions, no drives around town, no practice games, and, most disappointing of all, no extended discussions about the meaning of life.

Pavel wins his first round, as Toby and his father watch from the stands. It's an uncomplicated affair, two straight sets, a break of serve in each. The opponent, from Colombia, is a three-stroke guy; getting him into a rally, Pavel consistently earns an error on the fourth or fifth shot.

Toby is pretty subdued with his applause. But Pavel, meeting them afterward, acts as if he hadn't noticed. He envelops each of them in a hug, asking if it's all right that he wants a hamburger and a milkshake to celebrate, and do they know where to go? Afterward, he adds, he would be happy to practice with Toby on the family hard court—to assess the boy's game and offer adjustments and tips. Sorry he has waited till now, but he's been too

nervous; part of his pre-tournament superstition involves keeping himself to himself.

Toby tells Pavel about the swans, about spoiling them with gourmet croutons.

What are croutons?

Toby tries to explain a few times before giving up.

Toby makes the universal sign for toking, and Pavel says that he does not understand. It takes Toby several beats to realize that Pavel is entirely serious, and then he gives up on that, too.

Pavel's diagnosis of Toby's game: the young man doesn't have the legs. He needs a lower-body boost to funnel power into his weak serve, and he has to improve his speed if he wants to retrieve balls hit into the corners. Let's do drills, Pavel says. After thirty minutes, Toby's heart rate is out of this world, his face crazy. He has to lie down by the baseline, looking up at the sky, which takes a long time to resolve. Am I working you too hard? Pavel asks, not really interested in the answer. He apologizes, sits down by Toby. It's O.K.—this is a good start, Pavel says. You want to be professional, right? It takes a moment for Pavel to realize that Toby has been outside his body for a while.

So the two are silent. They can hardly hear the cars on the road that skirts the beach. The din is absorbed by the trees and shrubs that shield the property from view. A row of giant green Q-tips.

Toby sits up to signal that he has reëntered this life. He blinks, smiles.

Sorry, Pavel repeats.

After a while, Toby says, I can't be professional.

I thought your father said—

We tried, Toby says. He enrolled me at the Nick Bollettieri Academy.

Pavel whistles. That's a lot of money, he declares. And then, all at once, he understands his stupidity. But, of course . . . His hands, gesturing at the court, at the La Jolla air, complete his sentence. This is how recent? he asks.

When I was fourteen. And fifteen.

So what happened?

Toby considers his reply. I couldn't stand the instructors, he says, after some thought. And also the other students. And also Florida.

But Florida is like here, Pavel says. Same weather, same cars. And then he adds, I hate Florida, too. And then he tells Toby about his visits to the state: a handful of Challengers, and before that, when his rankings were "in the sewer," a handful of Futures; the grind of chasing the sun at its height worldwide, scrambling for the meagre points on offer, for the small pots that the winners take home. Toby has heard the Indian, the Chinese, the Canadian, the

Chilean, the Mozambiquan, the Moroccan, the Thai, and the Brazilian versions of this story, the proportions of joy and desperation and grit different in each. These tennis hopefuls have to rely on the largesse of people like Toby's father, and often the plane tickets to the events cost more than they can hope to win. Plus there are the meals. Plus the expense of maintaining their equipment, their bodies. An injury? Forget about it—learn to play hobbled or go back home and sell insurance, daydreaming about a life of sturdier luck and televised glory. Because these events at the Challenger level—you rarely get many spectators, much less a broadcast camera.

You ready for more? Pavel asks. They do new drills. The goal is to not hit the ball the same way twice in a row: vary the spin, the speed, the strength. First, both men stand at the baseline, going back and forth, playing the plush metronome of the game. Good, Pavel judges. And then it's Toby's turn to move up to the service box, to get used to taking control at the net. Good, Pavel says again. Not bad. Toby asks if Pavel's routine allows for drinks. He leads the Czech to the bar cart in the billiards room. Puts two tumblers down on the cart top and drops in ice from a mini-fridge by the sink. For Pavel, it's whiskey. Toby makes himself a gin-and-tonic. Cheers, they say, clinking glasses.

"I've got a bullet-pointed list of the ways I'd like you to surprise me."

Your dad, he makes his money from gambling? Pavel says, while staring at a limited-edition Damien Hirst print on the wall.

What? Toby's shoulders go up.

He has casino, no?

Oh. Yes. Yes.

What do you think I mean?

I forget about the casinos sometimes, Toby says.

Shall we play? Pavel indicates the billiards table.

Pavel gets to break.

Who is your favorite player? he asks.

Toby turns the question back on Pavel. Who is yours?

Of course, Federer, Pavel replies. Don't tell me yours. I can guess. Djokovic.

No! It's Nadal. Why do you say, Federer, *of course*?

Are you shitting me? Federer is the greatest. Of all time. If you say Nadal is greatest, I beat you with this stick. It's not clear whether or not Pavel is joking. He chases balls around the table until he misses.

But Nadal *owns* Federer! How can you be the greatest if someone has so many wins over you? And, besides, Nadal is the best competitor.

Pavel's tone gets nasal; his words, though gibberish, are just clear enough for Toby to understand that his last statement is being mimicked satirically. Federer is once-in-lifetime event, Pavel says. Like Mozart. Like Beethoven. When he plays, there is music. Well, of course, there is big silence. Because no one wants to miss anything. But the ball—it waits for his racket. I wish I could play like that! And your body—your body is just an illusion. You are here on this part of the court, but is that really true, because how can you be in that other part of the court in the wink of the eye? All the time, anticipating, anticipating—what is going to be the next ball? Radar, sonar—so precise, so beautiful.

Toby won't say so, but this Czech guy is paying back his free room and board in spades. Conversation like this raises Toby's temperature. Even if Pavel is a bully. For the first time since Toby picked him up from the airport, he is evincing *passion*: Mozart, Beethoven, radar, beautiful. Not even winning earlier in the day hastened his pace to the net to shake hands with his opponent. The requested hamburger and milkshake did not produce a smile. But now? Through talk of Federer, he's revealing his heart: he loves tennis; it's the only way of life for him. It is not enough to tire your body with play; away from the court, the discipline has to be kept alive through ardent discussion. But most of the time Pavel won't cop to it. Complaint comes easier, is more sporting. By listing his grievances, he is participating in the general fellowship of those

who toil in the Challenger levels. If tennis were a cosmology, the regular tour would be heaven, and Futures, the lowest level, its hell, where all matches are one endless slog of energy and spiritual depletion, an exquisite torture you must pay to be allowed to suffer. In between, with the higher level perpetually out of reach and the lower far too close for comfort, is where the La Jolla event and hundreds of others like it sit: Challengers. And when you play in the Challenger ranks—schlepping yourself economy, relying on local aficionados to provide housing in exchange for proximity to the tennis "life style" or checking into cheapo lodgings on the far outskirts of the competition locations and splitting the cost of food and cars with other players—what is challenged most is your continuing devotion to the game.

AUBADE

Good morning to what's left and what has gone.
No more of my dense cries and heavy songs
about time's hardships, my mood, gunfights in schools,
our murderous American sunshine.
I want a looser grip, a sweeter lightness
and grace and mercy around us, plainer talk

while my neighborhood's wild parrots squawk
and flash their smart immigrant finery
and acute green wings over treetops and roofs,
and Jimmy starts his Tuesday picking through
trash bins, fifteen years now, set your watch.
Buongiorno, too, you kestrel in the blue,

ignorant of tech genius and real estate.
It's a happy day to begin happy days
to come. My friends won't have to remind me
to say thank you, excuse me, please, how nice.
The glory of the casual and destined,
last month's blue moon, the orbed orange shade

Six months ago, men Toby did not know came to the front gate and wouldn't leave the buzzer alone. He delayed them for as long as he could, but the family lawyer's phone was going to voice mail, and the nanny, a Portuguese woman who'd been lured Stateside by Toby's father with the promise of an independent life she did not have the temperament to indulge, was even more frightened than he was. Most of all, he was intimidated by the I.D.s and badges that he couldn't—on the tiny security screen—read.

He took a deep breath before meeting the men at the top of the driveway. He was prepared to bar entry into the house. It helped that he was a head taller than all but one of them. My father isn't home, he told them. He's in Macao. He has businesses there.

We need to speak to him, they said. To a man, none of them had eyes, only dark glasses.

Three weeks later, they got their wish. By then, his father was lawyered up, and it was the suited representative who answered all the questions, his father contributing only whispered curses in Cantonese.

Yes, he makes his living from gamblers and gambling, but he has nothing to do with any of these accusations. No, actually, he would have more respect for them if they came right out with accusations, instead of confronting him with—what are these, *hints*? Hints and implications. Yes, he understands how it could appear that he and the guest player would have had plenty of time to collude, seeing as his home was open to the guest. But had they taken a look inside, and would it be so far-fetched to assume, given the size of the property, that he and the player had barely seen each other the entire time? And, most important, didn't the guest, Mahr-*teen* Lemebel, of Chile, ranked three-hundred-and-fifty-eighth in the world, have a prior history? Why else would they have been keeping an eye on him, flagging in particular his poor performance at the Diamond Club?

Don't think that Toby's father is unaware of the industry's need to save face: tennis bigwigs, under pressure to confront the sport's slack oversight of illegal gambling, had finally rounded up culprits—and, of course, the names named, the athletes sacrificed, would come from the lower rungs, easy scapegoats, and the disgraceful authorities would get to grandstand in front of an assembled gallery, pretending that the problem had been adequately addressed.

And where was the digital trail that linked Lemebel to his hapless La Jolla host, who even wrote checks to his guests to help them cover the costly overhead of the profession and keep a struggling dream alive for another half year or so?

So he admits to having written Mr. Lemebel a check?

He admits to having written each of his tennis players a check, going back ten-plus years! Could they produce the texts from him to Lemebel asking the player to throw a set, or the whole match, with a corresponding dollar payment for each lousy eventuality? Of course they couldn't! Because no such communication existed!

Forced to alter his routine and to spend even more time with a son he knew to be a dud, Toby's father upped his rages. The drinking became a twenty-four-hour phenomenon. On the plus side: the Steve McQueen line, being a little too close to home, was retired. Instead, it was Martin-this and Martin-that. Faggot Chilean, fucking cheat. I knew there was something fishy about that third-round loss. Martin had been in total control (up by a set and on the verge of converting a break point in the second, pivotal set) and Toby's father was supposed to swallow the Chilean's sudden inability to serve, believe that his swinging arm mistimed the hair-

of last week's eclipse. Good morning in
the afternoon to the cranked-up cockatoo
outside my café, on my neighbor's shoulder,
my constant strangers, each day at 4 P.M.
I love morning's unmenacing purpled beauty,
its silvered extremities, how it tamps beginnings

but cheers us through sunrise's slow ascending
flannel blue. Say this, say that, this fair hour
we want to feel as hope, as I write now
past midnight: I'm not waiting for day but know
it's here, a California sun rising on
our Americas, on schoolkids, gun nuts, nomads,

and megachurch and gospel choirs that sing
to heal the hearts of shopkeepers and cops,
poets, snowplow drivers, unionists.
I shout morning blessings on them, O world
of chronic pain and tenderness. Dear day,
protect me and our common. Sponsor us.

—*W. S. Di Piero*

breadth difference between in and out, over and over again? Of course, it's so clear *now:* for a privately negotiated fee, Martin had agreed to cede the match to his lesser-ranked opponent, thereby enriching bettors who'd placed money, hundreds upon thousands, on the greater odds that the man across the net from Martin, so inexperienced in victory, would be the one to move on to the next round. And to think that the support check Toby's father had given him was ten thousand more than usual—because Martin had moved him with his tales of growing up on the wrong side of the Chilean economic divide! No other boy of Martin's class had even thought to pick up the game, having no access to private courts or coaching fees. How many years had he persisted with a racket held together with tape? Days spent skulking around the public courts and even some of the exclusive ones, hoping for turned backs so that he could make away with rogue tennis balls. Playing either in the early mornings or late at night, when everyone else was gone, hitting ceaselessly into the void.

This was probably all true—a way for Martin to deflect judgment for what he was later caught doing, a way of laying the groundwork for cause, as well as affecting a soulfulness that loosened his sponsor's check-writing hand. As they say in Chinese business circles: *win-win*.

Toby's father had boasted to the Chilean of his son's tennis glory, the private coaches, in addition to the first-rank instruction he was receiving from the taskmasters at Bollettieri. And Toby had even won a score of matches, getting to the semifinals of a far-flung juniors and to the finals of another—nothing was a fluke and now everything was wasted. Don't think Toby's father can't smell the marijuana wafting from Toby's part of the house—don't think he doesn't know all about marijuana!

And Toby's reply, always: *I could never be Nadal*.

Who's asking you to be Rafael Nadal! His father's voice was booming, his manner full of threat. He'd even put his tumbler of Scotch down on the dining table.

You don't understand! If I can't play as beautiful, I'd rather not play at all!

Stupid high ideas! All my fault, because I raise you in this environment. Give you everything I don't have when I was growing up. Only son, raised like a prince, don't know how to cope with hardship. One setback and immediately want to quit. Should have sent you to the old country, live with my father and mother—see if they let you sleep all day with that marijuana-marijuana!

You don't have to worry—I'm going to college, and you won't have to see me for years!

What college will take you, tell me that!

With your money? Every one of them!

Hey! Where you going! Don't turn your back on me. You think you can pay your way for everything, and everything will be all right?

Why not? Toby said. It's the lesson you taught me.

O.K. From now on—no allowance!

Of course Toby had had to slink back, like a wet cat. Licking his paws and blinking, before finally rubbing himself against the old man. Sorry, Dad. I'll try again with tennis, if that's what you want.

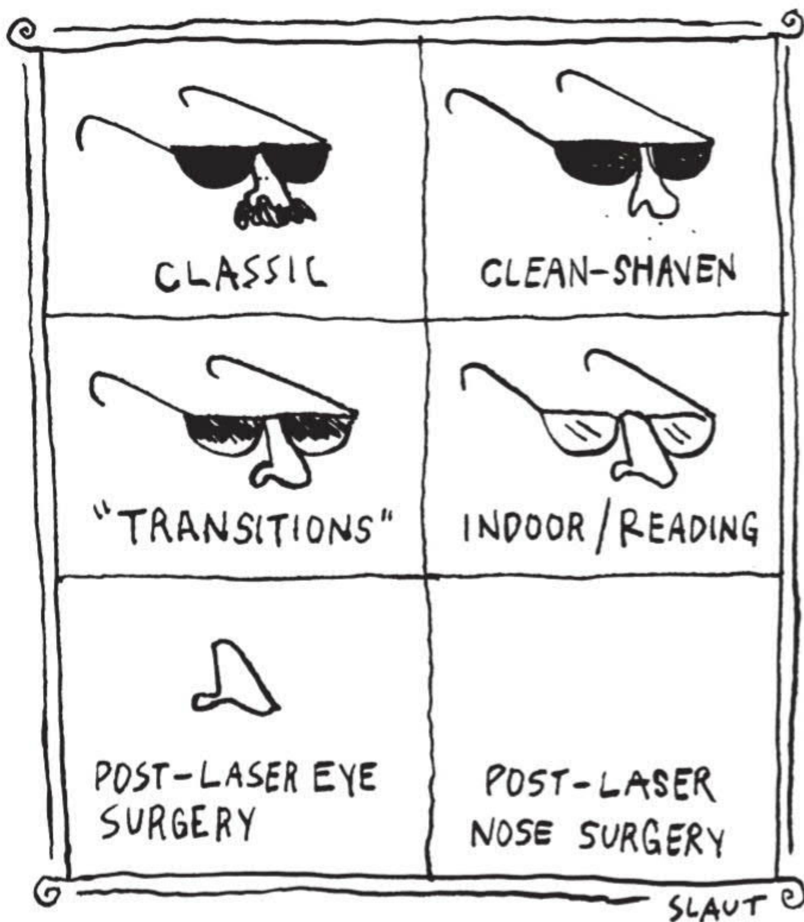
Toby's father tender, too. Not important what I want—what do *you* want?

You don't want to hear it, but I will never be good enough. It's not about laziness. Talk to the physio: my quick-twitch muscles, there aren't enough of them. And my hand-eye coördination: you can't teach stuff like that.

Toby's father ignored the information. What's wrong with your body? Is much better than mine. You skinny, I am fat. You still young, I am old-old. He waited a moment before repeating, with great disgust: Old.

Pavel wins the next round, and the round after that. He also claims the quarter-finals, where he reveals himself to be a nascent serve-and-volleyer. Finicky, though—having to hit more than one approach shot before he finally gets to net, as if never trusting that it's the right time to come in. Each of these is a mere two-set fight, and, finally, Toby's father is again the gregarious host of old. No more talk of cheating, of Martin the Sequel.

After the second-round match, Toby's father took them to the Empire Dragon at the mall, inaugurating a custom: a hearty Chinese banquet to celebrate victory. With many courses and much talk of tennis. Tennis dreams. Luckily, Pavel loves Chinese. The grease



and the salt—who cares? He'll wake up with heavy legs, but they will burn for only the first ten minutes of his five-mile run to and along the beach and back. Then it's drills with Toby on the family hard court, a near-exact replica of the surface at the Diamond Club. And, for the hour before the day's match, it's Survivor's "Eye of the Tiger" over and over, then, once the match has started, nothing but his head inside a towel between games, though there is not much of a crowd to block out—Toby and Toby's father, the other La Jolla grandees who are hosting his opponents, plus scattered club members and loitering U.C.S.D. students. If he wins the tournament, there are a hundred points on offer. Rise and rise and rise through the ranks. The dream of qualifying for one of the big-time tournaments known as a Grand Slam is never far away. Even to qualify for the pre-tournament qualifying, where a field of a hundred and twenty-eight is narrowed down to sixteen lucky entrants, who, having already made it through three rounds before the main Grand Slam began, are expected simply to be chum for the fresher, seeded players.

Pavel does win the Diamond Club. It's a first for Toby and his father: nobody they've ever hosted has won; the closest they came was a semifinalist, Pratesh, who had to retire with a hobbled ankle. They have sushi in honor of the triumph. While they're waiting for their green-tea ice cream at the end of dinner, Toby's father slides an envelope to Pavel's side of the table. A well-worn ritual. What is this? Pavel asks. Toby's father just raises his chin, meaning, Go on, open it. He smiles.

Discovering the check—as always, made out to Cash—Pavel looks at Toby, then at Toby's father. I don't understand. This is also the prize?

This is extra, Toby's father says.

I don't understand.

Consider it a gift. For your travels. Your equipment. If you're holding back from hiring a coach, now you can. Go up even higher in the rankings!

No, no. Pavel puts the check back in the envelope and hands it to Toby's father, whose mouth is open. Who has to make a concerted effort to put his face back in place. I don't need this, Pavel says. Between his first and second utterances, Pavel has switched tones. He's become conciliatory, polite, taking into account Toby's father's hurt feelings. And then he offers this explanation: Thank you, but my father, he works in Paris in a pharmaceutical company. I would not be doing this without him. He gives me everything I need, and we have an agreement that I try my very best. I am lucky that I have this father: his dream and mine are the same.

This is the complete opposite of Martin, with his patched-together racket and that hangdog look. Pavel is someone, if not of Toby's and Toby's father's class then very close to it. Toby has a cousin in the pharmaceutical industry, who lives in New York and London and owns a place in each city. The cousin's Instagram is a wet dream of exotic locations: Abu Dhabi, Phuket, Capri—all with the same sunset, the same tedious vista of jewelled water and pristine beach. I mean, why not just save yourself the hassle and stand in front of a revolving painted backdrop, with an ever-replenishing blunt between your fingers? Toby thinks.

No wonder Pavel loves Federer. His love for Federer, in light of this revelation, is pure class allegiance. Federer, the silky Swiss spokesman for Moët & Chandon, for Rolex.

If that is true, then how does Toby account for his own Nadal mania? It's not for the off-court Nadal, who is a

millionaire many times over, but for the player who has the press writing about the tennis court as a bullring in which he's not a minimalist matador of a few decisive moves but the lowliest of the low—the bull, with his grunts and his flexed eyebrows. For Nadal, as for no other player, victory is hard work. How does lazy Toby explain his fervent admiration for somebody who, as the press notes, "fights for every point"? But isn't that the essence of dreaming—wanting to be somebody you're not?

The following morning, Toby drops Pavel off at the airport, from where he is flying to Florida, for the next event. The Czech is as much of a stranger as he was on the day that Toby picked him up. Toby notices that Pavel is headed directly to the boarding gate, with a pre-screened ticket. Also, when the plane boards, he'll have priority over other passengers, which costs extra.

Pavel didn't need the tournament-winner check the way Martin did. He would never have conspired, as the Chilean had, to earn the equivalent—or maybe more—through extracurricular wranglings, which have cost Martin far more than he anticipated or is capable of paying. How unfair life is.

Another unfair fact of life: although he nabbed the champion's trophy at the Diamond Club, Pavel is not even half as talented as Martin, who, if he had not hooked up with criminal colleagues, might have gone all the way in La Jolla.

One shot in particular to illustrate Martin's skill, something he hit over and over during his two rounds of genuine play: he is in the service box by this point, having sent a shot deep, barely allowing his opponent to get the ball over the net, and the ball meets his racket not at the center, where the logo is, but on the outer rim, the racket held nearly vertically, as if he were using it to shield himself, and with the softest—*the softest*—grip, so soft that the handle is nearly unclasped, tapping, kissing the ball, which obliges by swooning just onto the other side, where, once it greets the court, it falls away with the slightest postcoital shiver. No opponent, regardless how speedy his legs, can do anything but gesture at a return, with a cry of futility that masks the admiration he must certainly feel for having been dispatched with such subdued poetry.

As before, Toby takes the precaution of closing the curtains, and he sits facing the door, in case his father should decide to walk in, though how could he, since Toby has locked himself in?

Martin looks terrible. Well, it's 4 A.M. in Santiago. He has stayed up to be able to make this assignation.

How are you? Martin says. You look good. Becoming more of a man every day.

Toby asks him about Pavel. Does Martin know the Czech player?

I don't think I ever played that guy. His ranking sounds way higher than mine.

He won.

If I had a beer I would be making a toast.

How is your case going? Toby asks. He would not normally go straight into business, but he doesn't know what else to say. This is his third and, he hopes, last encounter with Martin, though he's sure that Martin wants their sessions to drag on.

Martin is appealing his lifetime suspension from the game. He tells Toby his lawyer is confident that they can get the ban down to two years—maybe one year with community service, which

would involve being the South American face of an advertorial about the ills of tennis gambling and match-fixing. The Chilean has already given up his underworld contacts to the tennis authorities, so he has to produce other bargaining chips. Not so smart, but this is retrospective wisdom.

How is the weather there? A dead conversational gambit that Toby hopes will signal to Martin that he has fallen out of love.

The only good thing about being stuck here is the weather, Martin says. It's hot. I don't like the cold. I don't think I can live in a cold place. Martin smiles. It's hot where I am, and it's hot where you are. Why don't we make it the same hot?

Toby should not have blabbed about being in love with Nadal. Both the stellar athlete and Nadal the Torso. Should not have given the Chilean another item in the drop-down menu of disadvantages to capitalize on. He sighs. I already told you. My father doesn't want you here.

But after he goes back to Macao. He doesn't have to know. Just you and me.

He's staying put this year.

You are lying to me, Toby. I thought we were friends.

I'm not lying.

O.K., O.K. Martin is nodding. I will keep apologizing until your father accepts. You are telling him my apologies, right?

Yes.

Are you sure?

Whenever I can, I'm repeating what you say.

I don't want to keep trying and he hangs up on me. So it has to be through you. Are you trying?

I already told you.

O.K., it's late, and I do not want to be a drag. You say you're telling, and I have to believe you.

Behind Martin, Toby can't make out much of anything. Is that a bed frame? Are there windows, or could that be a trick of the video grain? Did Martin turn out all the lights to save on electricity? Or so as not to spoil the fiction of his poverty?

I swear, I'm not lying, Toby says.

You are no longer my friend. I understand. I disappoint you. This is my life: I disappoint so many people. But you have to understand—

I do, Martin.

—you have to believe me, I would not do that thing if I do not have to. I need the money. So I was blinded because the money is quick. Who wouldn't be, in my situation? This is as much as Martin has talked about his cheating. Frankly, Toby does not have the heart to press him on the details. He has the most important part: the impossibility of Martin's making

a living from the thing he loves most.

Did I tell you I had to sell my guitar to be able to buy a new racket? Martin asks. When I was sixteen, seventeen?

Yes.

I can tell from your voice—you are tired of my stories. You think they are bullshit.

That's not true. I'm here, aren't I? Just as I promised. Have I ever not shown up?

It's O.K. I deserve it. I exaggerate many things, but this I do not exaggerate: my life here is poor. Do you know how much they are paying me at the club to teach the rich people tennis? Only a little more than the waiters. I can pay for my apartment and food, and that's it. At least when I'm competing I am travelling—I am outside my life and outside my head. They say that my life—my *former* life—is like being a machine: you just keep hitting the ball, over and over. I mean, I used to agree. But now I realize: yes, it is like being a machine, but a machine *with soul*. You are always fighting to keep the ball alive. To never let the ball die on your side—that is the spirit. Always this fighting, sweating, the breathing of your mouth, like you are singing a song of air. And the two, three people watching—in my imagination, it is two thousand, one half of them cheering my name: Mahr-*teen!* Mahr-*teen!* Mahr-*teen!* So that my name isn't even my name anymore, but like the title on a poster. Like "Evita." Or "Paddington." And everyone—the people watching and myself—we all want the same result: not just that I win but that I *deserve* to win because if I play so beautiful how is it possible that I don't win? Every day I wait for the decision of those motherfucker officers. That they will say, You make a mistake, but we give you another chance. Everyone deserves a second chance. That is all I am asking. And then it doesn't matter if I am poor. I can stand to be poor then, so long as I am doing the thing I love.

As usual, Martin is saying all the right things. Either he has his act down or he is genuine. Most likely both.

I can promise you this, Martin says. If I was in La Jolla, it would be the summer of your life!

Toby's face and shoulders suddenly start to itch. His nails find the spot, only for the spot to move.

What is wrong with you? Martin moves closer to the camera, all eyeball.

Nothing.

I can put lotion on it if I was there!

Toby has dreams that he won't confess to Martin. Because to talk about dreams is to pour dousing sunlight on them. He and Martin go to the zoo and kidnap the swans: that is one dream. Although he understands that, in this instance, Martin is a proxy for Apichat and for Albert from Canada, although Toby and Albert never fooled around, just flirted. At least, Toby thinks they flirted. Also, and most wincingly, Martin could never be more than a pale stand-in for Romiro, the only boy Toby got close to at Bollettieri. He and Romiro would often wander off the trails in one of the local parks. Amid trees and nature, they would take turns going down on each other, hesitantly at first, and then with studious lasciviousness.

I have to go, Toby says.

So soon? What you have to do?

I have to let you go.

You are my only friend, Martin says.

Thank you.

Maybe tomorrow we can talk again?

Maybe. What he doesn't say: Let me go.

Wait. Don't say goodbye yet. I have one request.

What.

Don't think I am taking advantage, Martin says. Because you are the only one I can ask. Can you PayPal me five hundred?

O.K. Toby doesn't even ask about his father's check. The lawyer gobbling it all up. He feels his resolve to be done with Martin growing smaller—a dot on the horizon.

You'll do it? You're the best.

This is the last time. My dad is cutting me off.

Wait. One thousand, then.

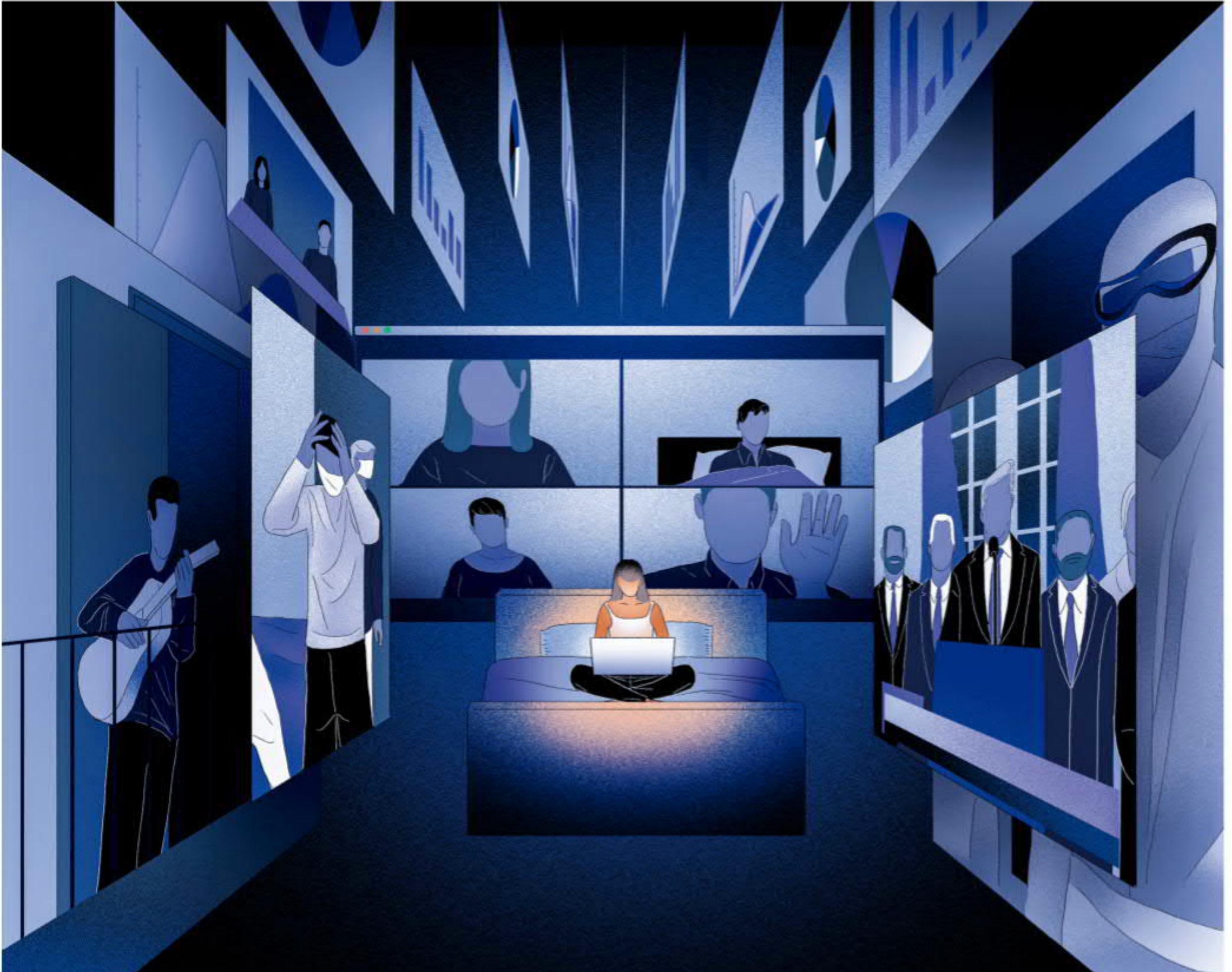
I don't have that much! What he'd really like to say: How much for you never to contact me again? He pictures the check that Pavel rejected, which his father ripped up in disgust.

You have everything! Martin says. O.K. Seven hundred. And fifty. Seven-fifty. Please. Please?

O.K. But that's it. Yet again, he understands that this will not be the last of Martin. And not just because of the Chilean's persistence but also, and mostly, because of Toby, who is girding himself for a slate of future houseguests who skew more Pavel than otherwise: Pavels Two through Ten. Not so much in their wealth but in their diffidence. An irritating self-sufficiency. Martin is all Toby has. Martin is the proverbial bird in the hand.

The money—it is all for the dream, Martin says. To play again. To be on the court. Befitting the subject, his voice is dreamy, far away. A 4 A.M. tone. Do you know what they are telling me? If I come back? I will have to start at the very bottom. That's right—Futures. Tashkent—do you know where that is? Do you know they have an event in Tashkent? Camels and yaks watching you sweat for points. It's like a joke to call it Futures when you are going into the past. My previous ranking I will give up and I have to start at zero. I will do it, too. Happy for me that day. I lie alone, and I can't wait for the next day to come, and the next. Time will move. And soon my problem will be fixed. Everyone in Santiago—my father, my brothers and sisters, the people at the club—they tell me to give up. Martin, you are twenty-five, it is time to grow up. Maybe this cheating is actually a blessing. It is right at the center of the "X" that is your life: in one direction, growing up; in the other, staying the same. What will you choose? That is my father. Also my older brother. Sometimes I get so lonely I talk to people waiting for the bus. I tell them my situation—not everything but close to it. They are quiet, but I can see in their eyes: this is all a dream, and it is time to grow up. Everywhere I turn, there are the same words: grow up. I never answer them, because I am humbled. It is my own fault that I cannot defend myself, because after what I have done who will listen to me? But if I could answer them I would say, Not yet to grow up. I need more time. Please. More time. The dream is not dead. There is still hope. Only after hope dies, then I will agree: yes, I can grow up. But not before. Only till then. Please. And, once more, he plays the word for the most forlorn—and to Toby—heartsore beat: *Please*. ♦

NEWYORKER.COM
Han Ong on the language of tennis.



ON TELEVISION

WHAT WE'RE WATCHING

In our self-isolation, video has replaced social life, and TV is grappling with a new reality.

BY DOREEN ST. FÉLIX

On the evening of March 6th, I went out to eat with friends in Brooklyn. The restaurant was a no-nonsense family-run spot. There was a flat-screen television mounted on the wall, considerately out of the sight lines of most diners. As we got up to leave after finishing, a flash of red colonized my peripheral vision. I turned to get a better look. David Muir was hosting a special edition of "20/20." Analysts were seated around a curved desk, typing on tablets. ABC had transformed the show's studio into a sloping, L.E.D.-striped panoptic lair for the election—which was, just days after Super Tuesday, the story of the year. Walls doubled as screens, but the images were of empty town squares in Italy, and the Grand Princess cruise ship, still stranded somewhere in the Pacific, miles from the Port of Oakland. On the floor of the studio was what looked like an illuminated election map that had been repurposed to highlight the states with confirmed cases of the coronavirus, which were shaded blood red. Outside the restaurant, we

Live streaming, which once seemed to presage the dissolution of human intimacy, now looks like its preservation.

ILLUSTRATION BY WENKAI MAO

discussed the aesthetics of breaking news, the almost-camp spectacle apparently required for the circulation of information in dire times.

The entire country is now red. The pandemic has jammed the churn of social life, pausing human interaction in medias res. Theatres, concert venues, and cinemas have closed. Restaurants in New York are open only for takeout and delivery. What else is there to do but watch TV? Friends ask for recommendations. ("High Maintenance" if you're missing your neighbors; "The Leftovers" if you're a masochist.) I quite liked "Devs," a brutally elegant work of science fiction, set in a jaundiced San Francisco in the near future, and would have reviewed it, had the world not changed.

It has been a long time since "television" conjured the box around which families once gathered to watch "The Ed Sullivan Show" or to first glimpse the surface of the moon; in this century, it encompasses whatever can be streamed via a Roku, a PlayStation, or an iPhone. But this crisis has already created a culture. As we self-isolate, the Internet has become host to an ambient, crowdsourced documentary of the time, and video is the anxious medium of social life. On Instagram, a friend has shared communiqués from a young doctor telling New Yorkers what to do if they experience shortness of breath. The illustrator Wendy MacNaughton begins her daily drawing classes on Instagram Live by stretching to Madness's "Our House"; John Legend streamed a live concert from his living room with his wife, Chrissy Teigen, perched on the piano. The migration of social activities to the Internet predates our current emergency by decades, but live streaming, which once seemed to presage the dissolution of human intimacy, now looks like its preservation.

I've also watched many hours of actual TV. Days before the general public seemed to understand how social distancing could help "flatten the curve," shows made a display of responsible citizenship. The sudden absence of live in-studio audiences was pleasingly absurd. "Welcome to 'The View'!" Whoopi Goldberg shouted, eight times, to no one, during a live taping. Subbing for Jimmy Kimmel, Pete Buttigieg was a shy but game entertainer-politician, delivering an opening monologue to his husband, Chasten, and a handful of "Kimmel" team members. He roasted the Trumps, implored vigilance in the face of the pandemic, and interviewed Patrick Stewart, sharing a photo of himself as a child in a Starfleet uniform. But, as the week went on, resilience seemed to waver. Joy Behar, who is seventy-seven, announced that she would stop coming to tapings of "The View."

I am not the first person to find that the most innocuous aspects of TV watching now induce a reflexive unease. On "American Idol," the hosts' displays of consolation toward eliminated contestants, conveyed through the rubbing of the singers' shoulders, made me nervous. Earlier this month, watching "The Bachelor," I had been annoyed by Peter's disrespect of Hannah Ann; two weeks ago, I couldn't stand the incessant stroking of faces. Commercials advertising fast food are orgiastic displays of careless skin contact. In the U.K., KFC's "finger-lickin' good" ads have been pulled.

On Sunday, after the Diocese of Brooklyn announced the suspension of Mass, I watched a service streamed from the St. James Cathedral Basilica, on the New Evangelization Television channel. At any other time, the empty pews would have offered further proof of the institution's decline. Later that day, driving up Flatbush Avenue for last-minute provisions, I watched a woman run across the street to a storefront black church, where members of the congregation were dancing and sweating in close quarters. In the evening, the Democratic Presidential debate felt like a consummation of the inevitable. The podiums were six feet apart; Joe Biden and Bernie Sanders greeted each other with an elbow bump. After Sanders challenged Biden on his health-care policy, Biden said that he didn't want to get into a "back-and-forth, in terms of our politics," and exploited a hunger for stirring rhetoric. "We are at war with a virus," he said.

On March 12th, "The Late Show with Stephen Colbert" announced that it would stop production altogether. Four days later, when New York State banned gatherings of more than fifty people, Colbert surprised viewers with a monologue recorded in his bathtub. Immersed in bubbles, fully suited, he provided his signature mix of acid critique and avuncular reassurance. The segment—which was followed by a rerun—looked like it was filmed with an iPhone. "Hey, everybody! Hi!" Colbert said. "Welcome to my bathroom."

These days, theatrics make public figures seem untrustworthy; the real heroes have no need for laurels. At press conferences, governors and mayors have mostly abandoned speechifying in favor of flat statements. Andrew Cuomo, the governor of New York, in a brown leather jacket and a white baseball cap, is a steadying figure. But even President Trump has dialled down the bombast. Sweating and breathing heavily as he pronounced from the Oval Office that America would beat the coronavirus, he appeared to represent the ailing global gerontocracy. "I will always put the well-being of America first," he said earlier this month. Last week, he seemed to have ceded the role of steward to Anthony Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. Fauci has appeared on Sunday talk shows and CNN panels, and is now a comforting presence at Trump pressers, standing to the side, taking questions from reporters after Trump and Mike Pence rattle off their false promises. The President claimed that the pandemic was under "tremendous control"; on CNN's "State of the Union," Fauci straightforwardly contradicted him. "People sometimes think that you're overreacting," Fauci said. "I like it when people are thinking I'm overreacting, because that means we're doing it just right."

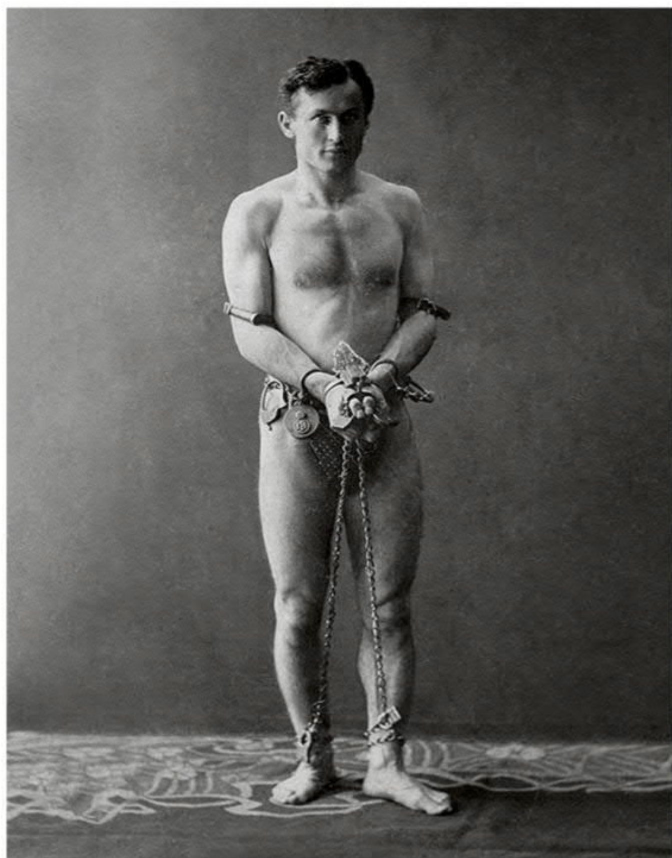
A small, seventy-nine-year-old public servant who barely clears the lectern, Fauci has a distaste for drama, and emanates authority. The President, who initially told the public that the coronavirus would go away, "like a miracle," seemed, last Tuesday, temporarily cowed by Fauci's presence. The next day, Trump told the reporter Yamiche Alcindor that it was correct to call the coronavirus "kung flu" and the "Chinese virus." The racism is tactical, a diversion from the Administration's failures. More embarrassingly, it is also a way of shifting attention from Fauci, who, Trump was forced to concede, had become "a major television star." ♦

A CRITIC AT LARGE

CHAIN ME UP

Harry Houdini and the art of escape.

BY DAVID DENBY



In 1908, Harry Houdini—"The World's Handcuff King and Prison Breaker"—needed a new act. He was thirty-four and had worked in show business for fifteen years. He had toured all over the United States, playing circus sideshows, vaudeville houses, and packed theatres of the Orpheum Circuit. As a beginner, he had performed with trained monkeys and fat ladies; a few years later, he did his tricks in a tuxedo with a boutonnière. In Europe, he had pulled off such stunts as escaping (in 1903) from the "Siberian Transport Cell," a metal safe on wheels that was used to haul political renegades off to prison. It was a time of intense anti-Semitism in Russia, and Houdini, who was Jewish, wanted to flummox the tsarist *politsiya*. Indeed, he was an affront to authorities everywhere. He had conquered inspectors from Berlin and Scotland Yard, who chained him up and then watched, bewildered, as he broke free. But now, having spent most of the previous five years in Europe, he had to conquer America all over again. Never a great illusionist, he lacked mystery and atmosphere; his stagecraft was ordinary. As a mentalist, he would have been shamed by today's master, Derren Brown. With a pack of cards in his hands, Houdini couldn't kiss the hem of the late Ricky Jay's rolled-up sleeve.

Houdini challenged the ultimate reality of death, risking it over and over.

In St. Louis, Houdini and his assistants dragged onto the stage a sixty-gallon milk can, a larger version of the ones delivered to grocery stores. They filled it with water, the excess slopping over the sides as Houdini climbed in. There is a photograph of the act in which Houdini's unsmiling face sticks out above the can (his knees were pulled up to his chest). Members of the local police—with helmets reaching down around their ears and impressively ugly mustaches—stand to the side, looking like nothing so much as the baffled cops who harassed Charlie Chaplin a few years later. The top of the can was padlocked, with Houdini submerged in the water—in later versions, done as promotional stunts, it was milk or beer. The curtain was drawn, and, after a minute or two, the crowd would become fretful. He was holding his breath as he tried to get out. What if he didn't? "Failure means a drowning death," as posters advertising the event warned.

Magic challenges our sense of what's real; Houdini wanted to challenge the ultimate reality of death, by risking it over and over. That risk, he later wrote, is what "attracts us to the man who paints the flagstaff on the tall building, or to the 'human fly,' who scales the walls of the same building. If we knew that there was no possibility of either one of them falling or, if they did fall, that they wouldn't injure themselves in any way, we wouldn't pay any more attention to them than we do a nursemaid wheeling a baby carriage. Therefore, I said to myself, why not give the public a real thrill?" He depended on tricks, but the possibility of an accident or a miscalculation or a clumsy assistant was tangible enough.

Even before the milk-can stunt, Houdini had gone further than other magicians. Starting in San Francisco, in 1899, he often stripped naked in his handcuff routines. He was short but handsome, beautiful, even, with a wide brow, glittering dark eyes, and muscular arms, shoulders, and thighs. He would appear at some grim local jail or state prison, take off his clothes, and, to establish that he wasn't hiding something on his person, undergo an intrusive inspection by a local medical examiner or police surgeon. He would then have himself locked in a cell, encumbered

"Look, I'm sorry to cut you off—it's just that I really can't stand listening to other people's dreams."

with shackles, and would emerge a short time later, holding them in his hand. Yet these simple escapes weren't enough; he needed to outdo himself and astound his audience. In a later version of the milk-can act, called "The Chinese Water Torture Cell," he was lowered, head first, into a large glass-fronted box filled with water. Sometimes knowingly, sometimes not, Houdini evoked actual cruelties—slavery and imprisonment, people cast into filthy cells and tormented for years. Of the glass box, he said, "It smacks of the Dark Ages." He burrowed into the unconscious of the human race, evoking types of public sadism that had been suppressed, only to reëmerge in later eras: his stunts looked backward to the ducking stools of the witch trials and forward to such practices as waterboarding and "enhanced interrogation" under the George W. Bush Administration.

There are daredevils who scale the Eiffel Tower, or leap across the Great Wall of China on a skateboard, or plunge over Niagara Falls in a barrel, but they don't provoke endless interpretation years after their exploits; most movie stuntmen retire into knobby oblivion. Houdini's strangeness and ambition—the nakedness, the liberationist triumphs—still fascinate us. A little guy who always escaped, he flourished in a century that saw mass incarceration, mass murder, the humiliation and destruction of entire populations. A few people, in his own time and in ours, have been convinced that his escapes were literal miracles. Edmund Wilson, more soberly, praised him in 1928 as a disciplined professional, "an audacious and independent being." At the height of his career, he was almost as famous as Chaplin and Rudolph Valentino, both of them immigrants who re-created themselves in a new country eager for fantasy. Of the three, only Houdini risked killing himself on the job.

Two recent books have explored and enlarged the spell of his dominion. In "The Life and Afterlife of Harry Houdini" (Avid Reader), the sportswriter Joe Posnanski recounts his time delving into today's "Houdini World," the peculiar existence of Houdini obsessives—some professional magicians, many just cultists—who gather in clubs and at conventions, rendering homage, repeating stunts, exchanging the tiniest details of Houdini's life. In "Houdini: The Elusive American" (Yale), the biographer Adam Begley tries to say, with good-humored seriousness, what kind of man Houdini was, and what he represented. It is not an easy task. In the familiar style of American popular artists, Houdini refused all interpretation. (John Ford: "I make Westerns." Mel Brooks: "I'm just an entertainer.") It is impossible, however, not to make a symbol out of a man hanging upside down in a straitjacket, sixty feet above Times Square. Almost from the beginning, Harry Houdini suggested some larger principle of being.

He was born Erik Weisz (later Americanized, sort of, to Ehrich Weiss) in Budapest on March 24, 1874. When he was four, he immigrated to this country with his mother and his brothers. His father had left Hungary two years earlier and settled in Appleton, Wisconsin, a mill town near Lake Winnebago, where he found a job as a rabbi. He was no longer young, though, and he didn't speak much English. The fifteen German Jewish families of Appleton fired him after a few years, and the family moved to Milwaukee, where they were often hungry, and then to Manhattan—to a cold-water flat on East Seventy-fifth Street (at the time a slum) and to jobs in the garment industry, cutting the lining of neckties. In New York, Ehrich, watching his father slide into despair and ill health, vowed, like many immigrant children, never to be poor—and, even more important to him, never to allow his mother, Cecilia, whom he adored, to want for anything. Like Al Jolson and Irving Berlin, who were also children of Jewish clergymen, he launched into show business as the way out of ghetto jobs like stitching garments and rolling cigars. It was the first of his escapes.

There is a photo of him as a skinny, angry-looking teen-ager. Like Theodore Roosevelt, the contemporary avatar of self-transformation, he built himself up; he ran, boxed, swam (in the East River), lifted weights, and became both strong and astoundingly flexible. There's no record that he was aware of the Zionist

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agitation in Europe at the time, but he came to represent Max Nordau's ideal of *Muskeljudentum*, or muscular Judaism, with its rejection of male bodies enfeebled by endless study. He spent little time in school and worked at odd jobs; he may have learned the secrets of locks while employed at a locksmith shop. As a child, he had played at conjuring and had dreamed of becoming a trapeze artist. When he was in his late teens, he acquired a used copy of the memoirs of Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin, the French watchmaker who became the great magician of the nineteenth century. Ehrich was so excited about Houdin that he changed his name to Houdini. He thought, Begley says, that the final "i" signified that he was "Houdin-like."

In the eighteen-nineties, small cities and towns had little in the way of live entertainment (burlesque and vaudeville were mostly confined to the big cities), so the arrival of a travelling circus, with its animals, its high-wire acts, its "attractions," was a major event. By 1893, Houdini and his brother Dash, two years younger, were touring as the Brothers Houdini, performing with "freaks," snake charmers, and belly dancers; they shuffled cards, did sleight-of-hand tricks, read the minds of people in the audience. That year, at the World's Columbian Exposition, in Chicago, they first performed an act known as "Metamorphosis." Harry was trussed and tied in a sack, then locked in a trunk, which Dash bound with rope. A curtain concealed them briefly; when it was withdrawn, Dash was the one tied up in the trunk, and Harry was at liberty. The speed of the transfer—mere seconds—was what people marvelled at.

In 1894, Dash was replaced in the trunk by Wilhelmina Beatrice Rahner, or Bess, a pretty, diminutive eighteen-year-old from Brooklyn. Within three weeks of meeting, Harry and she had married, over the objections of her German Catholic mother. The two worked together onstage, on and off, for three decades. Their romantic life, however, remains a mystery: they never had children, and Houdini, in truth, seemed more devoted to his mother. He wrote Bess cloying billets-doux, but he wrote Cecilia passionate letters; he also sent his mother a part of his earnings from Europe, indulged her whims and fantasies, and eventually bundled her, along with Bess, into a Harlem town house just north of Central Park. It's as if he wanted to be a better husband to his mother than his father had been. As Kenneth Silverman detailed, in his 1996 biography, Houdini did have one secret affair, with Jack London's widow, Charmian, but he appears to have run away from it. He was a driven, restless man in his career but not in his romantic life. Indeed, it's not clear whether he was sexual at all—his imprisonments and escapes, his purposeful exhibitionism, may have been all he needed, the ultimate act of sublimation.

During a burlesque tour of New England with Bess, in 1895, he wore handcuffs under the eyes of the police for the first time. For thirty years, he was cuffed and chained in shows, in police stations, in penitentiaries. The police evidently pulled out their strongest equipment for him; locksmiths designed special restraints with multiple locks. By 1906, he was throwing himself, chained, into inhospitable bodies of water, dropping twenty-five feet off the Belle Isle Bridge, for instance, into the freezing Detroit River. In 1915 and after, thousands of onlookers saw him straitjacketed and hanging upside down from a scaffold above the streets of Kansas City, Minneapolis, and many other cities. He'd pull himself up, wriggle free, drop the straitjacket, and spread his arms. The reference to Jesus did not go unnoticed.

The aerial escapades were often staged near a newspaper office. From

the beginning, the excitement about magic shows and outlandish feats was amplified by newspapers that, in this matter, barely observed the distinction between reporting and press-agent copy. In the novel "Ragtime" (1974), in which Houdini appears as a character, E. L. Doctorow re-created the lurid public life of the period just before the First World War. For Doctorow, Houdini was a key player in the history of sensation. Sex scandals, advertising, radio, moving pictures, flying machines, convulsive newspapers, exploding toys—America was going electric, approaching the goal of full-time, full-circuit excitement. Mass culture defined the aspirations of democratic man. The public was avid; Houdini was avid. As Begley says, he was more interested in acclaim than in money.

He taught himself to speak in advanced elocutionary English, and to write in the ornate tones of period ballyhoo; sometimes he used a ghostwriter, but he also composed or dictated stories about himself, proclaiming his greatness in leaflets, flyers, books, and pamphlets. He appeared in a few silent movies in the nineteen-tens and twenties, although he was a terrible actor. In "Houdini," a large-scale Hollywood version of his life from 1953, the angel-faced Tony Curtis—who was also of Hungarian Jewish parentage—gave him a quick-moving grace and an ingenuous charm. But the movie is square, dishonest, and distinctly unmagical. For all his self-promotion, Houdini managed to elude the projections of others.

In 1920, he became friends with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. The creator of the most logical man in popular literature was, paradoxically, devoted to Spiritualism. Doyle was convinced that he had communicated, in séances, with his son Kingsley, who was wounded in the Great War and died in the influenza epidemic of 1918. In between writing stories about Sherlock Holmes, Doyle wrote books announcing that humanity had entered into "new relations with the Unseen"; he believed that Harry Houdini, for one, possessed supernatural powers. Houdini was flattered but disavowed any special help. The friendship proceeded in an amiable manner until June of 1922, when Doyle and Lady Doyle, who was a practicing medium, invited Houdini to their suite at the Ambassador Hotel in Atlantic City. Lady Doyle seated the party around a table, rapped three times, and began communicating with Houdini's adored mother, who had been dead for nine years. (Hearing of the death while in Europe, Houdini had fainted.) She wrote out fifteen pages of messages in

English, a language that Cecilia never spoke. Houdini sat there quietly, thanked his hosts, and departed.

He wanted to reach his mother, but he knew that Spiritualism was a con. In the eighteen-nineties, he and Bess had dabbled in it themselves, researching names at local graveyards the night before summoning the dead in public. In the wake of the Atlantic City disaster, Houdini, now thoroughly enraged, decided to expose the entire movement. He took on famous mediums and began lecturing on "Fraudulent Spiritualistic Phenomena." He testified before Congress about the Spiritualist menace. Travelling all over the country, he interrupted séances, sometimes in disguise (beard, hump), shouting, "I am Houdini!" He flipped over tables and demanded that the lights be turned on, trashing the event for performers and hopeful listeners alike. Why did he care so much? He and the Spiritualists were both engaged in show business. But the Spiritualists, he thought, preyed on the emotions of people in mourning. At the same time, he may have seen Spiritualism as a covert personal assault. Any suggestion of miracles, of God intervening, of spirits getting into the act, took away from the self-generated powers of the Great Houdini.

What he believed in was the art of magic. Starting when he was young, he assembled books, posters, leaflets, and artifacts from magic history, which he loaded into his Harlem town house—in effect, his own museum. He set himself up as the arbiter of who mattered and who didn't. More than a half century later, Ricky Jay did the same thing, with equal fervor; magic, an art based on ephemeral moments and illusion, needs its historians. But Harry Houdini was too egotistical to be fair to everyone. He attacked his progenitor, Robert-Houdin, and hounded his own imitators, as if his risk-taking earned him the right to be the only man on the stage. Although he was the president of the Society of American Magicians for almost a decade, he had no serious disciples—just people obsessed with him, an obsession that, in recent decades, has taken in some reckless kids who have died trying to do their own versions of his stunts. Less grievously, the Houdini cultists, as Posnanski chronicles, devote themselves to the details of his schedule, estimating the truth of this or that rumor about him. They compare notes and try to top one another. They won't let go of him; they appear to be conducting a séance that's perpetually in session.

The climber, it has been said, assaults the mountain "because it's there." But for Houdini nothing was there, except the extinction that he teased and eluded with more and more bizarre feats. For him, a failure of nerve might have been worse than any calamity. Begley lays to rest the legend that Houdini's death, in October, 1926, resulted from a punch to the stomach, though there *were* punches that month, administered in a Montreal hotel room by a McGill student who (with Houdini's consent) sought to test the popular myth that the great man could withstand any blow. But Begley convincingly argues that Houdini was ill beforehand. A couple of days after the Montreal incident, he took the train to Detroit and, refusing to go to the hospital, performed his opening-night show in feverish agony. He died, of a burst appendix and peritonitis, at the age of fifty-two, on October 31st.

He left behind many unfulfilled longings and a legion of interpreters. In a 2001 study, "Houdini, Tarzan, and the Perfect Man," the cultural historian John F. Kasson noted that a man or a woman held naked by uniformed police exists in a state of abject humiliation, with only punishment or death in store. Houdini not only escaped; on a couple of occasions, in penitentiaries, he moved prisoners from one locked cell to another. He was a showoff, a tease, a provocateur. "The people over here, especially Germany, France, Saxony, and Bohemia, fear the Police so much, in fact the police are all mighty," he wrote home, when he was twenty-seven, "and I am the first man that has ever dared them, that is my success." As Kasson says, Houdini's mockery of the police may not have been political in its intent, but it remains stirring as an anti-authoritarian flourish. In Michel Foucault's inescapable text "Discipline and Punish," the philosopher's vision of modernity centers on the subjection of bodies to the protocols of violence and submission; Houdini, as if anticipating his future imprisonment by theory, defied those protocols.

How much of the chained-beauty act, with its bondage-and-discipline overtones, was a case of necessary stagecraft stumbling innocently into perversion? And how much of it was a knowing lure? On the surface, innocence reigned: women were barred from the naked performances in city jails and prisons (men, ostensibly, would not have lustful thoughts). Houdini himself seems not to have attached sexual meaning to anything he did, and perhaps we shouldn't, either. The male torso is a common enough sight. What's extraordinary in Houdini's case is that he presented a naked body *bound*. Looking at photographs of these events, you inevitably think of Michelangelo's "Bound Slave" and "Rebellious Slave" sculptures. The figures, as many have said, appear to be struggling to emerge from the stone they are carved in. Houdini sculpted his own body, and reënacted the annihilation and renewal of that body.

He was, for many, the ultimate immigrant success story—a sort of diminutive Liberty holding aloft a pair of empty handcuffs as his torch. He was the outsider who fights his way out of obscure and even sordid circumstances and finds distinction and public acclaim. He freed the Jewish body from immigrant restraint, giving rise to forlorn hopes that he could have led another kind of exodus. In "Humboldt's Gift," Saul Bellow has his hero, Charlie Citrine, remark about Houdini, "I once speculated whether he hadn't had an intimation of the holocaust and was working out ways to escape from the death camps. Ah! If only European Jewry had learned what he knew." One can hear in that remark a note of mordant disappointment as well as awe.

Begley, countering Bellow, writes, a little sourly, "Houdini was not interested in the meaning of his stunts, and in a sense they were meaningless. They accomplished nothing. They advanced no cause, proved no point. . . . He liberated only himself." And yet Begley's vivid account can't help but invite us to see metaphor, and meaning. "Out he popped," Begley says, describing the end of the water-torture act, "gasping, eyes bloodshot, lips flecked with foam." At a certain point of danger, the queasily erotic spectacle passes over into images of rebirth, a limitless freedom that nevertheless has to be asserted again and again. ♦

BOOKS

GOD'S COUNTRY

How Mormons came to terms with the federal government.

BY CASEY CEP

It was an unlikely candidacy: a thirty-eight-year old mayor from the heartland who pitched himself as the solution to partisan gridlock, played up his military experience, talked often about his faith, and promised to end the country's moral decline. He was fond of quoting the Founding Fathers, had an army of grassroots supporters, and came from a swing state. But the year was 1844, the state was Illinois, the parties were the Whigs and the Democrats, and the candidate was Joseph Smith, the founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Whether or not the country would have been with Joe, we'll never know: on June 27th, a few months after announcing his candidacy, the first Mormon to run for President became the first Presidential candidate to be assassinated. Smith's death marked the end of a decisive period in Mormon history, one that is less familiar to most outsiders than the Church's founding, in New York State, or its eventual move to Utah, where, against considerable odds, its members came to flourish. But the chaotic months of Smith's Presidential campaign and his effort to establish a theocracy in Illinois are the subject of the historian Benjamin E. Park's new book, "Kingdom of Nauvoo: The Rise and Fall of a Religious Empire on the American Frontier" (Liveright).

Park's book is a compelling history, built from contemporaneous accounts and from the previously unreleased minutes of the Council of Fifty, a governing body of sorts that Smith convened in Nauvoo, Illinois, when he was feeling besieged by his enemies and anticipating the Second Coming of Christ. Its minutes help clarify Smith's sometimes contradictory political theology, and Park's explication of them elevates "Kingdom of Nauvoo" from pure religious history to the realm of political theory. Park, an ambidextrous thinker, is equally sensitive to the danger the state can pose to religious minorities and to the danger that a religious institution can pose to the secular state. In his account, the early Mormons were a rowdy band of neo-Puritans who mounted a fundamental challenge to the democratic experiment. The tensions that they experienced—between the right to religious freedom and the limits of religious tolerance—still persist today.

Smith was twenty-one and a few years into a floundering career as a treasure hunter when, per his own account, he unearthed a set of golden plates buried in upstate New York. This was in 1827, during the Second Great Awakening, when charismatic preachers were stoking religious fires around the country. Smith's parents had been drawn into this religious passion—especially his father, who dabbled in divination until his dreams were filled with prophecies. Smith's own visions were of an angel named Moroni, who appeared to him several times before finally instructing him to retrieve the plates buried in Hill Cumorah. By then, Smith had married a woman named Emma Hale, who helped transcribe the words that Smith claimed to translate from the plates—engravings in a language that he called "reformed Egyptian."

Smith finished the transcription by 1830 and found a printer who agreed to run off five thousand copies. The result, the Book of Mormon, begins as the record of a Jewish family in Jerusalem, who, around 600 B.C., build a boat and sail to the Americas—where, six centuries later, the risen Christ

A new book, "Kingdom of Nauvoo," examines Joseph Smith's theocratic visions.

ILLUSTRATION BY PAUL ROGERS

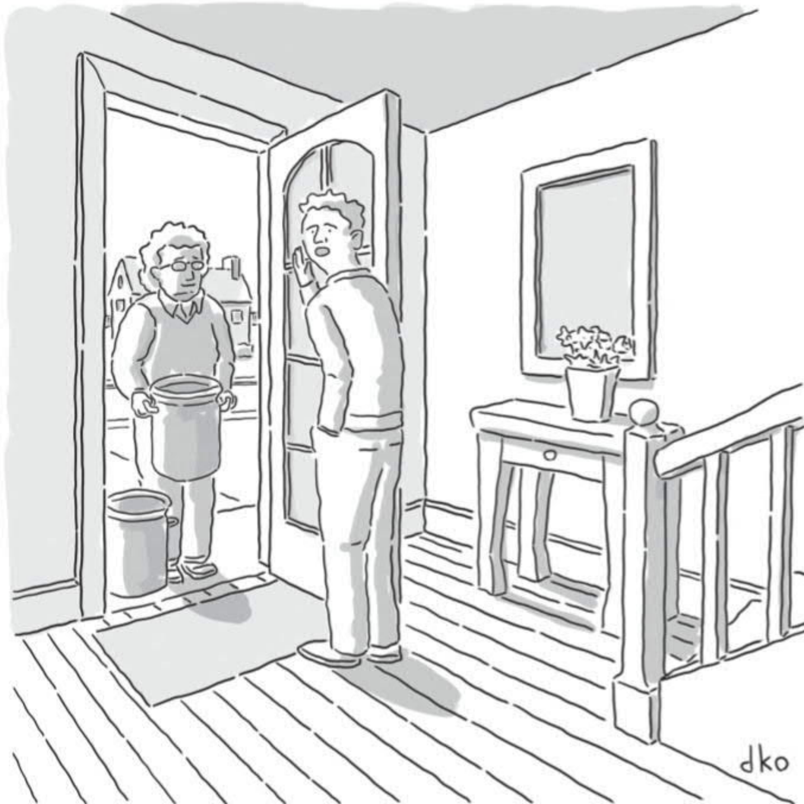
preaches to their descendants. In an age when people were hungry for evidence of God's continued involvement in the world, and in a country anxious to assert itself on the global stage, Smith's scriptures offered appealing assurances: not only was the United States a holy land where Jesus himself had walked but God was still speaking to the men and women who lived there. Smith attracted a circle of followers, mostly men of modest means—farmers, clerks, small-time pastors, and schoolteachers—from New York and Pennsylvania at first, then from farther afield.

But self-declared prophets seldom sit well with the political establishment, and, almost immediately, Smith and his adherents got into trouble with the law. Some of their antagonists were motivated by personal animus toward Smith dating to his pre-Prophet, huckstering, treasure-hunting days; others were dismayed by the unconventional nature of Mormonism, with its new scriptures, its occasional glossolalia, and its insistence that other churches had fallen away from Christ's true gospel. It wasn't long before Smith was arrested for being a "disorderly person," one in a series of charges by various authorities attempting to stymie his religious movement: banking fraud, illegal banking, fornication, threatening a public official, conspiring to assassinate a public official, incitement of a riot, perjury, polygamy, and treason against two states.

As grave as some of those charges were, they were the least of the problems faced by members of the new faith. Anti-Mormon mobs harassed known believers and attacked their houses; they even tarred and feathered Smith one night in 1832. Hostilities like these gradually pushed the Mormons farther and farther toward the frontier: they established their first new Jerusalem in Kirtland, Ohio; then a newer new Jerusalem in Independence, Missouri; and their newest new Jerusalem in Far West, Missouri. In each place, local opposition increased in tandem with the growth of the Mormon population. It worsened when, at Smith's command, Mormons voted as a bloc, upsetting the political order. In 1838, having already been evicted from one Missouri county, they went to vote in the county seat of another, where a mob attempted to stop them. There were allegations of violence in what came to be known as the Gallatin County Election Day Battle, and subsequent vigilantism left more than twenty people dead. During this period, the Missouri governor, Lilburn Boggs, declared in an executive order that "the Mormons must be treated as enemies, and must be exterminated or driven from the state if necessary for the public peace." Three days later, seventeen Mormons were murdered by soldiers near Shoal Creek, in Caldwell County.

The next day, Smith was arrested and imprisoned for four months, during which time thousands of Mormon refugees moved to Illinois, where they had been promised protection by the state legislature, whose members included a young Abraham Lincoln. Smith escaped from jail before standing trial—possibly with the help of sympathetic guards—and he and other Mormon leaders then went to Washington, D.C., to plead their case before the federal government. Aggrieved but also entitled, they carried four hundred and eighty-one individual petitions for reparations from harm suffered in state-sanctioned violence, demanding compensation for everything from lost livestock to lost husbands. The largest of the claims came from Smith himself, who demanded a hundred thousand dollars for loss of property and what he described as false imprisonment.

Those petitions represented a peculiar understanding of American federalism: predictably, the Mormons got nowhere with their argument that the national government should compensate them for the actions of a particular state. "What can I do?" President Martin Van Buren asked incredulously, before giving the same answer that Congress offered when presented with the petitions: "I can do nothing for you." It was the first of many contradictory lessons the Mormons would learn about how the federal government adjudicates between the will of the majority and the rights of a minority. Disillusioned and angered, Smith and the others headed back to Illinois, where the Mor-



"Honey, it's Lorna from next door. She wants to borrow three hundred cups of sugar."

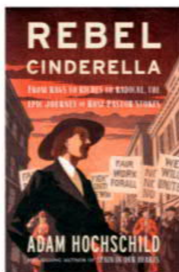
mons had already chosen a place to resettle. The town was called Commerce, so they bought it. Smith changed the name to Nauvoo, which he believed to be the Hebrew word for "beautiful city."

The city of Nauvoo took shape in an age when Ralph Waldo Emerson claimed that every intellectual had "a draft of a new community in his waistcoat pocket." But Smith's plans went far beyond the scribbling stage: within a dozen years of its founding, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints had more than twenty thousand members, and Nauvoo quickly grew to be more populous than Chicago. But, unlike the Windy City, Nauvoo, operating under a permissive charter from the state of Illinois, developed a distinctly theocratic character: its independent judiciary could deny the validity of arrest warrants issued by neighboring authorities in order to shield Church members from prosecution, and its standing militia of several hundred armed men, known as the Nauvoo Legion, was empowered to protect citizens from any threat. Smith was made a Lieutenant General, a title previously held in the United States only by George Washington, and organized parades to show off the legion's strength. (This was the military experience he would boast about during his Presidential campaign; he later added to his résumé a term as Nauvoo's mayor.)

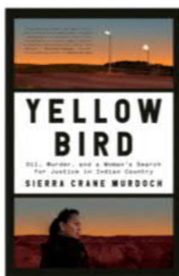
The city's grandest feature was its enormous tabernacle. Smith wanted the temple of Nauvoo to rival the one built by Solomon; when it was finished, thanks to the tithe in time and muscle required of every resident, it was twice as tall as the White House. Smith had continued to receive revelations about how the faithful were meant to serve God, so this new sanctuary housed new religious rituals. One of them called for posthumous baptism, through which Mormons could baptize a living person as a proxy for someone already deceased. Another—which would divide the Church, attract the permanent suspicion of the state, and forever taint the public perception of the faith—called for plural marriage.

The origins of this rite are not well known. As Park observes in "Kingdom of Nauvoo," it is striking that a faith so devoted to record-keeping did not document the doctrine of polygamy. "As

BRIEFLY NOTED



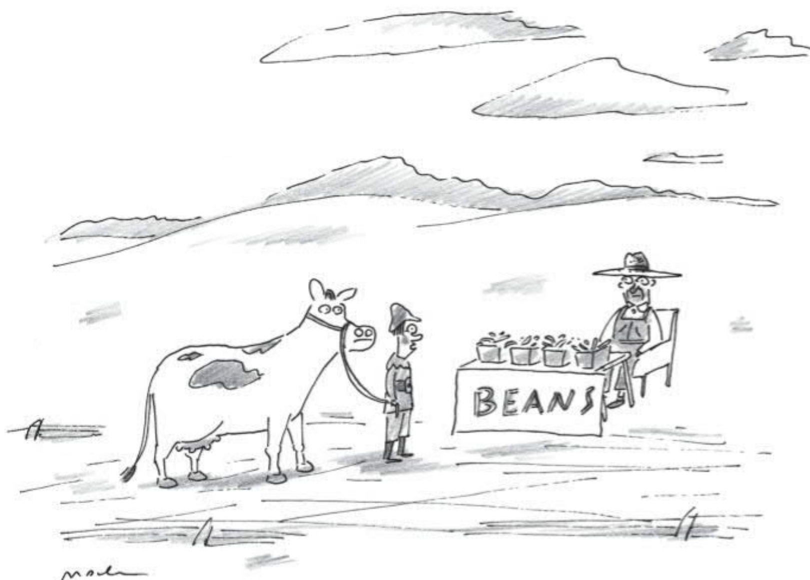
Rebel Cinderella, *by Adam Hochschild (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt)*. This vibrant biography portrays the riveting charisma of the socialist activist Rose Pastor Stokes. A Russian-Jewish immigrant and a cigar-factory worker, Pastor Stokes became an overnight celebrity when, in 1905, she married into one of the nation's wealthiest families. For the next fifteen years, she was a tireless crusader for workers' and women's rights, fighting to decriminalize birth control. She also hosted a stream of socialist luminaries, including W. E. B. Du Bois and Maxim Gorky, on her private island. Moving between glittering estates and squalid tenements, Hochschild captures the improbability and idealism of both Pastor Stokes and her era, a time when it seemed that stark divisions of class, race, and gender might be erased, in an instant, by love.



Yellow Bird, *by Sierra Crane Murdoch (Random House)*. In 2012, at the height of the North Dakota oil boom, a young white truck driver working in the oil fields disappeared from the Fort Berthold Indian Reservation. The case seemed fated to languish unsolved, but it found a champion in Lissa Yellow Bird, an obsessive amateur detective. Yellow Bird—a member of the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara Nation, a recovering addict, a former prison guard, an ex-convict, and a mother of five—uncovered the truth with impressive persistence and guile. Murdoch's sprawling narrative explores the woman's past, the terrible history of America's treatment of indigenous peoples, and the impact of sudden wealth on a place that has suffered decades of deprivation and mismanagement.

Little Gods, *by Meng Jin (Custom House)*. This début novel begins on the eve of the Tiananmen crackdown, in 1989, with the birth of a baby girl. Her parents, a physicist and a doctor in Shanghai, are upwardly mobile transplants from a neighboring province, whose lives are soon tossed into chaos. Told from three perspectives, including that of a young American who travels to China to trace her mother's life, the book is populated by stubborn characters who are balancing on thin wires of ambition or nostalgia. As the narratives merge, tying together history and the present, Jin's richly textured, unsparing writing questions whether a self can exist unmarked by the past.

Blue Flowers, *by Carola Saavedra, translated from the Portuguese by Daniel Hahn (Riverhead)*. One winter day, a resentful, recently divorced man receives a letter from a mysterious woman, who signs the missive with "A." It's a mistake: the intended recipient, A.'s ex-lover, was the previous tenant of the man's apartment. Letters continue to arrive, and the man becomes fixated on A.'s passionate meditations about her relationship's end and the web of tenderness, hostility, and submission in which it has left her. He halts his normal life to find her, and Saavedra, a lauded Brazilian writer, twists this search deftly. As A.'s correspondence unfolds, it explores language's insufficiencies, and its power: "This letter will be opened, and all the world that it contains will open, too."



"I'd better not. The last time I traded a milk cow for beans someone ended up dead."

• •

committed as he was to the ritual's significance," Park writes, of Smith, "he was similarly committed to its secrecy, knowing that its exposure would lead to Nauvoo's downfall." Smith publicly denied knowledge of polygamous marriages, and the few records of those unions which do exist refer to them as "sealings"—or, even more cryptically, simply connect the names of the united with "was," an abbreviation for "wed and sealed." One of the only documents Smith ever recorded which attests to the practice is a blessing he wrote for the family of one of his teen-age wives, assuring her and her relatives of their salvation. Another of Smith's plural wives—whose marriage to Smith was followed, within a few weeks, by that of her sister—later explained that these marriages were "too sacred to be talked about." Such furtiveness makes it difficult to track the development of the doctrine, much less Smith's theological justification for it. Some historians, including Park, believe that he took his first plural wife in April, 1841, though whenever it happened, he did not tell Emma, and it was some time before she learned the truth. If he'd been elected President, the nation's cumulative total of First Ladies would instantly have tripled: by then, he had taken more than thirty wives, the youngest of whom was thought to be fourteen, and the oldest of whom was fifty-six.

Originally, only Smith had multiple wives. But he gradually revealed the practice to other Mormon leaders, inviting them, selectively, to witness his plural marriages, then encouraging them to pursue their own. Not everyone approved: Smith's brother Hyrum initially led the opposition, condemning polygamy and calling for a moral revival in Nauvoo. Hyrum was a widower, and his hostility to the practice weakened after he learned of its supposed posthumous benefits, through which he could be united in the afterlife with both his late wife and any future ones. Other Mormons remained unenthusiastic. Emma tried to marshal resistance among women through the Church's all-female Relief Society; in response, Smith tried to stifle the organization. Emma then threatened him with divorce, at which point he promised to take no additional wives and signed his property over to her and their children, in order to secure their financial well-being in case of rival claims.

It would be years before any Mormon leader formally acknowledged the practice of polygamy. Instead, somewhat shockingly, the Nauvoo city council passed a law punishing adultery with six months in jail and a fine of up to a thousand dollars. (Because the city's municipal leadership overlapped entirely with its spiritual leadership, Smith could choose to protect colleagues from prosecution under this new law.) Even more audaciously, Smith cursed "all Adulterers & fornicators" in a speech, then excommunicated two Church leaders for attempting to expose his secret marriages. The first, John C. Bennett, had been the mayor of Nauvoo; when his own polygamy became public, he accused Smith of having sanctioned it. The second, William Law, had denounced plural marriage after Smith propositioned his wife. After being banished from the faith, Law started a breakaway movement called the True Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.

Such two-faced dealing was characteristic of Smith's leadership during the Nauvoo years, both within and beyond the bounds of the Mormon Church. Not only was he struggling to maintain control of his followers—suppressing dissent over plural marriage and quashing concerns about his own moral purity—he was also trying to expand his secular power. Since arriving in Illinois, Smith had, ahead of every election, courted the favor of the two major political parties, the Whigs and the Democrats, dangling the Mormon vote in exchange for political favors and personal protection. In a state where a few hundred votes could determine the outcome of an election, particularly at the county and congressional levels, the thousands of active and enfranchised Mormons became a sought-after constituency. After a few election cycles, though, this courtship soured, partly because Smith did not reliably follow through on his promised endorsements; in one congressional race, he supported the Whig candidate while instructing other Church leaders to support the Democratic opponent, dividing the promised bloc vote. Moreover, he was becoming politically toxic. When Boggs, the Missouri governor, was shot, in 1842, rumors circulated that Smith had placed a bounty on his head. Missouri forced

Illinois into an extradition arrangement for the Mormon leader, but the municipal courts in Nauvoo thwarted it, in a scandalous act of disregard for the rule of law.

Like the Quakers in the Massachusetts Bay Colony before them, and the Rajneeshees in Oregon after them, the Mormons in Illinois came to be seen as a danger to democracy: not a mini-America, where the saints could take refuge, but an anti-America, where social deviance threatened the moral order, and religious authorities sought too much power. In the case of the Mormons, that perception was not entirely inaccurate. This became clear in 2016, when the sealed minutes of the Council of Fifty were finally made public. Smith first convened the secret organization in the spring of 1844, and it immediately began drafting an alternative to the United States Constitution, rejecting democracy as a failed political project and outlining a theocratic kingdom to replace it.

Park's access to these minutes is part of what makes "Kingdom of Nauvoo" so illuminating. The documents offer new insights into Smith's decision to run for President, a campaign that exasperated authorities in Illinois and in Missouri and drew criticism of the Mormons from around the country. It was the Council of Fifty that appointed Smith "Prophet, Priest & King," helping him shape a political platform while also making plans for what would happen if he lost the election and the Mormons needed to leave Nauvoo. The Council sent missionaries south and west, to see about resettlement, and Smith, in his Presidential platform, called for the annexation of Texas from Mexico, suggesting that the sale of the nation's public lands could be used to buy the freedom of enslaved persons around the country, thereby ending slavery and promoting Manifest Destiny at the same time. (That suggests a stronger commitment to racial equality than existed. In the Book of Mormon, dark skin is depicted as a curse from God; after Smith's death, the Church began withholding the priesthood from black members, a policy that lasted for much of the twentieth century.)

Smith had queried the five other Presidential candidates before deciding to run. Only three responded, and none expressed a willingness to protect the Mormons if elected. Smith's ensuing campaign was not so much a vanity project as an attempt to advocate for a more assertive federal government and a stronger executive branch, making the case that the Union should intervene against the states whenever the rights of minorities were threatened. "Persecution has rolled upon our heads from time to time, from portions of the United States, like peals of thunder, because of our religion," Smith lamented, after announcing his candidacy. "And no portion of the Government as yet has stepped forward for our relief. And in view of these things, I feel it to be my right and privilege to obtain what influence and power I can, lawfully, in the United States, for the protection of injured innocence."

Nearly three hundred Mormon missionaries were sent into all twenty-six states to evangelize for Smith's candidacy. Political conventions were just becoming popular, and his newly created Reform Party planned to hold them in every state—and to hold a national one in Baltimore later in the summer. But, not long before it was to take place, Smith was imprisoned in Illinois. The arrest stemmed not from forces outside Nauvoo but from forces within it: William Law, the excommunicated leader who founded a rival church, had, with a group of other dissenters, begun publishing a newspaper, which accused Smith of polygamy and detailed the ways in which he was supposedly dangerous to American democracy.

Smith and his Council of Fifty ordered the Nauvoo Legion to destroy the press that printed Law's Nauvoo *Expositor*. Smith then declared martial law. The state of Illinois responded by threatening military retaliation against Nauvoo, and by adding a new charge to all the outstanding ones against Smith: attempting to incite a riot. Smith surrendered himself at Carthage, the county

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THE NEW YORKER

seat. Two days later, a mob of more than two hundred men stormed the jail where the Prophet was being held and shot him as he tried to escape by jumping from a second-story window. He died not long after hitting the ground, either from the fall or from the bullets the mob fired at him once he landed.

Only five of the vigilantes were tried for Smith's murder, and none were convicted. Smith's First Counselor and Vice-Presidential running mate, Sidney Rigdon, tried to take control of the Mormon Church; then Brigham Young, a former carpenter who'd been ordained to an advisory council called the Quorum of the Twelve, made the more politic suggestion that the whole Quorum should oversee the Church, with Young as its president; the congregation agreed. (The Council eventually excommunicated Rigdon, who later established a competing church, which condemned polygamy, in Pittsburgh.) Young was a forceful figure—"a man of much courage and superb equipment," per the weathered stone that marks his birthplace, in Whitingham, Vermont. Ignoring the criticisms of the surrounding secular authorities, he began to "marry for eternity" more than a dozen women, seven of whom had also been "M.E." to Smith, while also organizing the Mormon vote for county elections. The state retaliated by revoking Nauvoo's charter, and the antagonism between the theocratic city and its surrounding democratic neighbors intensified until, finally, the Mormons were forced out of Nauvoo.

There was no reason to believe, at that point, that the Mormon Church would survive. Some supporters had proposed giving the religion its own sovereign reservation, like those that had recently been designated for Native Americans; opponents of the faith advocated, outright, for the extermination of its adherents. Park suggests that the Mormons' migration to Utah was a preview of the sorts of secessionist tendencies that would play out two decades later, when Southern states left the Union, though the Mormons departed the country entirely—or tried to. When the faithful settled in the Salt Lake Valley, more than twelve hundred miles from Nauvoo, they were pleased to find themselves outside American territory, then displeased to discover, after the Mexican-American War, that their foreign soil was suddenly domestic. In yet another example of their continually complicated relationship to the United States, the Mormons almost immediately petitioned for statehood, trying to get federal recognition for the State of Deseret.

Nearly half a century later, Utah finally became a state, and the Mormons rejoined the Union—but not before they had mounted an armed resistance against the National Guard, in response to the American military entering the territory, in 1857. Five previous applications for statehood had been denied, on the ground that the Mormon Church's political theology clashed with the country's democratic values: the same conflict that had forced the Mormons out of Nauvoo was now playing out, over and over again, in their new home. Unlike the separatist Shakers and Mennonites, the Mormons wanted to participate in the democratic process, and they tried to consolidate enough political power to bend the laws of the majority to protect their minority beliefs. But polygamy, for the U.S. Congress, was a nonstarter; eventually, judicial debates over its legality went all the way to the Supreme Court. In Reynolds v. U.S. (1879), the Justices ruled that the free-exercise clause did not protect plural marriage, and that a federal law banning polygamy was constitutional. Congress then passed more laws punishing the Church, including one that called for the seizure of its property. Finally, Mormon leaders, who had previously called for open defiance of federal laws, declared an end to plural marriage. Six years after this public capitulation, in 1896, Utah was recognized as the forty-fifth state.

Such compromises are the stuff that democracy is made of—and, it seems, the stuff that successful religions are made of, too. Many denominations came and went during the proliferation of faith and fanaticism that characterized the Second Great Awakening. What kept Mormonism from joining their ranks was its willingness to change its political theology. Park suggests that part of what the Mormons learned at Nauvoo was the limits of theocracy. Adapting their beliefs and practices in Utah strengthened their standing with the federal government; by balancing religious liberty with democratic authority, they survived persecution and persisted, eventually coming to play a significant role in the political life of the nation.

Although a Mormon was elected to state office in Illinois in 1838, it wasn't until 1896 that one was elected to the federal legislature. That achievement did not end the suspicion on both sides of the church-state divide: when a member of the Quorum of the Twelve, Reed Smoot, won a United States Senate seat, in 1903, he endured several years of congressional inquiries into whether his duties as a Mormon apostle would keep him from exercising secular authority. Such was the uneasy evolution of the relationship between the faithful and their government: enmity and mistrust slowly gave way, on both sides, to accommodation and alliance. So it was that earlier this year, on the floor of the Senate, another onetime Mormon Presidential candidate, Mitt Romney, could declare that he had sworn "an oath before God to exercise impartial justice," and become the first politician in American history to vote to impeach a member of his own party. In explaining why he would convict President Donald Trump on the charge of abuse of power, Romney said, "I am profoundly religious. My faith is at the heart of who I am."

It was a remarkable gesture, the sort of profile in courage that so many people had been waiting for during the impeachment trial. It was also a vote to constrain the power of the executive branch, which Joseph Smith had wanted to strengthen, and to uphold traditional democratic principles, which Smith and his early followers had sought to undermine. And it was a vote at odds with some of Romney's co-religionists in Congress: of the three other Mormons in the Senate, one, Tom Udall, a Democrat, joined Romney in voting for impeachment, while the other two, Mike Crapo and Mike Lee, both Republicans, voted to protect the President. That schism might have dismayed Smith: this time, there was no Mormon bloc. But, nearly two hundred years after the founding of Nauvoo, there was, within his faith, something that Smith had demanded from his country, even if he had not always permitted it in his church: room for dissent. ♦

BOOKS

NIGHT SHIFTS

The curious creation of Anna Kavan.

BY LEO ROBSON

Not long after being discharged from a Swiss sanitarium, in 1938, the English writer Helen Edmonds, who was born Helen Woods and had published six novels as Helen Ferguson, replaced her long brown locks with a neat blond bob and started calling herself Anna Kavan. The name was borrowed from the protagonist of her most autobiographical novels, "Let Me Alone" (1930) and "A Stranger Still" (1935), and chosen, at least in part, because it echoed the name of the writer who inspired the shifts in literary approach that accompanied her change of identity: Franz Kafka. It was in this new guise—born-again avant-gardist—and under this new name that she became known to the Home Office (as a registered heroin addict); to her most important publisher, Peter Owen; and to a small but avid readership.

In life, Kavan came across as distant and ethereal—a temperamental leaning intensified by daily drug use—but she was surprisingly attuned to the dynamics of literary reputation. In 1943, writing to a lover, she appeared to accept that during the Second World War, when English fiction was expected to be straight-talking, outward-looking, and even propagandistic, her sort of "experimental writing"—the portraits of mania and despair collected in "Asylum Piece" (1940) and "I Am Lazarus" (1945)—was "completely out." More than two decades later, in an exchange with Peter Owen, she defended the generic framework of her novel in progress, an opaque yet rollicking tale of dystopian quest, on the ground that "this kind of adventure story seems to be in the air just now."

That manuscript became "Ice" (1967), the last book to appear during Kavan's lifetime. It was, as she seems to have anticipated, a notable hit and remains her best-known work; its admirers include the singer Patti Smith and a range of novelists associated with science fiction, including J. G. Ballard, Brian Aldiss, Doris Lessing, Christopher Priest, and Jonathan Lethem, who contributed a foreword when it was republished as a Penguin Classic, three years ago. Beyond the "Ice" cult, Kavan has attracted only sporadic attention since her death, in 1968, usually when her books have been reissued, or a lost manuscript has resurfaced. But, in recent years, conditions have begun to shift in her favor. Her preoccupations—opioid addiction, extreme weather, female oppression, psychopathology—have become topics of burning interest. And a growing appetite for expressionist techniques and hybrid forms—and for a submerged tradition of postwar English modernism—suggests that literary culture is on her side. Her work dominates Francis Booth's newly reissued "Amongst Those Left: The British Experimental Novel 1940-1980" (Dalkey Archive), while the most Kavanesque of current British writers, Deborah Levy, is also among the most celebrated. Now the London-based academic Victoria Walker, one of an expanding group of Kavan specialists, has gathered twenty-four of her stories under the title "Machines in the Head" (New York Review Books).

Kavan was born in Cannes in 1901. Her childhood was a picture of misery. At an early age, she was sent to the first of a series of boarding schools that suited her poorly. "All the old Victorian methods of bullying seem to have been revived for my benefit," she wrote, in a diary entry from her twenties. In 1911, her father killed himself by jumping from a ship. Several years later, when she had just left school, her mother encouraged her to marry Donald Ferguson, a railway engineer based in Burma. The marriage lasted barely two years, and, at

Kavan's fiction features icy heroines, dystopian quests, and gothic flourishes.

PHOTOGRAPH BY WALKER EVANS

twenty-one, Kavan returned, with their young son, to live in England. During a stay in the South of France, she met a wealthy layabout named Stuart Edmonds. She also started using heroin. In another diary entry, she noted, "H makes one's eyes beautiful. . . . I watched myself in the glass for a long time, which gave me real pleasure."

The addiction, she thought, allowed her to cope and even thrive—a view later supported by the German psychiatrist Karl Bluth, her friend and enabler. During her marriage to Edmonds, she bred bulldogs at their house in the Chilterns, enjoyed moderate success as a painter, and published all her Helen Ferguson novels—a handful of bleakly astute realist character studies, plus an eccentric mystery, "Goose Cross" (1936). Kavan described her own nature as "hopeless," and, from the start, her writing was concerned with the formation and hardening of a female personality type—the unloved girl bound to become an unhappy woman. This figure appears in various forms, but she is almost always pale, cold, suspicious, "shyly arrogant." "Let me alone" is her motto, and the mirror her best friend. Here is Karen, who dreads personal interaction and envies the sea, in Ferguson's trenchant—and forgotten—second novel, "The Dark Sisters" (1930):

> Her face had taken on its mildly inattentive look, which was like a curtain drawn in front of her true self, hiding it. She looked pensive and remote, an abstract creature of fantasy, scarcely human. There could be no warmth or passion in her blood.

In the nineteen-thirties, Kavan and Edmonds had a daughter, who died in infancy; the marriage then foundered, and Kavan made a number of suicide attempts. Eventually, her mother intervened and paid for her to go to an asylum in Switzerland. This did not mark the end of her troubles, but it symbolized a moment of transition, both on and off the page.

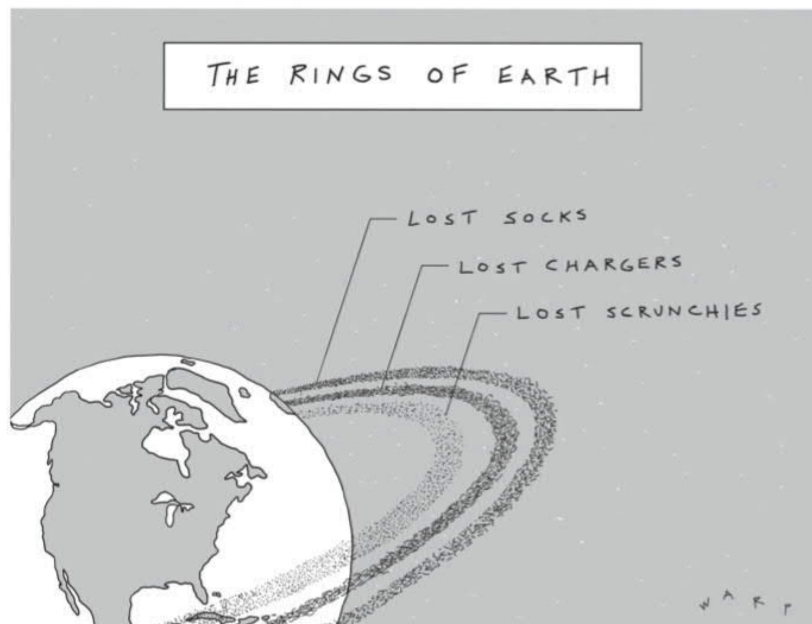
During the early years of the war, Kavan travelled to Norway, New Zealand, and Bali, among other places. While visiting a snowbound New York—the setting for her wonderfully edgy story "Ice Storm"—she sold three stories from "Asylum Piece" to *Harper's Bazaar* and was photographed by Walker Evans. When she eventually returned to London, she worked with traumatized soldiers—an experience depicted in several stories, including "The Blackout," which ran in this magazine in 1945—and then took a job as an assistant at the literary journal *Horizon*, where she soon became a regular contributor.

The brief outpouring of essays and reviews from this period, which are included in the U.K. edition of "Machines in the Head," provides a glimpse of her thinking at the time. In one essay, she wrote, "I do not like at all the idea that a new life can be built up on the old foundations." It is believed that one of her purgative acts, on becoming Anna Kavan, was to destroy most of her letters and diaries. From this point, there were to be no bulldogs or country houses or husbands or children. (Her son was killed in action during the war.) For the next thirty years, she lived alone, mostly in Notting Hill, in West London, and supplemented her meagre writing income with an allowance from her stepfather and a sideline as a property developer.

Kavan's biographers, D. A. Callard and Jeremy Reed, and the novelist Rhys Davies, one of her executors, have followed Kavan's lead, promoting the idea of an abrupt and total break in her life and work. Just as her hair was shorn and bleached, and her contact with others minimized, so was her literary aesthetic supplanted by something harder-edged. As Helen Ferguson, she wrote barely transmuted memoir, turning her narcissistic mother into a narcissistic aunt, and her father's suicide by drowning into a bullet to the head. In the Kavan work, memory provided a route to elliptical fantasy and dark parable. An uneventful dinner she had with Davies at a London restaurant became the seed for the intensely, and typically, unconsoling story "The Summons," in which the narrator takes the advice of a trusted friend, R, and turns herself over to a figure lingering nearby, who leads her off to be charged with an as yet unnamed crime. The story ends with the narrator speaking from some hopeless future point:

> When we went out into the hall and I saw the neat, inconspicuous man still impassively, impersonally waiting, I began to wonder, as I have wondered ever since, whether the good opinion of anybody in the whole world is worth all that I have had to suffer and must still go on suffering—for how long; oh, for how long?

Although Kavan was committed to her own narrative of self-transformation, some of the hallmarks of her later writing had been present all along. For the character Anna, in the third Helen Ferguson novel, "Let Me Alone," the world appears to be a "vague and unconvincing place, minatory and yet unreal," "an uneasy dream" that threatens to become a "nightmare in good earnest"; boarding school causes her to feel "like a stranger in some fantastic country whose language and mode of life were alike incomprehensible, surrounded by enemies



PREVIOUS PAGE: © WALKER EVANS ARCHIVE, THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

in an atmosphere of suspicious and perpetually lurking, unimaginable dangers." This is the surrealist alienation recognizable in Anna Kavan's writing; what changed was not the underlying theme or impulse but the trappings. Kavan specialized in the first-person short story, a form and a voice she never employed as Ferguson. And she responded to what she called "conditions outside," or developments in literary style and fashion—notably the emergence, via English translations of "The Castle" and "The Trial," of a method and a world view later recognized as Kafkaesque.

There are occasions when Kavan, whom Brian Aldiss dubbed "Kafka's sister," leans too heavily on the master's tropes. Places are identified as "the other country" or "the southland"; characters are referred to by single initials or ominous titles or both. In Kavan's novel "Eagles' Nest" (1957), an artist working at a department store grows tired of his "sadistic" boss and answers a job listing aimed at "a man of integrity," placed by "The Administrator" of a country estate in a nameless area.

But, between the early nineteen-forties and the late nineteen-sixties—in "Asylum Piece," "I Am Lazarus," "The House of Sleep" (a 1947 exercise in what she called "night-time language"), and, of course, "Ice"—she was spurred by Kafka's example to create a bare yet vibrant fictional universe and a series of stunning, if slightly melodramatic, nightmare scenarios. The unanswered question is a worse fate than the dreaded reply. At the start of her story "The Enemy," the threat is not so much a nemesis as the *idea* of a nemesis. There is little reprieve from these depths: the final stories in "Asylum Piece" are called "The End in Sight" and "There Is No End."

Walker's selection, in "Machines in the Head," highlights Kavan's newfound taste for gothic flourishes and for jagged or circular structures that enable a potent mixture of immersion and analysis. "A Bright Green Field," the title story of the last collection published when she was alive, concerns a sloping meadow that follows the narrator around, and that seems to be "arrogant" and "aggressive" in its year-round luminosity. And, in "Ice," the narrator is never anything but lucid in his efforts to evoke a sense of dislocation:

> Reality had always been something of an unknown quantity to me. At times this could be disturbing. Now, for instance, I had visited the girl and her husband before, and kept a vivid recollection of the peaceful, prosperous-looking countryside round their home. But this memory was rapidly fading, losing its reality, becoming increasingly unconvincing and indistinct, as I passed no one on the road, never came to a village, saw no lights anywhere. The sky was black, blacker untended hedges towering against it; and when the headlights occasionally showed roadside buildings, these too were always black, apparently uninhabited and more or less in ruins. It was just as if the entire district had been laid waste during my absence.

In an undated note, Kavan explained that she had wanted to "abandon realistic writing insofar as it describes exclusively events in the physical environment, and to make the reader aware of the existence of the different, though just as real, 'reality' which lies just beyond the surface of ordinary daily life and the surface aspect of things." But, even at its most spectral or uncanny, her writing remained rooted in questions of human psychology. In a 1944 essay, she argued that all stories, whether using "realistic technique" or conducted in "a dream or fantasy medium," depended on "an understanding of the fundamentals of personality"—what, channelling the language of psychoanalysis, she called "the interpretation of complexes." She never abandoned the glazed and remote female figure that populates the Ferguson novels. The "ice" in Kavan's final novel is an emotional landscape, not a stand-in for heroin or nuclear fallout, as is often claimed.

Her work under both names reads like variations on a case study, almost like a preparation for the more systematic deliverances of modern psychology: Winnicott's writing on true and false selves, the pitfalls of codependency. Kavan's icy heroines, or antiheroines, are never alone: there's always someone else—usually a suitor, sometimes a sister—determined to defrost them. In "Rich Get Rich" (1937), a suitor is visited by a powerful impulse to dry the tears on a woman's "white, distraught, child-like face." (At their first meeting, the glacial air outside fills the room "as with a solid cube of transparent ice.") But what is really going on here? Who is really comforting whom? Another suitor, confronted by the "heartless and cold" Karen, in "The Dark Sisters," finds that he is "tantalized against his will," and desperate, on his own behalf, to locate her "real self." The narrator of "Ice" confesses that he found himself "madly" attracted to the "victim's look" of a woman he calls his "glass girl," and pursues her across the frozen wastes of a dying world, propelled by the unshakable sense that she possesses something he is "missing."

Kavan has been compared to Jean Rhys—the changes in style, the belated success—and to Anaïs Nin, who tried in vain to establish a friendship with her, and who celebrated "Asylum Piece" in "The Novel of the Future" (1968). But perhaps the most resonant analogue is Sylvia Plath, whose personal mythology shares a variety of symbols with Kavan's: drugs and dreams and doubles; leopards and Lazarus; bad mothers and dead fathers and marital miseries. Both Kavan and Plath initially felt a degree of suspicion about confessional writing, then recognized self-scrutiny as their natural mode. On November 24, 1968, just over a year after "Ice" appeared, to general acclaim, Kavan wrote Peter Owen and explained that she had been working on an "autobiography in the form of short stories with a connecting thread." Barely a week later, she died, of heart failure.

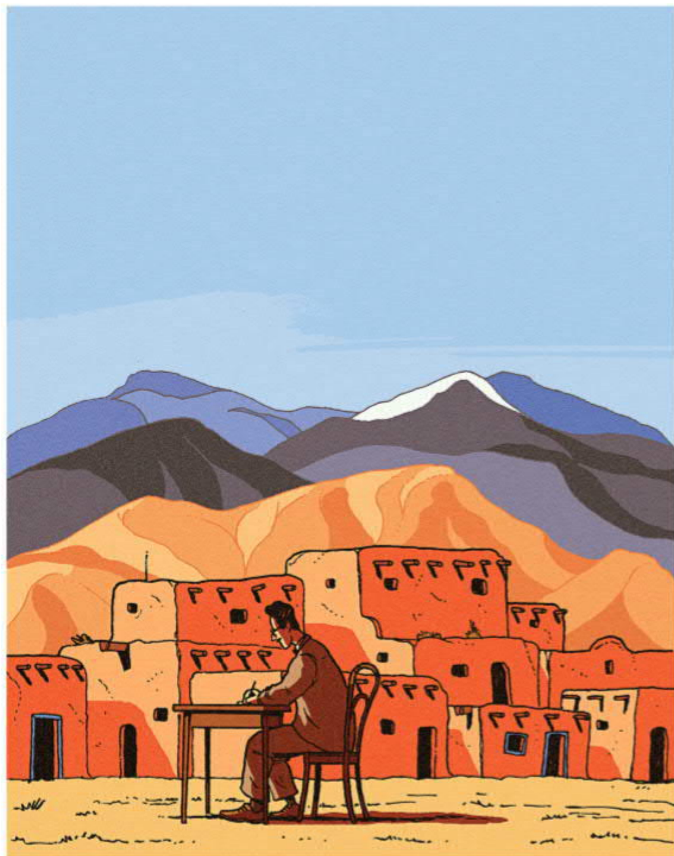
In 1970, Owen put out the collection "Julia and the Bazooka." The title story is perhaps the most haunting, mordant, and confident thing that Anna Kavan ever wrote. A miniature picaresque, at once unflappable and ticklingly faux-naïf, it's an encapsulation of Julia's—and her creator's—entire life. Kavan slaloms around in time, so we encounter Julia as a little girl who loves picking poppies; an adult analysand "damaged by no love in childhood"; a heroin user liberated to conduct "a normal existence"; a "young bride" with a "sheaf of roses"; a rooftop gardener surrounded by "pots of scarlet geraniums." The story ends with Julia no longer "anywhere," replaced by "nothing." But whether she is alive or dead matters less than the prevailing sense, so bracingly represented in this writer's best work, that she is isolated, off-kilter, and doomed. ♦

THE THEATRE

DESERT DREAMS

Jean Toomer's unproduced play "A Drama of the Southwest."

BY VINSON CUNNINGHAM



Toomer yearned to birth "a new race in America" among artists in Taos.

On late afternoons, after his work was done, the modernist poet, novelist, religious omnivore, and occasional playwright Jean Toomer observed a ritual that he called "deserving time." Much of the latter half of his life was spent in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, north of Philadelphia, on his property, Mill House. On the grounds, alongside his family, Toomer housed a revolving retinue of devotees who came to learn his home-brewed adaptation of the spiritualist George Gurdjieff's mystical practices; the students also performed manual labor, a classic—and, for Toomer, quite convenient—aspect of Gurdjieff's "Work." At four o'clock, when the teacher had finished his writing and his charges had finished with their chores, they'd gather in the main house, where adults made drinks and children had cookies and ginger ale.

The placid hour wasn't only for idle fun. Toomer—a brutally intense, relentlessly abstract, comically vain man who took every quotidian moment as an opportunity to philosophize—would ask probing, pointed questions, turning conversation into a kind of Socratic extension of his teaching. (In 1937, he tried to sell a book of dialogues with one young student. "Talks with Peter" was rejected by several publishers.) Later in his life, "deserving time" devolved into a grandiose cover for Toomer's encroaching alcoholism. "I've been working very hard," he wrote in a teasing letter to his wife, Marjorie Content. "Don't you think I'm deserving? Don't you think I *might* stop at that tavern and put my head in just to see *if* they have any beer?"

During these virus-haunted days of padding around the house, anxiously taking in news and "visiting" my friends via video chat, I keep thinking about Toomer's afternoon ceremony. A Sabbath atmosphere not unlike the one at Mill House has sprung up between my wife and me: we sit around reading and cooking and listening to music, contemplating work more than doing it, calling our moms, pushing each other fruitlessly to extrapolate on figures (testings and infections, hospitalizations and deaths) that neither of us fully understands. Cocktail hour starts a bit earlier than usual, and ends a bit later.

One of the little tortures of the moment is the sudden disappearance of live theatre, and the thought of all the plays that had been scheduled to open, some of which, barring an economic or logistical miracle, will go all but unseen by large audiences. I've tried to console myself by turning to plays that have seldom—sometimes never—been seen, but which I love nonetheless. Some are intentional "closet plays," meant for reading rather than seeing; others are simply interesting attempts, still waiting for their turn onstage.

One such strange but promising specimen is Toomer's odd, keening 1935 play "A Drama of the Southwest," written, I'm sure, between many "deserving times" but never completed. I'd love to see it staged someday, perhaps clipped into a one-act and presented on a bill with Toomer's other little-known plays. He was an earnest dramatist; the knotty contradictions of his life and his ideas seemed to rhyme with the dialectical possibilities of playwriting. Still, his attempts at having his plays produced were failures—as were many literary endeavors after his classic 1923 work, "Cane," a quilt of poems, prose, and drama set in black Georgia.

Two versions of the manuscript of "A Drama of the Southwest" were skillfully collaged in a 2016 critical edition by the scholar Carolyn Dekker. In her introductory essay, Dekker presents the

 ILLUSTRATION BY R. FRESSON

Toomer who, having firmly abandoned his identification with the Harlem Renaissance, black Americans, and the South, continued to rove the country, yearning to find a locale fit to birth what he imagined as "a new race in America." The play, which is semi-autobiographical, chronicles his attempt to manage this trick among the cacti and adobe houses at the Taos art colony, in New Mexico.

Tom Elliot, the play's leading man, is not unlike Toomer: cruel, curious, naïve, self-involved, cluelessly sexist, an essentialist obsessed with racial and regional admixture, a vague but expansive theorizer even when the moment calls for concision. He and his wife, Grace, have arrived in Taos, where they've rented a house. They've been to New Mexico before, "magnetized" by its small but vibrant artistic scene; they've come to visit with friends and to frack spiritual energies from a land that, to them, feels fresh. Tom and Grace are mirror images of Toomer and Content, who were acquainted with the scene in Taos thanks, in part, to their friendship with the wealthy arts patron Mabel Dodge Luhan (a fellow Gurdjieff disciple who fell rapturously in thrall to Toomer's high talking) and with Georgia O'Keeffe.

The play is a test of that group's guiding, if often unspoken, principle: that, owing to a place's intrinsic, elemental features—blue sky, red mud, brown folks—it might work as a symbol of the American future and as an enabler for art. This was familiar territory for Toomer. "Cane" ends with a play called "Kabnis," which portrays a Northern teacher who has come southward, to Georgia, his tourism the outer sign of an inner quest. Where "Kabnis" is poetic and mysterious, in places hard to follow at all except by rhythm and deftly enjambed nighttime images, "A Drama of the Southwest" is unsubtle in its study of oppositions.

Before Tom and Grace show up in Taos, after a lush stage description that works better as a guide to Toomer's psyche than as an inducement to set design (try staging this: "Then silence again . . . and life becomes existence again . . . and existence, focused for a time in a group of singing men, expands to the mountain and the close stars"), we meet a pair of Taos locals named Buckter T. Fact and Ubeam Riseling. They sit on a roof and talk about all those art colonists descending on their corner of the country. Riseling—whom Toomer describes, cryptically, as being "above art"—is rhapsodic about the visitors; Fact, a butcher who is "below art," is more cynical. Through their patter, Toomer's own unmistakable voice is sometimes awkwardly audible:

> UBEAM: The spirit of the Indian still lives in and dominates this land. Disappearing elsewhere, it is vital here, vital like these hills. . . . To this little cluster of earth-built houses the entire world comes.
>
> BUCK FACT: Comes and goes as fast as it can. . . . And why? What's to be seen here? One bank, one newspaper, grocery and drug stores like you can see anywhere, an armory, a baseball field, a fish hatchery, bad roads, the plaza, and a dump heap. Why should anyone come all this way to get dust in his eyes? As for me, it means a job.

Toomer's travellers are gluttons for the sensual. After visiting a sick friend, Grace is crestfallen, less by the disease than by what it does to the vibes. "What's the use of being here," she says, "unless you feel you are in the country and see the mountains and the sunsets?" Like glorified Airbnbers, Tom and Grace are in constant contact with the owners of the house they've rented, who take pains to set rules and explain the situation with the keys.

There's little in the way of a plot. The play is, instead, a group portrait. All of Tom and Grace's friends are ostensibly writers and artists, but none—except the sick friend, a poet named Lillian Range—are getting any work done. They trade thoughts about art, politics, Communism, and the unremitting war between the sexes. The only available intrigue is a spat between a couple—a petty jealousy that seems to peter out. Tom is trying to write a book. He sets up plans for his "deserving hour" and sits down at the typewriter but can't think, and writes a meandering letter to a friend. He reads the missive aloud, at length—pages and pages, precious few of which would make it into my imagined one-act. "To motor across the continent is to let the physical world come into you," he writes. "In comes the world of earth—and out go your thoughts and feelings and even your ego."

Toomer's manuscript ends abruptly, in what looks like the dead middle of a domestic scene. We don't get to see Tom's troubled ego dissolve. One suspects that it never does. Instead, maybe he finishes the book but stubbornly languishes, still unsatisfied with the writing. He gets into his car again, forgetting Grace (I promise, he would) and heading farther west, into obscurity, deserving little but claiming all, attacking the landscape like a bad, unstoppable germ. ♦

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CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Jon Adams, must be received by Sunday, March 29th. The finalists in the March 16th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the April 13th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST

" .... "

THE FINALISTS

"I know I don't look familiar, but, believe me, I eat here all the time."
Phil Walker, Fallston, Md.

"There'll be several hundred of us."
David Powell, Rome, Ga.

"The last time I was here, I swear they tried to poison me."
Tom Noone, Worcester, Mass.

THE WINNING CAPTION

"And how do you feel about how she feels about how he feels?"
Liliya Jones, Los Angeles, Calif.

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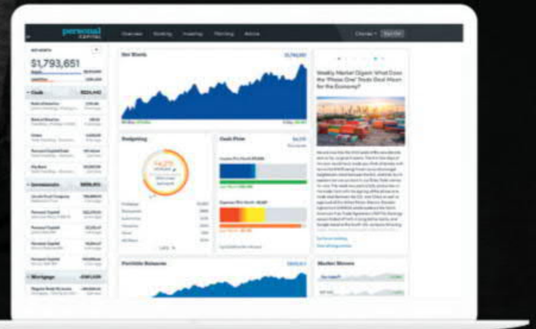

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