



January 17-30, 2022

NEW YORK

INTERVIEW


WITH THE ALLEGED

VAMPIRE

**JOSS
WHEDON,**

Hollywood's
fallen
feminist
nerd king,
struggles to
explain
himself.

By Lila Shapiro



NEW MONEY.
OLD RULES.

FROM THE CREATOR OF
DOWNTON ABBEY

HBO ORIGINAL
THE
GILDED
AGE

NEW SERIES
STREAMING JAN 24

HBOmax

©2022 Home Box Office, Inc. All rights reserved. HBO and related channels and service marks are the property of Home Box Office, Inc.



NEW YORK

JANUARY 17-30, 2022

FEATURES

**The Undoing
of Joss Whedon**

The *Buffy* creator wrestles
with losing his legacy.

By Lila Shapiro

14

**13,000 Pounds
at 118 Miles per Hour**

The limo crash and
the FBI informant.

By Ben Ryder Howe

20

**Last Sane Man
on Wall Street**

Short upstart
Nathan Anderson's
precarious enterprise.

By Andrew Rice

28

Nathan Anderson

INTELLIGENCER

- 6
The City Politic
Eric Adams's first days in office
By Errol Louis
- 8
The Group Portrait
Two actors keeping *The Lion King* onstage
By Jackson McHenry
- 10
72 Minutes With ...
Pickleball pundit Connor Pardoe
By Giri Nathan
- 12
The Money Game
What happened to America's quarters?
By Choire Sicha

STRATEGIST

- 35
Best Bets
Wriggleproof dog coats
- 37
The Look Book
Works an 18-hour shift at a Staten Island shipping dock
- 40
Design Hunting
Six decades in a Chelsea co-op
By Wendy Goodman
- 46
Food
Platt samples South Indian in a KN95; a tale of two garlic achaars
- 4 Comments
- 78 *New York* Crossword, by Matt Gaffney
- 80 The Approval Matrix

ON THE COVER: Joss Whedon.
Photograph by Ryan Pfluger
for *New York Magazine*.

THIS PAGE: Mitski. Photograph
by Andreas Laszlo Konrath
for *New York Magazine*.

THE CULTURE PAGES

- 51
Mitski in Nine Acts
The reticent singer-songwriter reveals just enough
By E. Alex Jung
- 54
See Spot Paint
How Agnieszka Pilat became Silicon Valley's favorite artist
By Shawn McCreesh
- 58
Accent Anxiety
Dialect coaches on how to hone a native sound
By Chris Lee
- 60
Hanya's Boys
Why can't the *Little Life* author conceive of love outside life support?
By Andrea Long Chu
- 64
Critics
MOVIES by *Bilge Ebiri*
In *A Hero*, moral fable meets narrative mousetrap
POP by *Craig Jenkins*
The Weeknd knows no bounds
TV by *Kathryn VanArendonk*
Somebody Somewhere is a confident tale of an unconfident woman
- 68
To Do
Twenty-five picks for the next two weeks

AUTHENTIC SELVES

THE BEAUTY WITHIN

Countertenor **Anthony Roth Costanzo**, cabaret legend **Justin Vivian Bond**, and others join the NY Phil in exploring how music gives us voice.

Anthony Roth Costanzo and Justin Vivian Bond

Rose Theater at Jazz at Lincoln Center's Frederick P. Rose Hall

January 27-29

Jaap van Zweden conductor

Anthony Roth Costanzo countertenor

Justin Vivian Bond vocalist

Zack Winokur director

Joan TOWER *Fanfare for the Uncommon Woman*, No. 1

Joel THOMPSON / Tracy K. SMITH *The Places We Leave*
(World Premiere-New York Philharmonic Commission)

PROKOFIEV *Symphony No. 1*, Classical

VARIOUS / Arr. N. MUHLY *Selections from Only an Octave Apart*

nyphil.org/beauty | 212.875.5656

Anthony Roth Costanzo is The Mary and James G. Wallach Artist-In-Residence.

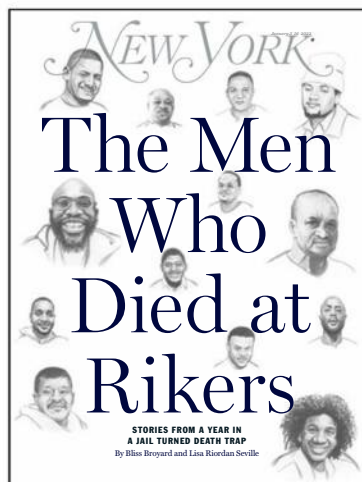


Programs are made possible, in part, by the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of the Office of the Governor and the New York State Legislature.

Photo of Justin Vivian Bond and Anthony Roth Costanzo by Nina Westervelt.

Conductors, soloists, programs, prices, and sale dates are correct at the date of printing and are subject to change. © 2022 New York Philharmonic. All rights reserved.

Comments



1 In *New York*'s latest cover story, Bliss Broyard and Lisa Riordan Seville memorialized the 15 Rikers detainees who died last year (“**My Dad Wasn’t Just a Nobody,**” January 3–16). “I forced myself to read all of them ❤️,” tweeted Genius Guild’s Stacey Ferguson. “Thank you for telling their stories.” Commenter crsulli called the tales “sickening. **Being incarcerated at Rikers without ever having been convicted is on a par with a death sentence for these poor souls.**” Commenter imspeaking4000+ wrote, “NYC saw almost 500 murders this year. I think analyzing and trying to correct the issues at Rikers is important, but this publication feels really biased in always thinking about people that commit crimes. You don’t just end up at Rikers. I’m feeling so much more compassion for the victims of crimes.” On Instagram, @lescarletwoman countered, “**The amount of people in these comments who think that just because someone has committed a crime means that they suddenly should be stripped of all human rights is depressing as hell.**” @iamsamanthamaisano added, “We seem to forget that more often than not people in Rikers are awaiting TRIAL. It’s a holding cell. This shit is horrific.”

2 In “**The Political Life of Dr. Oz**” (January 3–16), Olivia Nuzzi explored what made the TV surgeon think he belongs in the Senate. “This story is like a holiday gift to all of America,” the political strategist Steve Schmidt said. Political analyst Alexander Ziporovich called it a “**scathing portrait of yet**

another empty American celebrity that just can’t wait to sell his soul for glory in the GOP. A devastating profile of a dangerous phony.” Some readers were most intrigued by Nuzzi’s account of how Mehmet Oz and his wife, Lisa, carried on a conversation after trying, and failing, to hang up on her. @GothamNurse wrote, “The phone call alone that Oz’s wife accidentally left connected is the stuff of *Succession*-like television,” and music journalist Sowmya Krishnamurthy added, “smh to someone running for office who can’t work Bluetooth in their car.”

3 Zak Cheney-Rice asked “**Why Did Keisha Lance Bottoms Quit?**” in his profile of the now-former mayor of Atlanta (January 3–16). Author Rashaun J. Allen called the story “a good read and insightful about the challenges Black leadership face and how the poor who oftentimes are Black can get left behind even when the intention to do better is present.” *The Atlantic*’s Tom Nichols said it was “a fascinating read, especially about how the Floyd protests actually led in major cities not to reform, but to ‘re-aligning with the police.’” Political theorist Jared Anthony Loggins wrote, “This profile is not framed in terms of making an argument. But there is one: Black managerial elites in Atlanta really really do not like the poor.” Alex Camardelle of the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies noted in response that “**the power of Black mayors to do more for the poor is constrained by a white-led GOP state government, which preempts progress & bans Black-led cities from implementing good policy.**” And

@mcgarrygirl78 added, “The kind of progress many Black folks want to make, and deserve to make, doesn’t mesh well with white supremacy and capitalism. And once in positions of power, it’s often impossible not to adhere to America’s structural rigidity. Especially in the South.”

4 In August, Reeves Wiedeman and Lila Shapiro told the story of an unsolved mystery in publishing: a shadowy figure who has been stealing manuscripts for reasons unknown (“**The Spine Collector, August 16–29, 2021**”). On January 5, the FBI arrested Filippo Bernardini, 29, a rights coordinator at Simon & Schuster UK, in connection with the case; he has been charged with wire fraud and identity theft. TikTok user @literaryfling called it “the most exciting news I have ever seen” and urged her followers to read about the “insanely dramatic and absurd four-year-long scheme against the publishing industry.” @lilliana.09 commented, “I ran to look for this article and now i’m so invested i need this to be turned into a movie.” Literary agent Karolina Sutton said she was “**amazed the FBI took this seriously. For years we were told no one would (and certainly no one did in Britain!). [Wiedeman and Shapiro] did some seriously time-consuming sleuthing too, raising the profile of this case.**” And indie-folk band the Mountain Goats tweeted, “If you did not know about this AMAZING, should 100% be AWARD-WINNING story ... read every word.”

➡ Send correspondence to comments@nymag.com. Or go to nymag.com to respond to individual stories.

THESE DOCTORS ARE AMONG THE BEST DOCTORS IN NEW YORK

Each doctor has been peer-nominated and selected by Castle Connolly, the nation's leading provider of information on top doctors.



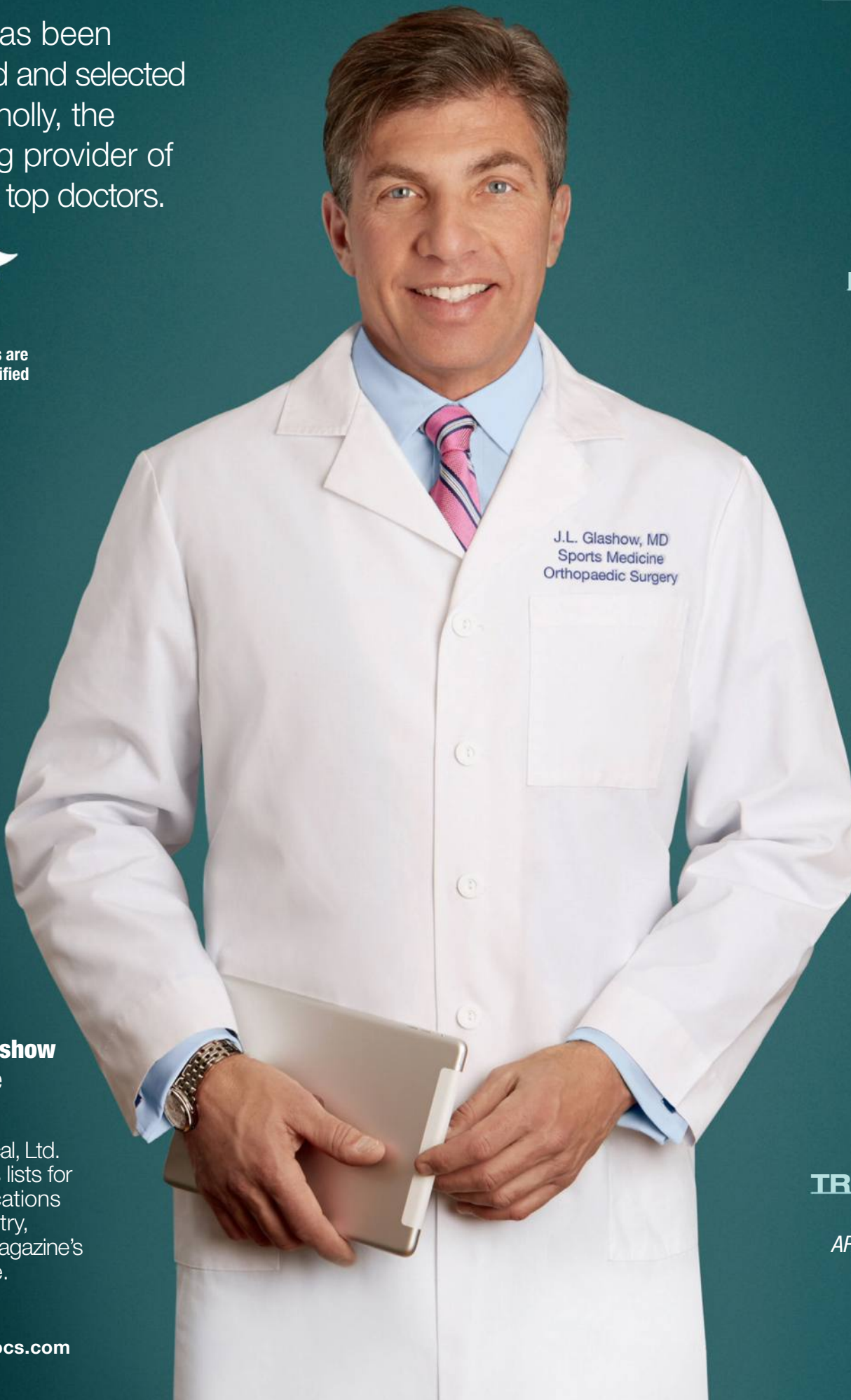
All Doctors are
Board Certified

Dr. Jonathan L. Glashow
Sports Medicine

Castle Connolly Medical, Ltd. provides Top Doctors lists for many regional publications throughout the country, including *New York* magazine's "Best Doctors" issue.



TheBestDocs.com



SPORTS MEDICINE

Jonathan L. Glashow, MD
*Shoulder, Knee,
Arthroscopic Surgery*
737 Park Avenue
New York, NY
212-794-5096
GlashowMD.com

PLASTIC SURGERY

Barry M. Weintraub, MD
*Face, Eyes, Nose &
Neck Procedures*
800A Fifth Avenue
New York, NY
212-737-7500
DrBarryWeintraub.com

NEUROSURGERY

Ezriel E. Kornel, MD
*Minimally Invasive
Brain & Spine Surgery*
215 East 77th Street
New York, NY
914-948-0444
TopSpineSurgeonNYC.com

HAND SURGERY

Mark E. Pruzansky, MD
*Hand, Wrist & Elbow Surgery,
Sports Injuries*
975 Park Avenue
New York, NY
212-249-8700
HandSport.us

DERMATOLOGY

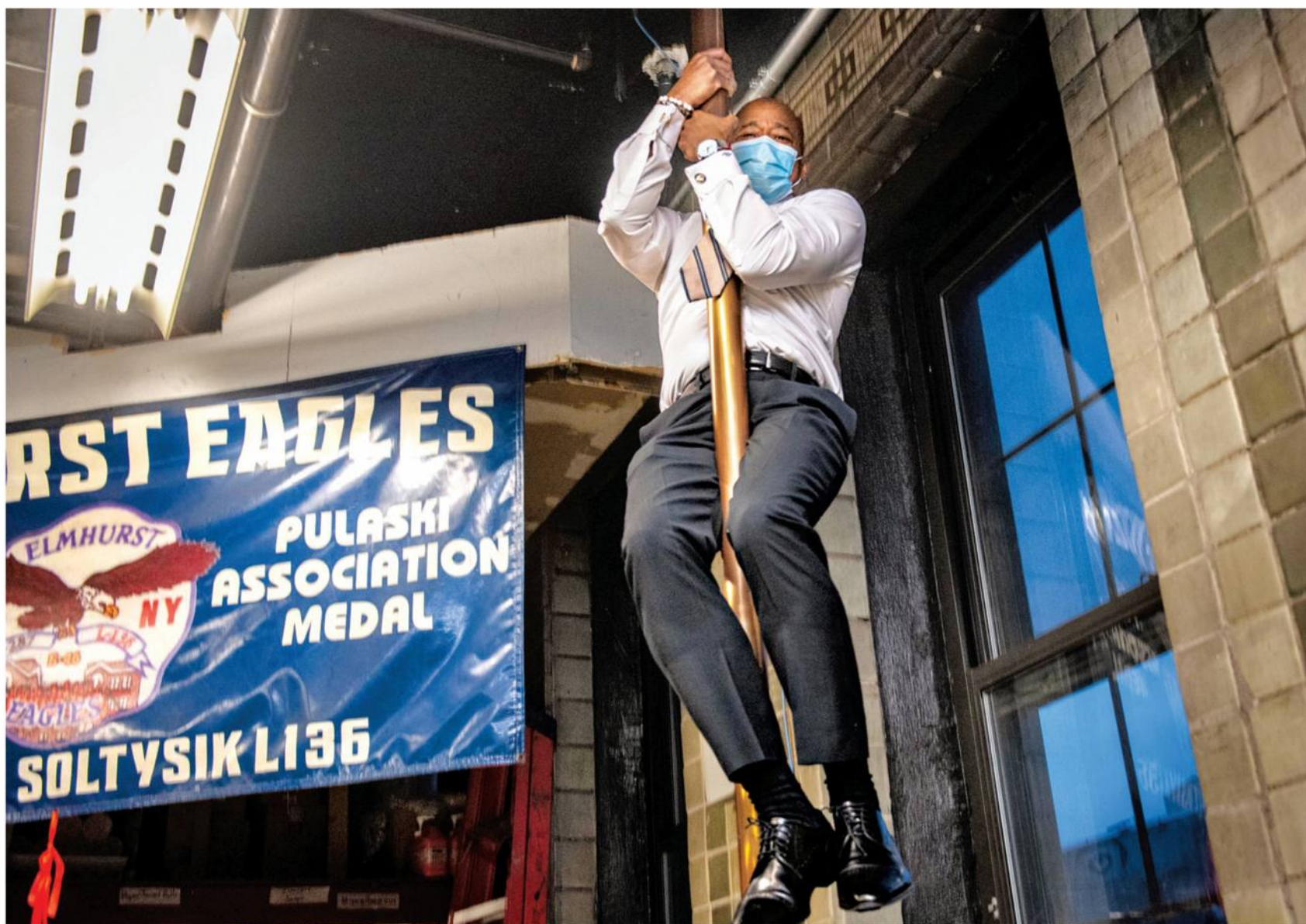
Ellen Marmur, MD
*Cosmetic and
Dermatologic Surgery*
12 East 87th Street
New York, NY
212-996-6900
MarmurMedical.com

HAIR TRANSPLANTATION

Robert M. Bernstein, MD
ARTAS® Robotic Hair Transplants
Center for Hair Restoration
110 East 55th Street
New York, NY
212-826-2400
BernsteinMedical.com

Intelligencer

INSIDE: The quick-change artists of *The Lion King* / Pickleball's professional glow-up / Into the coin-shortage wormhole



Mayor Adams in a Queens fire station on January 5.

The City Politic: Errol Louis

The Eric Adams Show
A beginning stocked
with masterstrokes,
gaffes, and eyebrow-
raising appointments.

"I'M GOING TO put in long hours—no one in this city is going to outwork me," Eric Adams said on day one, and he went on to rack up at least 47 public appearances in his first ten days as mayor—traveling to work on a Citi Bike and the subway, shoveling snow off the steps of his Brooklyn brownstone, sliding down the pole at a firehouse, making guest appearances on national news programs, and solemnly attending a vigil in the Bronx following a horrific fire that claimed 17 lives.

"It's not about showmanship—it's about showing up," he said in his first address to the city. Like Mayor Ed Koch, who took the reins at City Hall four decades ago in the shadow of a fiscal crisis that required massive layoffs and belt-tightening, Adams is making hard choices—his budget chief has already ordered agencies to outline plans to reduce spending by at least 3 percent before the end of the month—but he is also trying to cheer up a weary city in need of a morale boost as we head into the third

year of the pandemic. “When a mayor has swagger, the city has swagger,” Adams said in unscripted remarks at a school in the Bronx, flashing a big bright smile. “We’ve allowed people to beat us down so much that all we did was wallow in COVID,” he added. “This is a city of resiliency.”

New Yorkers should expect to hear more pep talks from City Hall as our economy struggles to get on its feet. Right now, the city’s 9 percent unemployment rate is more than double the national average, and we still have 350,000 fewer jobs than before the pandemic and aren’t expected to fill them until 2025.

Adams, pleading with city employers to end remote work and reopen offices, raised eyebrows at a press conference by making a tone-deaf reference to “my low-skill workers, my cooks, my dishwashers, my messengers, my shoeshine people, those who work at Dunkin’ Donuts—they don’t have the academic skills to sit in a corner office.” The mini-gaffe is likely to be remembered by the chattering classes but surely did nothing to shake Adams’s connection to the working-class families that make up his political base.

A more serious set of challenges has emerged in the form of harsh headlines and scolding editorials—which he knew were coming—about ethics issues surrounding his personnel picks. “It’s a bit dispiriting to see the new mayor really want to launch his war on crime this way,” wrote the New York *Post* editorial board, slamming Adams for trying to steer his younger brother, Bernard Adams, into a top NYPD job and for picking Philip Banks—a friend, business associate, and travel companion of several men convicted in a corruption scandal—as deputy mayor for public safety. “The mayor skipped important steps in the process. He should change course,” the *Daily News*’ editorial board said of the plan to hire Bernard. As for Banks, the paper warned, “By bringing into his inner circle a man who played a sizable role in one of the most sordid chapters of de Blasio’s term, Eric Adams is taking a risk.”

The mayor has indirectly responded to the criticism. After first announcing his brother would be a deputy NYPD commissioner, Adams downscaled his proposed responsibilities to running the mayor’s personal security detail. And while Adams continues to defend Banks—the brother of his schools chancellor, David Banks—the mayor took the unusual step of allowing him to announce his own appointment in an op-ed, a sharp contrast to the lengthy televised press conferences at which his first five deputy mayors were introduced. Adams is betting that complaints about his personnel

choices will fade from the headlines if his team can deliver on his core campaign promise: making New Yorkers feel our streets are safer and more orderly.

It has been done before. In the 1990s, one reason Rudy Giuliani became a two-term Republican mayor in our overwhelmingly Democratic city is he strongly accelerated the drop in street crime that began under his predecessor, David Dinkins, and took sole political credit for the subsequent dramatic rise in safety, picking up cross-over Democratic voters in even the most liberal of neighborhoods who were at wit’s end over crime. Famously, when Giuliani’s flashy, innovative NYPD commissioner, Bill Bratton—who conceived and led the implementation of the department’s data-driven CompStat management system—showed up on the cover of *Time* magazine, Giuliani replaced him two months later with a fire commissioner, Howard Safir, who took care to never upstage his boss.

Adams, in the Giuliani mold, is planning to run the NYPD from City Hall and to take 100 percent of the credit if crime goes down.

Adams, in the Giuliani mold, is clearly planning to run the NYPD from City Hall and to take 100 percent of the credit if crime goes down. Consider his appointment of Keechant Sewell as police commissioner. A rising star in law enforcement, Sewell had never worked in New York City government, and her experience managing the 350-member detectives bureau of the Nassau County Police is dwarfed by the NYPD’s 50,000 uniformed and civilian personnel. It will take time for Sewell to master the vast scope, culture, and internal politics of the NYPD, in contrast with the men she will report to, Banks and Adams, who are veterans with long-standing allies and connections throughout the department.

Adams, Banks, and Sewell have yet to unveil any major initiatives or funda-

mental changes to NYPD strategy. If they are open to new ideas, a couple are ripe for the taking. Naveed Jamali, a technology and national-security expert, has been preaching the merits of having the NYPD share its 911 dispatch data. Jamali told me that a close analysis of 911 calls—most of which never result in an arrest or evidence of a crime—could generate valuable information about where problems are likely to crop up in the future. Repeated police visits to a particular address could serve as a warning system that gun violence, domestic violence, illegal drug sales, or a mental-health crisis is likely to occur.

Another idea comes from a group of advocates who filed a class-action lawsuit against the city in the final days of the de Blasio administration. The group argues that the NYPD has violated both the state and federal Constitution as well as the Americans With Disabilities Act by allowing police officers who lack medical training to make snap, on-the-street diagnoses of who is an “emotionally disturbed person” and subject them to arrest, imprisonment, or deadly force. The coalition behind the lawsuit is calling on New York to get cops out of the business of responding to so-called EDP cases and instead to dispatch trained, unarmed medical specialists and peer-group members.

“This isn’t really about the police and how the police can do things better—it’s about getting them out of the picture entirely,” said Ruth Lowenkron, director of the disability-justice program at New York Lawyers for the Public Interest. Lowenkron hopes the coalition suing the city can meet with Adams. “I have been very vocal with people on the transition team. And I’m cautiously optimistic that my message is getting through,” she said.

That question—“Is my message getting through?”—is one that countless advocates, business owners, parents, and homeowners are asking. Adams has talked a strong game up until now, but will he make good on it?

“I think his first week in office has been quite extraordinary,” said Betsy Gotbaum, the former two-term public advocate who now runs the Citizens Union good-government organization. She’d just attended a board meeting where everybody was talking about the optics of the mayor appointing his brother and his friends. “But they also feel there’s somebody in charge in the city,” she says. “He’s having a good time—but, boy, was he on top of things when things didn’t go so well. It was a terrible week for him, but he handled it really well.” ■

The Group Portrait: Swing Time

Two actors, dozens of roles: How to keep *The Lion King* going during an outbreak.

By Jackson McHenry

IN EARLY JANUARY, as New York's Omicron cases were climbing, Leroy Church, who has acted in Disney's *The Lion King* on and off since 2013, flew back to the city from the show's tour to find that three men in the Broadway cast couldn't perform that night. Church would have to fill in for the part of the Bird Man, which involves an elaborate costume and a solo dance. At the hour call before the show, the dance supervisor taught him the choreography. "I'm doing everything I can to be the last one standing," Church says. "I keep knocking on wood." So far, he has tested negative.

Church is what is known in theater parlance as a "swing": an actor who fills in the gaps when other performers are absent. Unlike an understudy, who performs in a musical's ensemble each night and may step up to a principal role, a swing typically stays offstage until needed. The moment another actor calls out, a swing has to be ready to cover a number of "tracks," or the set of roles within an ensemble one actor would play in a night (the actor who plays the Bird Man, for instance, will often reappear in a dashiki later in another number, and a swing would do both).

During the Omicron spike, *The Lion King*'s nine swings have stayed on alert, ready to play all manner of characters from the savanna as the COVID test results come in each day. Church has also covered the part of a zebra—the very first role he ever played in the show, and the reason he has "zebra-print everything"—and has trained for the part of an antelope. Jacqueline René, a swing who has been with the show since a tour in 2003, typically covers eight tracks, including the principal roles of Shenzi the hyena and Nala the lioness. Like many swings, she has an encyclopedic knowledge of *The Lion King*: its score, its choreography, and its blocking, which she has refined by skipping between tracks constantly. But with so many absences, even the most seasoned have discovered something new. Before a recent show, René found herself, with a few minutes' notice, holding Mufasa's eye onstage for a coup de théâtre in the second act in which the dead patriarch's face appears in the sky. The part was new to her, and she discovered in the process that the eye puppet, which is attached to a 15-foot pole, is surprisingly cumbersome. "At *Lion King*, we're all of it," she says. "We're the humans, we're the puppets, we're the set pieces." ■





*Jacqueline René as Grasshead, Nala, and Bird Lady.
Leroy Church as Antelope, as Zebra, and in the dashiki he wears in the ensemble for "He Lives in You."*

Photography by Jake Chessum



72 MINUTES WITH ...

Connor Pardoe

Pickleball, once a game for the 50-plus crowd, exploded during the pandemic. This sports commissioner wants to turn it into a national pastime.

BY GIRI NATHAN

IN THE SUMMER of 2019, Connor Pardoe was trying to persuade Life Time, Inc., a health-club chain and the largest private operator of tennis courts in the U.S., to embrace a different game. Pardoe, then 26, was peddling pickleball: a racquet sport similar to tennis but played on a much smaller surface, over a slightly lower net, with a squarish paddle and a perforated plastic ball. The year before, Pardoe had left his family's real-estate business to build the Professional Pickleball Association. As he hunted for

tournament venues, he went straight for the flashiest sites in pro tennis. "We started big, reaching out to the Miami Open, the Lindner Family Tennis Center, where they play Western & Southern. A lot of those guys weren't too interested," he says. After all, for most of its 60-year history, pickleball was the domain of senior citizens too achy in the joints to scramble around full-size tennis courts. "We were on our hands and knees, begging these people to give pickleball a chance," Pardoe says.

After months of negotiation, Life Time agreed

to host one event on a trial basis. On tournament weekend, thousands of pickleballers descended on one of the health club's Atlanta locations, where each tennis court had been painted into four standard pickleball courts. "They brought their executives out and were like, 'Oh my gosh, this is the real deal. Can we add another one?'"

Since then, Pardoe's case has only gotten stronger. Pickleball was a curious beneficiary of pandemic conditions, which left people searching for low-stakes, outdoor ways to socialize at a distance. The Sports & Fitness Industry Association estimates that 4.2 million people played pickleball in 2020, up 21 percent from the year before. Unsuspecting parkgoers may now be familiar with the distinct *plonk* of ball against paddle. (Last winter, after a rash of noise complaints, the mayor of Ridgewood, New Jersey, put a padlock on the town's pickleball courts for three months.) Interest seems to be trickling down from the boomer set to my millennial peers: Four days into the New Year, one otherwise sports-agnostic group chat lit up with a bold resolution: "Have any of you played pickleball/I'm thinking this is my year."

"2021 was huge for us," Pardoe, now 28, tells me in December, video-chatting from PPA's offices just outside his native Salt Lake City. The group's tournaments did record ticket sales. TV and streaming deals started moving. "Today, I get a call every day from at least three to five people saying, 'How can I bring a pickleball event to my city or to my club?'"

Pardoe's ambition is to funnel the burgeoning enthusiasm for *playing* pickleball into enthusiasm for *watching* it, to win (and monetize) eyeballs on the scale of pro tennis or golf. The 2022 PPA season will span 20 events in North America and dispense \$2.5 million in prize money. That money comes in large part from sponsors like Hyundai, Margaritaville, and Guaranteed Rate, which might pay anywhere from \$200,000 to \$500,000 a year to have their names tied to events and their logos splashed over courts. Some PPA events will be broadcast on ESPN3 and Fox Sports, a prospect that once would have been as surreal as tuning in to world-class four square. The organization also seeks out and locks down the top pickleball talent. Its stars, such as Ben Johns, who has earned \$146,325 over his 40 PPA titles, sign exclusivity contracts so they can't play on rival tours, such as the mirror-named Association of Pickleball Professionals (APP).

Pardoe grew up in a family of tennis purists, and his dad played Division I. But a rogue pickleball-obsessed aunt ("We gave her a hard time because of the name and

whatnot," he says) encouraged him to pick up a paddle after her partner got sick before a tournament. Pardoe subbed in and was hooked by the game's learning curve: Competence felt immediate, and mastery felt distant. While managing the family firm's senior-living facilities, Pardoe played and watched as much pickleball as he could. Soon, he was sold on its potential as a spectator sport. A handful of skilled players were already calling themselves pros, but the existing patchwork of small-time events couldn't do the term justice. As he built a tour of his own, he picked up mentors like the Utah Jazz's head of sales and sponsorships and the former commissioner of the Women's Tennis Association.

Pardoe is an apt pitchman for a game intent on shaving a few decades off its average enthusiast's age. Unlike the typical commissioner of a professional sports league—sexagenarian, clean-shaven, encased in a suit at all times—he shows up to our interview in a hoodie and a black cap bearing the electric-blue initials CP (I first assume it's bespoke commissioner swag, but it's actually the logo of pickleball pro Catherine Parenteau, who finished the 2021 season as the No. 1 women's-singles player). He speaks with the polish of a newly minted M.B.A. and the self-assurance of an affable jock. (Pardoe played high-level youth basketball and, in the eighth grade, was dunked on by current New York Knicks star Julius Randle, then "an absolute man-child.")

"I don't think there's a sport out there that has as much potential as pickleball," Pardoe says, veering into pitch mode and running through the influx of new athletes, the telegenic play, and, most important, the low barrier to entry in terms of both athleticism and cost. A rudimentary paddle could be as cheap as \$20, while a solid beginner one will start at around \$60. Plus "it's so easy to build a court—you need a fourth of the size of a tennis court," Pardoe says. He has one in his backyard, where he plays pickleball weekly.

Pardoe intends to win over young fans with a less buttoned-up viewing experience

"We were on our hands and knees begging these people to give pickleball a chance."

than the old-guard country-club sports. "If you walked into one of our events, it's going to look like you're at the PGA or a professional tennis event. But the feel is a party. We have a live DJ between timeouts; the fans are rowdy. Not so much Flushing Meadows," he says. "It's more of a millennial-type, drink-a-beer, watch-Tyson McGuffin approach." (McGuffin is a player he describes as "a crowd favorite—more edgy, tattoos, growling, yelling.")

For now, tennis sits higher on the cultural totem pole, but at an institutional level, tennis and pickleball are already cozying up. Tennis clubs the world over are repainting their lines for pickleball. Tennis Channel will broadcast four big PPA events in 2022, and the official tennis organs of the U.S. and Canada are hosting and co-owning PPA events this year, respectively. In the spirit of toppling the racquet-sport hierarchy, Pardoe has invited American tennis pros like John Isner and Jack Sock to take on the pickleball elite. "They come in like, 'Oh, we can beat these pickleball professionals' and then they get smoked," he says.

At first, tennis players try to play what Pardoe calls a "bang-bang" style of pickleball, smashing the ball clean past their opponent, only to realize it's much easier to retrieve shots in these narrower confines. So power gives way to careful shot placement and wars of attrition. In time, Pardoe believes the PPA can lure athletes from the lower rungs of pro tennis, where the competition is knife sharp, the travel is ceaseless, and the money is thin. "I'd be a fool to say that we're not going to see more tennis transition, especially as our prize money is growing," he says. "For these guys that are ranked No. 500, No. 400, No. 300 in tennis, they can make more money in our sport if they think they can be a top player."

When I catch up with Pardoe again, in early January, he's driving around Dallas, where he plans to move the PPA headquarters later this year. He now has around 25 full-time employees, up from the skeleton crew of three at the PPA's inception. The last three hires were all media types brought in to help the league's top players build their brands online ("Content is king," he intoned more than once). This year, pickleball will get in on the biggest consumer trend in sports when the PPA brings in a gambling partner. "New eyeballs, new audience, more clicks, more views," he says in the nimble patter of the millennial marketer. While the current goal is for the PPA to get settled in North America, Pardoe notes the sport is booming in India, Europe, and the Philippines. With global spread, another objective looms: Get pickleball into the Olympics as a demo sport for the 2028 L.A. Games. ■



The Money Game: Choire Sicha

America's
Quarter-Life Crisis
Where's our change?
The answer is gnarlier
than you'd expect.

OUR GOVERNMENT just dropped a hot new quarter featuring Maya Angelou with her arms dramatically aloft, posed before a bird's giant wingspan. It's the first of a series, each depicting women on the back. (George Washington is still on the front.) Arrival of the long-planned quarter was met with joy tempered with bafflement. Hey—aren't we in a coin shortage?

The answer is complicated. For some time now, the United States of America, among her other struggles, has indeed been in the silvery throes of a slow-moving crisis of coin. It became apparent in the spring of 2020, when our sudden lack of desire to get breathed on forced many of us to stop transacting money IRL. The Federal Reserve found that in April 2020, only a third of Americans had made an in-person purchase within the past 30 days—and only slightly more than half of those people reported using cash. (In previous surveys, nearly everyone had reported recently making an in-person purchase.) We had ceased being cogs in the money-circulation system; we were neglecting our role as the pollinators of cash. It was yet another supply-chain issue, one in which

the troublesome link was you and me.

With this disruption of the constant input of coins into banks and Coinstars and cash registers, the currency output hiccuped as well. That's why, in the summer of 2020, you saw stores posting signs to warn customers that cashiers wouldn't be able to make change. A Dollar Tree in the suburbs of Detroit was offering to buy coins from customers; Kroger stores were crediting change to customer-loyalty cards; and people in Belton, Texas, were charging into laundromats to use the change machines and then leaving, violating the social contract of laundromat fairness and making the problem of finding quarters even worse. Meanwhile, the Federal Reserve started rationing coins to local banks, placing a temporary cap on how many they could order.

A bit panicked, the U.S. Mint and the Federal Reserve introduced an entity called the U.S. Coin Task Force, bringing together government, big retail players, and commercial banks in order to make at least this one aspect of COVID less painful and less prolonged. This group included friends and competitors with a vested interest in the fate of coins, like Coinstar and the armored-car people. (Brink's makes a big chunk of its revenue from ATMs and running money; a pillar of its cash-moving business is transporting new currency in and around the Federal Reserve system.) In the summer of 2020, this task force agreed on a diagnosis: that we lazy Americans were simply refusing to exchange these coins frequently enough, creating a "dramatic deceleration of coin circulation through the supply chain." There was, in other words, no shortage. America still had tens of billions of dollars of coins. It just so happened that, like the murderer in the movies, they were in your house right now.

But the reasons our coins were building up in our piggy banks and under our couch cushions turned out to be greater than simply our lack of in-person shopping. In the U.S., while our bills have mostly remained a transaction currency (you give 'em a \$20 at the deli and get a bacon and egg on a roll), our coins, worth just little bits of money, are mostly a settlement currency (the deli gives you back the difference in change). For many of us, we'd only be bothered to return that change to our economy when it's time to do laundry or when we aren't going to make it to payday—off to Coinstar we go!

From the Coin Task Force emerged a hashtag, #GetCoinMoving, giving an echo of 1989's classic Soul II Soul track "Keep on Movin'." The task force created social-media images and captions that included "Calling all coin!" and "Spend your coins—they're

We had ceased being cogs in the money-circulation system; we were neglecting our role as the pollinators of cash.

bored!" It called on Americans to empty their couches and car ashtrays like it was a war draft.

It didn't work. And meanwhile, the idea that the U.S. was literally running out of quarters and dimes to keep our barely functioning society going had become a meme—obvious, self-reinforcing. (Twitter reactions to the Angelou quarter included "During a coin shortage? Comical" and "Isn't there a coin shortage?? How the hell am I supposed to get one 🤔.") Even after people began returning to stores and transacting more normally, we saw coin scarcity everywhere. Some of New York's retail darlings, in defiance of a 2020 city law mandating that businesses accept cash, stubbornly refused to open their registers. Last year, ice-cream parlor Van Leeuwen was fined for repeatedly violating the cash mandate; by November 2021, it still wasn't accepting legal tender and hadn't paid its fines, according to an Eater investigation. And while Roberta's, holder of the hipster pizza crown, famously used to be an all-cash business, its South Williamsburg location was fined \$1,000 for not accepting cash at all.

"Pseudo shortages are as serious as actual shortages, just as psychosomatic illness produces symptoms as real and painful as those created by actual illness." That's what Representative Dante Fascell said at a House subcommittee hearing on American coin shortages in 1964. The coin shortage of the 1960s, the subcommittee agreed, had pretty much one cause: People were hoarding silver coins because the value of silver was growing and the specie was worth more as an investment than as actual currency. Congress moved fairly swiftly, in government terms. By the next year, dimes and quarters were no longer made of silver. Case closed!

Now our coins are made of garbage (apologies to the zinc industry!), and as currency, they're worth less and less to us every year. Despite our indifference, the U.S. Mint is

ordered to keep up annual production—even if that means it's drowning us in shiny new coins that merely add to our collection of coins we don't use. But no matter how worthless they become, there's always someone who can make money off coins: counting them, wrapping them, transporting them. And because of the constant flood of free new coins, there is no actual (as in financial) pressure on anyone involved to unlodge those old ones from our homes.

This coin quandary was minted long before the pandemic. In December 2018, the U.S. Mint privately gathered people in D.C. to brainstorm ways to reduce the country's dependence on constantly pumping out new coins. Ideas usually include eliminating pennies or nickels or changing their composition. That's not good business for the quiet interests involved. The zinc industry, for example, is heavily invested in the life span of the penny (and pays Americans for Common Cents for its lobbying powers). And if you change the composition of a coin, you'd pass on a large onetime cost to institutions that measure coins by weight or thickness or metal.

With the big issues of our time—global warming, a never-ending pandemic—we love to obsess about individual decisions: what we buy and how we throw it away, where we go or don't go. When it comes to our slow coin-extinction event, we get the blame as well. But it'll only be resolved when someone figures out a way to make money fixing it.

In the meantime, scarcity takes all forms, including the lengths to which people still go to gin up some quarters. Last year, Aja Lans, a bioarchaeologist, moved to the Boston area from New York City. Her basement laundry room in New York had a card system, but her Boston place was Quarter City. In the first month, she busted open a pineapple piggy bank. That ran dry quick. Lans thought she'd try her husband's work, a large plumbing-supply company. Nope—it no longer had coins. Lans figured she'd go to the bank; a neighbor told her not to bother. "She was like, 'I tried that. They don't have any either,'" Lans said.

In December, she went home for Christmas to upstate New York. In a classic clear family coin jar, her mother had been stockpiling a small fortune in change. Mom passed her a Ziploc bag full of coins in exchange for Venmo. This ends one household's crisis—for now—and their Christmas was mostly successful, though the family lost a few attendees to positive coronavirus tests along the way, a fittingly disruptive end to 2021. "So it was very small, and we had a little kind of dinner," Lans said. "But at least I got quarters out of it." ■

The Undoing of Joss Whedon

The *Buffy* creator, once an icon of Hollywood feminism, is now an outcast accused of misogyny. How did he get here?

By Lila Shapiro

IN THE FALL OF 2002, 160 scholars convened at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, England. They were an eclectic group—theologians, philosophers, linguists, film professors—and they had descended on the medieval city for a conference dedicated to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, a cult television show about a teenage girl who fights monsters while attending high school in Southern California. It was not a typical academic gathering. There were life-size cutouts of the eponymous heroine as well as *Buffy*-themed chocolates, action figures, and, in the welcome bags, exfoliating moisturizers (“Buffy the Backside Slayer”). Professors stalked around in long black leather coats like the vampire Spike, Buffy’s enemy and, later, her lover.

If the line between scholarship and fandom was vanishingly thin, so was the line between fandom and worship. On the first morning of the conference, David Lavery, a professor of English at Middle Tennessee State University, stood at the podium and declared the show’s creator, Joss Whedon, the “avatar” of a new religion, the “founder of a new faith.” Lavery and two other professors would go on to establish the Whedon Studies Association, an organization devoted to expanding the field of *Buffy* scholarship. As Lavery would write in the introduction to a book he co-authored on the series, Whedon had not simply composed a narrative about a struggle against the “forces of darkness—vampires, demons, monsters of all varieties”; he had taken a stand against a panoply of oppressive “social forces,” most obviously the “forces of gender



stereotyping.” According to the prevailing rules of Hollywood horror at the time, Whedon’s protagonist, a hot blonde with a dumb name, should have died within the opening scenes, but Whedon had flipped the genre on its head, endowing her with superhuman powers and a hero’s journey.

It wasn’t just scholars who worshipped him in those days. He was a celebrity showrunner before anyone cared who ran shows. In 2005, the comic-book artist Scott R. Kurtz designed a T-shirt that gestured at Whedon’s stature in popular culture at the time: JOSS WHEDON IS MY MASTER NOW. Marvel later put him in charge of its biggest franchise, hiring him to write and direct 2012’s *The Avengers* and its sequel *Age of Ultron*, two of the highest-grossing films of all time. His fans thought of him as a feminist ally, an impression bolstered by his fund-raising efforts for progressive causes. But in recent years, the good-guy image has been tarnished by a series of accusations, each more damaging than the last. In 2017, his ex-wife, Kai Cole, published a sensational open letter about him on the movie blog *The Wrap*. She condemned him as a “hypocrite preaching feminist ideals” and accused him of cheating on her throughout their marriage, including with actresses on the set of *Buffy*. Then, beginning in the summer of 2020, the actors Ray Fisher and Gal Gadot, who had starred in a superhero film directed by Whedon, claimed he’d mistreated them, with Fisher describing his behavior as “gross, abusive, unprofessional, and completely unacceptable.”

They were soon joined by Charisma Carpenter, who played Cordelia on *Buffy* and its spinoff series, *Angel*. In a long Twitter post, she wrote that Whedon had a “history of being casually cruel.” After she became pregnant, heading into *Angel*’s fourth season, he called her “fat” to colleagues and summoned her into his office to ask, as she recalled, if she was “going to keep it.” She claimed he had mocked her religious beliefs, accused her of sabotaging the show, and fired her a season later, once she had given birth. All the joy of new motherhood had been “sucked right out,” she wrote. “And Joss was the vampire.”

Carpenter’s comments threw the fandom into a crisis. Fan organizations debated changing their names; people on discussion sites wrote anguished posts as Sarah Michelle Gellar, who played the titular Slayer, and other *Buffy* stars offered words of support for Carpenter online. The community’s sense of shock and betrayal could be seen in part as an indictment of the culture of fandom itself. “As fans, we have a bad habit of deifying those whose work we respect,” Kurtz, the comic-book artist, told me. “When you build these people up so big they have nowhere to go but down, I don’t know why we’re surprised when they turn out to be fallible humans who fall.”

This past spring, Whedon invited me to spend a couple of afternoons with him at his home in Los Angeles. By then, I had spoken with dozens of people who knew him; after months of agonizing over whether to grant my request for an interview, he had decided to talk, too. Whedon lives in Santa Monica, 13 blocks from the ocean, on a street lined with magnolia trees and \$5 million homes. His house is open, airy, modern. He sat hunched over on a black leather couch, his fingers clicking together, the thumbs tapping each of the other digits in quick succession whenever the conversation shifted toward his recent troubles. Pale and angular with bags under his eyes, he no longer much resembled the plump-cheeked Puck who once impishly urged a profile writer to describe him as “doughy” and “jowly.” It was a perfect day in Santa Monica, as almost every day in Santa Monica is. But Whedon wanted to stay inside. Gazing through a wall of glass at his lush backyard, he announced in his quiet rumble of a voice that he was thinking of getting curtains. “The sun is my enemy,” he said.

Scattered around the room were paintings by his wife, the artist Heather Horton. They got married in February 2021, just after the wave of allegations had crested. At the sound of the garage door opening, his shoulders relaxed. “Heather’s coming back,” he said. She breezed through the room in a sundress and complimented me on my glasses. Then she was gone. Picking up a cup of tea, Whedon said he could no longer remain silent as people tried to pry his legacy from his hands. But there was a problem. Those people had set out to destroy him and would surely seize on his every utterance in an attempt to finish the job. “I’m terrified,” he said, “of every word that comes out of my mouth.”

BACK WHEN HE WAS still a god, the kind that is contractually obligated to promote network-television shows at press junkets, Whedon was asked over and over to explain why he wrote stories about strong women. For years, he would answer by talking about his mother. Lee Stearns, who died in 1991, was an activist and unpublished novelist who taught history at an elite private school in the Bronx. One of her students, Jessica Neuwirth, went on to become a co-founder of Equality Now, an organization that promotes women’s rights. Neuwirth, who has cited Stearns as an inspiration, described her to me as “a visionary feminist.” In 2006, Equality Now presented Whedon with an award at an evening dedicated to honoring “men on the front lines” of feminism. In his speech, Whedon referred to his mother as “extraordinary, inspirational, tough, cool,” and “sexy.”

Sitting in his living room, he told me he sees a different side of her now. “She was a remarkable woman and an inspiring person,” he said, “but sometimes those are hard people to be raised by.”

Whedon had been thinking a lot about his childhood. He had been in therapy for the past few years, ever since he checked himself into an addiction-treatment center in Florida for a monthlong stay. As a younger man, he had channeled his pain into his work, but he was never particularly interested in picking apart the stories he always told himself about his past. Now, he didn’t have much else to do. The allegations against him had led friends to stop calling. He was out of work and wasn’t writing. What story could he even tell? There were things about his life he was only beginning to understand. “Not the things being said in the press, necessarily, but things I’m not comfortable with,” he told me. “I’m like, *I have nothing going on. I can do some work on me.*”

Born Joseph, Whedon grew up in a palazzo-style apartment building on the Upper West Side. The family spent holidays reading Shakespeare out loud and evenings listening to Sondheim with friends. “There wasn’t a grown-up who didn’t have a drink in their hand by midafternoon,” he said. His father, Tom, was a second-generation television writer whose credits included *The Golden Girls* and *The Dick Cavett Show*. He had lived through many writers’-room battles, and he and Lee ran the home as though they were in the thick of one. “If you weren’t funny or entertaining or agreeing with them, they would cut you down or turn to stone,” he recalled.

Whedon was the youngest of three boys. Soft and slight and anxious, he had long red hair that caused people to mistake him for a girl, which he says he didn’t mind. He identified with “the feminine”—a testament, maybe, to his connection with his mother. She was “capricious and withholding,” but she frightened him less than his father and, especially, his brothers—“admirable monsters” who “bullied the shit” out of him. On weekends and in summers, he would pass his mornings pacing the long driveway of the family’s second home, a farmhouse near Schenectady, “making up science-

He felt he “had” to sleep with them, that he was “power

fiction universes or plotting elaborate revenges on my brothers.”

Whedon now has a term for the damage his childhood caused. He says he suffers from complex post-traumatic-stress disorder, a condition that can lead to relationship problems, self-destructive behavior, and addictions of various kinds. I asked if he would be willing to share his most traumatic memory with me. “I’m going to run to the loo,” he said. Later, he would let slip that someone had advised him to pretend he needed to pee if he felt uncomfortable with a question.

Returning to the couch, he affected a sort of Vincent Price voice. “And now,” Whedon said, “tales of horror and woe.”

When he was 5, a 4-year-old boy, the son of family friends, disappeared on his parents’ property upstate. Eventually, his body was found; he had drowned in the pond. Years later, as a teenager, Whedon remembered he had called the boy over to the pond to play with him. After getting bored, he had walked away, leaving the boy alone by the water. “I didn’t think it was my fault,” Whedon said. “I knew I was 5. But it doesn’t just disappear as a thought.” It took him another 30 years, he said, before another thought dawned on him: Even after the incident, his parents never taught him to swim. “There was no structure,” he said. “There was no safety.”

His parents split up when he was 9. At 15, he went to an all-boys boarding school in England where he read more Shakespeare, joined the fencing team, and struggled to make friends. “I was very dark and miserable, this hideous little homunculus who managed to annoy everyone,” he told the author of *Joss Whedon: The Biography*. Then, in 1983, his fortunes changed. He had arrived at Wesleyan University, where he discovered his artsy, angsty personality could actually be attractive to women. He got a girlfriend, traded his basic name for a more interesting one, and found a mentor, the eminent film scholar Jeanine Basinger.

Basinger, a sort of campus Svengali, surrounded herself with acolytes—Michael Bay, Mike White, D.B. Weiss. In one of her books, *A Woman’s View*, she espoused the artistic merits of the woman’s picture, a genre that predominated in the middle of the 20th century. The heroines of these films led fabulous lives as successful single girls in the workplace until just before the closing credits, when they gave it all up for marriage. Seen from one angle, these movies promoted sexist conventions; from another, they celebrated women’s liberation. Basinger argued they did both, and she perceived this ambiguity made them interesting because it reflected the messiness of the human mind. This insight stayed with Whedon, who had no trouble understanding how messy the mind could be. He admired strong women like his mother, yet he’d discovered he was capable of hurting them, “usually by sleeping with them and ghosting or whatever.” He would later tell his biographer this duality gave him “an advantage” over the girls in his college class on feminism when it came to discussing relations between the sexes. “I have seen the enemy,” he said, “and he’s in my brain!”

After Wesleyan, Whedon moved to L.A., where he met Cole and wrote the screenplay for *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, the 1992 film directed by Fran Rubel Kuzui. He wanted to tell a story about someone who turns out to be important despite the fact that no one takes that person seriously. “It took me a long time to realize I was writing about me,” he told me, “and that my feeling of powerlessness and constant anxiety was at the heart of everything.” His avatar was not a fearful young man, however, but a gorgeous girl with extraordinary courage. He wanted to be her, and he wanted to fuck her.

In 1995, executives at the fledgling WB network invited him to turn the idea into a series. Building on his original premise, he re-

imagined the monsters as metaphors for the horrors of adolescence. In one climactic scene, Buffy loses her virginity to a vampire who has been cursed with a soul; the next morning, his soul is gone and he’s lusting for blood. Any young woman who had gone to bed with a seemingly nice guy only to wake up with an asshole could relate.

Like those women’s pictures Basinger had written about, the show invited a multiplicity of interpretations. You could view it as a story of female empowerment or as the opposite—the titillating tale of a woman in leather pants who is brutalized by monsters. When it came out, critics mostly read it as the former. It was the late ’90s, after all. In 1998, shortly after *Buffy*’s second season aired, *Time* published an infamous cover asking, “Is Feminism Dead?” As the story’s author, Ginia Bellafante, noted, the protests of the ’60s and ’70s were long over, Gloria Steinem was defending Bill Clinton in the *New York Times*, and the struggles for equal pay and child care had been subsumed by the corporate pageantry of “girl power,” the glib spectacle of powerful women on TV. *Buffy* was actually far more complex than most of the other examples of this phenomenon. As in so much of Whedon’s work, the lines between good and evil were blurred. The good guys sometimes did monstrous things, and the monsters could occasionally do good. But the media likes a story with a clear-cut hero, and Whedon wasn’t above playing the part. “I just got tired of seeing women be the victims,” he told the *L.A. Times* in 2000. “I needed to see women taking control.”

I N THOSE EARLY DAYS of the internet, before nerd culture swallowed the world, fans flocked to a message board set up by the WB to analyze *Buffy* with the obsessive zeal of Talmudic scholars. Whedon knew how to talk to these people—he was one of them. He would visit the board at all hours to complain about his grueling schedule or to argue with fans about their interpretations of his work. Back then, as he pointed out to me, the internet was “a friendly place,” and he, the quick-witted prince of nerds, “had the advantage of it.” At one point, fans became convinced Buffy and another Slayer, Faith, were romantically entwined. After Whedon shot down the theory, accusing its proponents of seeing a “lesbian subtext behind every corner,” one of the posters (Buffynerd) sent him a link to her website, where she had published a meticulous exegesis of the relationship. He returned to the message board to applaud her, sort of. “By God, I think she’s right!” he declared. Dropping the facetious tone, he conceded she had made some good points. “I say B.Y.O. Subtext,” he proclaimed, coining a phrase that fans would recite like scripture.

Occasionally, some of the *Buffy* stars and writers would gather at Whedon’s house to watch episodes. They’d huddle around his computer, log on to the board, and chat. Once, Alyson Hannigan, who played Buffy’s friend Willow, posted her number to the site—she was moving to a new apartment the next day but planned to keep her old landline connected to an answering machine so posters could leave her messages. One fan called so quickly he caught her before she had a chance to set up the machine.

Every year, the regular posters would hold an IRL party where Whedon would make an appearance. Bryan Bonner, one of the organizers, recalled running into him outside one of these events. Bonner suggested he use the VIP entrance, but Whedon shook his head. “He said, ‘No, I’m good. It’s fine,’” Bonner recalled. “He was always this approachable, down-to-earth guy.” Another organizer, Allyson Beatrice, who wrote a book about *Buffy* fandom, described the annual gathering as a sort of family reunion. Many found their closest friends through the fan community. One of

less” to resist. I laughed. “I’m not actually joking,” he said.

the most appealing ideas in the show was that a group of social outcasts could come together to form a chosen family. When we meet Buffy, her father is absent, her mother is distracted by work, and she is isolated by the lies she has to tell to cover up her life as a Slayer. At school, she falls in with a gang of nerdy friends who know who she really is. Together, they take on evil teachers, bad boyfriends, and goat-horned demons, saving the world, and one another, again and again.

Fans believed Whedon had found his chosen family, too, behind the scenes of the show they all loved so much. But chosen families are not necessarily spared the strife that can plague any family. “I felt very conflicted with the fans,” one *Buffy* actress told me. “I didn’t have the same feeling about the show, but I also know sometimes people don’t want your truth.” She believed people hadn’t been ready to hear about what Whedon was really like on the set. “There was a cult of silence around that sort of behavior,” she said.

WHEDON WAS 31 when he began running *Buffy*. He had never run a show before and had never been a boss of any kind. At first, when crew members would hold the door open for him on set, he would do an awkward dance and insist he hold the door for *them*. “It just felt so fucking wrong,”

he told me. Then, one day in the third season, a crew member neglected to hold the door and Whedon walked straight into it face-first. “*Oh, I see,*” Whedon recalled thinking. “*You did get used to it.*”

By the next year, he would be running two shows at once—*Buffy* and *Angel*. Soon, he added *Firefly* to the mix. He spent his days racing among the sets and the writers’ rooms, exerting control over countless aspects of the productions, from the story arcs down to the details of makeup and wardrobe. One actor described him as a “huge pulsating brain.” “There were a thousand things he was tuning in to every moment,” he said. “He could make the slightest adjustment and the scene would go from a three to a ten.”

A sort of cult of personality formed around Whedon. Once a month, he would invite his favorite cast and crew members to his house. They would hold Shakespeare readings in the amphitheater that Cole, an architect, had built in their backyard. “It was like being part of this little family,” said an actress who was in the inner circle for a time. One *Buffy* writer recalled Whedon signing posters for every member of the writing staff. They stood around as he bestowed each of them with personalized words of wisdom like “a guru on the hill.” Scenes like this were not uncommon. “The standard reaction to Joss was worship,” the writer said.

Even people who didn’t worship him told me working with him could be a wonderful experience. Miracle Laurie, an actress on Whedon’s 2009 series *Dollhouse*, was a size 12 when she got the job. Whedon told her not to go on a diet. “He was trying to show that a size 12 woman is normal, sexy, beautiful, strong,” she said. “I still get people coming up to me saying how much it meant to them. I felt celebrated by him.” Like many I interviewed, she was surprised to hear her colleagues felt differently, but looking back, she remembered glimpsing another side of Whedon. “I saw his kindness and his good intentions,” she said, “and I also saw the snarkiness, the fickleness, where I would not want to be on the other side.”

Buffy costume designer Cynthia Bergstrom recalled an incident that happened during the filming of season five. In one episode, Spike asks a sadistic science nerd to create a sex-robot version of the Slayer. Whedon and Gellar did not agree on what the Buffy-bot should wear. “Sarah was adamant about it being a certain way,” Bergstrom said. “The costume she wanted was a bit grandma-ish—a pleated skirt and high neck. He definitely wanted it to be sexier.” On the day Gellar tried the different options, Whedon grew frustrated. “I was like, ‘Joss, let’s just get her dressed,’” Bergstrom recalled.

“He grabbed my arm and dug in his fingers until his fingernails imprinted the skin and I said, ‘You’re hurting me.’”

A *Firefly* writer remembered him belittling a colleague for writing a script that wasn’t up to par. Instead of giving her notes privately, he called a meeting with the entire writing staff. “It was basically 90 minutes of vicious mockery,” the writer said. “Joss pretended to have a slide projector, and he read her dialogue out loud and pretended he was giving a lecture on terrible writing as he went through the ‘slides’ and made funny voices—funny for him. The guys were looking down at their pages, and this woman was fighting tears the entire time. I’ve had my share of shitty showrunners, but the intent to hurt—that’s the thing that stands out for me now.”

A high-level member of the *Buffy* production team recalled Whedon’s habit of “writing really nasty notes,” but that wasn’t what disturbed her most about working with him. Whedon was rumored to be having affairs with two young actresses on the show. One day, he and one of the actresses came into her office while she was working. She heard a noise behind her. They were rolling around on the floor, making out. “They would bang into my chair,” she said. “How can you concentrate? It was gross.” This happened more than once, she said. “These actions proved he had no respect for me and my work.” She quit the show even though she had no other job lined up.

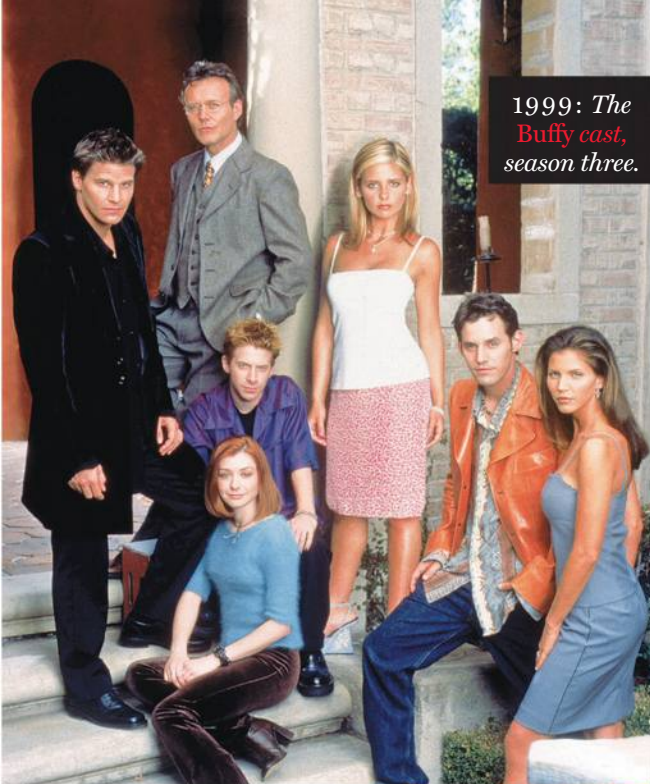
Then there were the alleged incidents two *Buffy* actresses wrote about on social media last year. Michelle Trachtenberg, who’d played Buffy’s younger sister, claimed there had been a rule forbidding Whedon from being alone in a room with her on set. Whedon told me he had no idea what she was talking about, and Trachtenberg didn’t want to elaborate. One person who worked closely with her on *Buffy* told me an informal rule did exist, though it was possible Whedon was not aware of it. During the seventh season, when Trachtenberg was 16, Whedon called her into his office for a closed-door meeting. The person does not know what happened, but recalled Trachtenberg was “shaken” afterward. An adult in Trachtenberg’s circle created the rule in response.

The story of Whedon’s conflict with Carpenter is less obscure. The actress has been talking about it with fans and reporters for more than a decade. The tensions with Whedon developed well before her pregnancy. By her own account, she suffered from extreme anxiety and struggled to hit her marks and memorize her lines; Whedon, obsessed with word-perfect dialogue, was not always patient. After she moved over to *Angel*, she got a tattoo of a rosary on her wrist even though her character was working for a vampire, a creature repelled by crosses. Another time, she chopped off her long hair in the middle of filming an episode. In her Twitter post, Carpenter seemed to blame Whedon for her performance problems. She wrote that his cruelty intensified her anxiety. She got the tattoo, she explained, to help her feel “spiritually grounded” in a volatile work environment.

Whedon acknowledged he was not as “civilized” back then. “I was young,” he said. “I yelled, and sometimes you had to yell. This was a very young cast, and it was easy for everything to turn into a cocktail party.” He said he would never intentionally humiliate anyone. “If I am upsetting somebody, it will be a problem for me.” The costume designer who said he’d grabbed her arm? “I don’t believe that,” he said, shaking his head. “I know I would get angry, but I was never physical with people.” Had he made out with an actress on the floor of someone’s office? “That seems false. I don’t understand that story even a little bit.” He removed his glasses and rubbed his face. “I should run to the loo.” When he came back, he said the story didn’t make sense to him because he “lived in terror” of his affairs being discovered.

He had some regrets about how he spoke with Carpenter after learning she was pregnant. “I was not

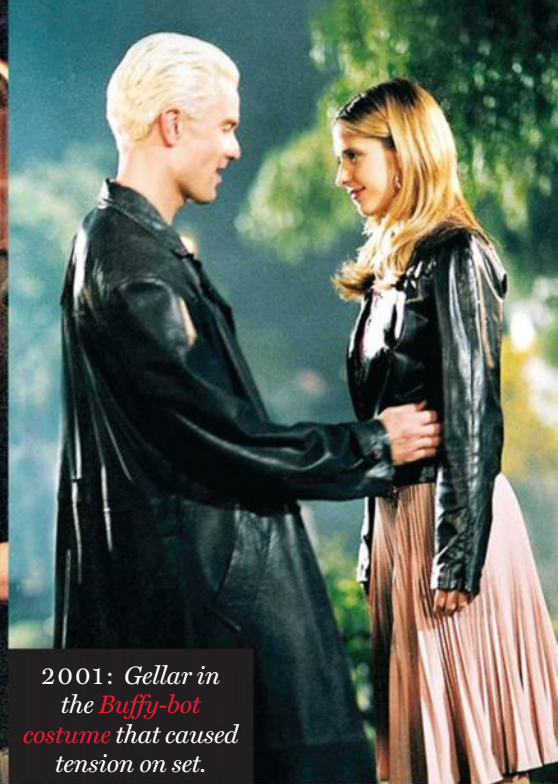
(Continued on page 70)



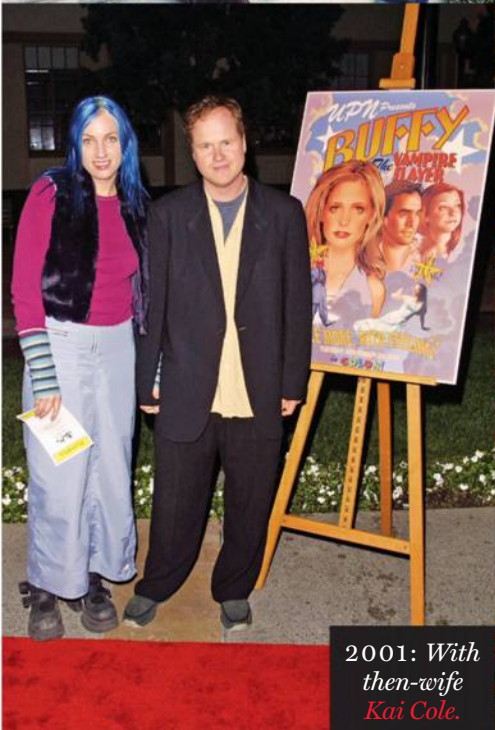
1999: *The Buffy cast, season three.*



2001: *Whedon on the Buffy set with star Sarah Michelle Gellar.*



2001: *Gellar in the Buffy-bot costume that caused tension on set.*



2001: *With then-wife Kai Cole.*



2004: *With the cast of Buffy spinoff Angel.*



2009: *With Eliza Dushku, star of Dollhouse.*



2011: *Making Avengers.*



2012: *With Robert Downey Jr., Chris Hemsworth, and Chris Evans on the set of Avengers.*



2015: *With Scarlett Johansson on the set of Age of Ultron.*



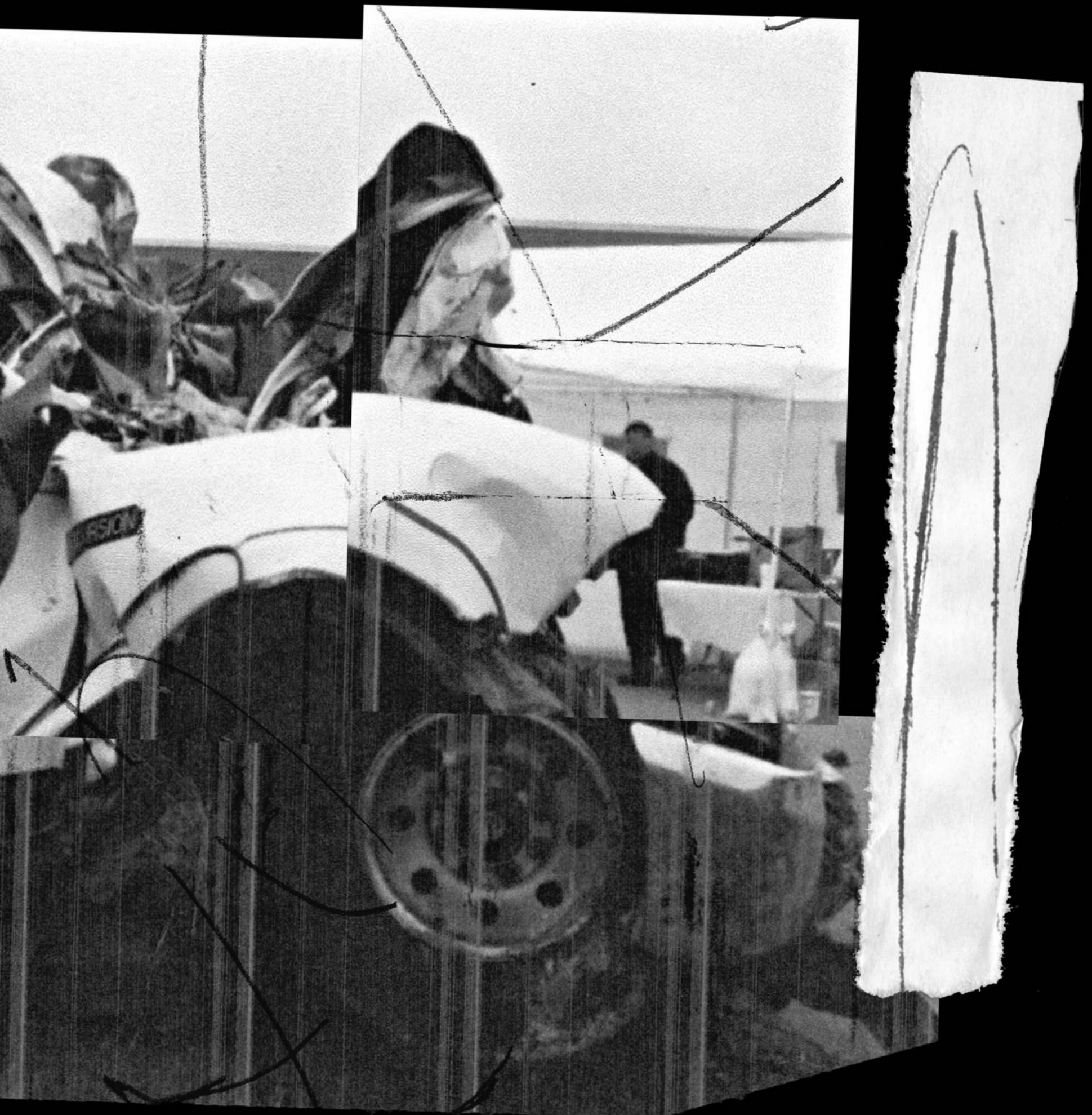
2021: *Ray Fisher in Zack Snyder's Justice League.*

THE WRECK OF A LIMO NEAR ALBAN TRANSPORTATION DISASTER IN A DE ONE OF THE MOST NOTORIOUS CONFIDE



13,000 POUNDS AT 11

**Y WAS THE DEADLIEST U.S.
CADE. AND THE MAN BEHIND IT WAS
NTIAL INFORMANTS IN FBI HISTORY.**



8 MILES PER HOUR

BY BEN
RYDER
HOWE

Photo-illustration by Mark Harris

ON SEPTEMBER 4, 2018, Nauman Hussain, a 28-year-old professional paintball player, was working at his family's business when a state inspector arrived for a routine visit. Nauman's father owned Prestige Limousine, a small company touting "modern, classy vehicles" for "exquisite wedding, prom, event, and special occasion" transportation in the Albany area, and Nauman operated it day to day, sometimes answering to his father's name. The inspector examined Prestige's vehicles and placed an orange-and-white sticker roughly the size of a license plate on the windshield of its workhorse, a Ford Excursion. "OUT-OF-SERVICE," it read. "This motor vehicle has been declared UNSERVICEABLE."

The Excursion was a beast, a 10,000-pound SUV that had been chopped in half and welded back together with 12 extra feet of carriage in the middle, effectively turning it into a bus. It was a party vehicle, or a party gag, the kind of limo that made you wince and check the leather seats for stains. State inspectors knew Prestige's Excursion well. They regarded it as an insult to their profession and "violated" it whenever they could.

The Hussains always managed to get it back on the road. Six months earlier, the limo had failed inspection for a long list of deficiencies, including corroded and compromised brakes. Someone had crudely disabled one of the lines with a vise grip. The Excursion's regular driver, a 53-year-old named Scott Lisinicchia, knew the vehicle had problems and preferred to operate Prestige's other limousines. But on Saturday, October 6, a little after 9 a.m., Lisinicchia got a call. Nauman Hussain wanted him to take the Excursion out on a job. The windshield sticker was gone.

At 1 p.m., Lisinicchia pulled the limo up to a home in the town of Amsterdam. Axel Steenburg, a 29-year-old bodybuilder who worked at a semiconductor plant, was organizing a 30th-birthday celebration for his wife, Amy, and a big crew. Seventeen of them, including Amy's three sisters, Axel's brother, and several other young couples, were going day-drinking at Brewery Ommegang in Cooperstown, some 50 miles away. The Steenburgs had figured that hiring a sober driver seemed like the safe thing to do.

As the celebrants piled into the Excursion, they found sickly neon-colored lights, padded benches, and floorboards that had rusted through. One of the partygoers texted a friend who had planned to attend but backed out.

*the limo sounds like it's going to explode
yes haha it's a junker literally
the motor is making everyone deaf 🤯🤯🤯*

Lisinicchia took an odd path to the brewery. Avoiding a direct route along the highway, he embarked on a meandering course along small rural roads. It might have seemed like an easier drive for the lumbering Excursion, now carrying some 3,500 pounds of people, but the route's steep hills and frequent stops had the opposite effect, further stressing what remained of the brakes. In back, the passengers could smell something burning.

By 1:45 p.m., the Excursion was south of Amsterdam in the rolling Schoharie Valley, an hour from the brewery and heading in the opposite direction. Lisinicchia drove hesitantly, as if he were trying to figure something out. On Route 30, at the top of a hill, he shifted to the breakdown lane.

A Jeep came up from behind. Its driver, Holly Wood, a worker for the county government, noticed the limo had its back-up lights on yet was inching forward. "That's weird," she said to her daughter, who was sitting shotgun. Wood turned down the radio, lowered the window, and heard the bleat of the limo's back-up alert. Through tinted windows, she could see the passengers' silhouettes. Lisinicchia was pointing toward something in the distance. Wood passed the limo and drove on.

Behind her, the Excursion kept rolling and began to pick up speed, accelerating down a winding road that plunged almost 600 feet in less than two miles. There was nowhere to pull off. Lisinicchia was pumping the useless brake pedal so hard it deformed in the shape of his loafer.

At the bottom of the hill, Route 30 terminates in a T-shaped intersection with another state highway. Wood and her daughter sat there waiting to turn. She looked in her rearview mirror and saw the 31-foot Excursion hurtling directly toward them at as much as 118 miles per hour. The sound in her ears was like a jet engine. Wood had enough time to tell her daughter to hold on and then there was a white

streak as Lisinicchia swerved past and across the busy junction.

On the far side of the road, in the parking lot of a country store, the Excursion smashed into a stationary Toyota Highlander, launching the 4,000-pound SUV 80 feet. Standing nearby, two members of a family en route to a wedding were crushed. Even after destroying the Highlander, the Excursion was traveling at 80 miles per hour. It ended up in a ditch, impaled upon itself, the engine bay all but flattened. From the outside, the passenger compartment looked uncannily intact. Inside, blunt-force trauma had instantly killed 16 people. Two more died within hours. None of the passengers had been wearing seat belts, and their bodies broke against the walls, the ceiling, and one another. The carnage was so extreme that veteran paramedics attending the crash site developed disabling mental-health issues.

Nauman Hussain was informed about the crash by a call from a New York State trooper. "Is this a prank?" he asked. Four days later, he was arrested at a traffic stop outside Albany and charged with criminally negligent homicide. News photographs from his arraignment show a muscular young man in a black V-neck shadowed by his glowering older brother, Haris. Among the items seized from Nauman's Infiniti QX56 were a passport application and a shredded piece of paper—the OUT-OF-SERVICE sticker that had been glued to the windshield of the Excursion.

Nauman posted bail, went home, and refunded \$1,475 to Axel Steenburg's credit card. A few weeks later, he traveled to Kissimmee, Florida, for the 2018 Paintball World Cup at Gaylord Palms Resort & Convention Center, where his team, the New York Xtreme, registered a disappointing 14th place.

THE SCHOHARIE TRAGEDY was the deadliest transportation disaster in the

U.S. in almost a decade, including plane crashes. It was one of the worst single-car wrecks in the history of the automobile, comparable only to accidents involving buses or trucks that caught fire, sank, or fell off cliffs. But the story would likely have faded from awareness, as car crashes invariably do, if not for one factor: Nauman Hussain's father, Shahed, the owner of Prestige Limousine, was a longtime confidential informant for the FBI and one of the most notorious operatives in the agency's history. In upstate New York, where a pair of federal terrorism investigations had left Muslim communities seething and in despair, many people gasped when they saw his name connected with the Schoharie crash.

"It's this feeling that we're cursed," says Steve Downs, an Albany lawyer and political activist. "Each time his name comes up, you say, 'This is it. We finally got to the end.' But it just keeps coming back—this guy."

The impact of Hussain's FBI cases was not confined to the region. They were legal landmarks in the War on Terror, helping establish the legitimacy of secret evidence, warrantless wiretapping, and the government's practice of inventing terror plots to entrap ordinary Americans with no prior connection to violent Islamic groups. For this, the Hussain family received hundreds of thousands of dollars, which helped them open and operate several businesses around Albany. Prestige and the others racked up safety violations, some of them egregious, yet were never shut down by regulators.

"The FBI enabled Shahed Hussain to feel that he could get away with anything," says Kathy Manley, an Albany attorney who has represented men still serving multi-decade prison terms because of Hussain's undercover activities and who sees a connection between his anti-terror work and the 20 dead in Schoharie. "He clearly didn't care about the limousine being unsafe, and apparently neither did his son." The larger unanswered question is whether anyone in government had helped the Hussains when their businesses ran into trouble over the years. If they had, it would make the government complicit in an unspeakable catastrophe. Few in power are willing to discuss Shahed and Nauman Hussain. One of the sources who did, when I began to call around last winter, speculated that the family belongs to a class beyond the reach

of law enforcement—whose leverage confers something close to impunity.

IF HIS STORY IS TO BE believed, Shahed Hussain arrived in Albany in 1994 as a political refugee. With his wife, Yasmeen, and two boys, Nauman and Haris, Shahed claimed to have fled sectarian conflict in Pakistan, with a scar he said was proof—a mark on his wrist from being tortured in custody. There were rumors in Albany's Muslim community, however, that Hussain had come to the U.S. to escape not oppression but a criminal investigation involving a murder.

In the Capital Region, the Hussains seemed to make a seamless transition to upper-middle-class life, settling into mansion-lined Loudonville, where Nauman and Haris attended one of the area's top elementary schools. Shahed, a nonstop talker with dark hair and an alligator grin, came to own or operate several businesses, including a gas station and a venture to import small consumer goods. A few months after the terror attacks of September 11, 2001, he was arrested as part of an identity-fraud ring. According to court documents, the scam originated when Hussain had his driver's license taken away for failing to maintain one of his cars. After paying a mechanic to falsify repairs, he persuaded a DMV clerk to clean up his record.

Soon, he was plying the clerk with cigarettes for illegal IDs, mostly for other Urdu-speaking immigrants.

The charges he faced were serious, with national-security implications: Several of the 9/11 hijackers had used illegal licenses. Hussain was in danger of being deported. But the FBI was desperate to discover potential terrorists in the United States, and the agency offered him a deal to become a confidential informant.

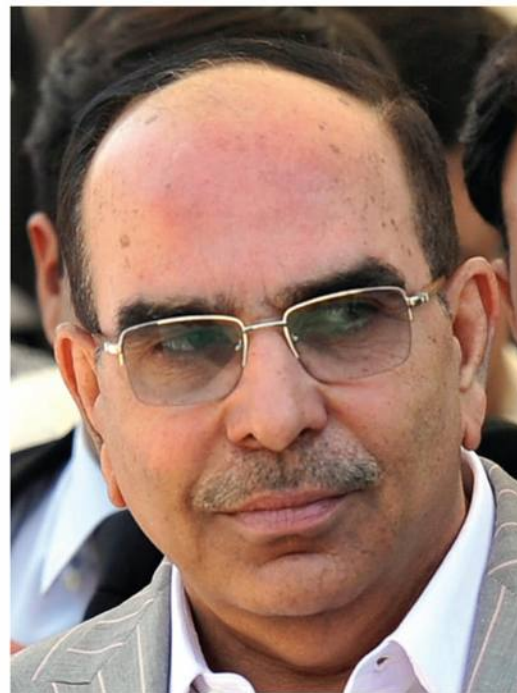
In his new role, Hussain, who claimed to speak five languages, was enthusiastic and effective. His FBI handler later testified that he was "good at being deceptive," adding, "like an actor—so he was presenting a role, and he was very good at that." His first targets were members of his own identity-fraud scheme, including a girlfriend he testified against; another case involved infiltrating an Afghan heroin ring. Hussain's personal life, though, was turning chaotic. He filed for bankruptcy in the summer of 2003, and that October, a fire destroyed most of the family's home. The blaze nearly killed Yasmeen, who was forced to jump out a window. FBI agents showed up at the scene, where their informant was refusing to talk to investigators from the fire department.

Hussain was about to take on his most significant assignment yet. Based on evidence recovered in Iraq, the government suspected the imam of an Albany mosque,



● Shahed Hussain undercover in 2003.

WHY DIDN'T THE DRIVER PULL OVER? WHEN DID THE PASSENGERS REALIZE THE BRAKES WERE SHOT? WOULD THIS DEATH TRAP HAVE BEEN ON THE ROAD IF ITS OWNER HADN'T BEEN AN FBI ASSET?



● From left: Shahed Hussain, his son Nauman, and his brother Malik Riaz.

a Kurdish refugee named Yassin Aref, was a terrorist commander. The FBI asked Hussain to wear a wire and engage Aref on the subject of violence against America. Posing as “Malik,” a wealthy importer of Chinese goods, Hussain began attending meetings at the mosque. The congregation included a Bangladeshi pizzeria owner who was in financial trouble, and Hussain offered him a \$50,000 loan. He also showed the man a surface-to-air missile. “But it’s not legal,” the pizzeria owner said. “What is legal in this world?” Hussain replied.

When it came time to transact the loan, the men agreed that a fellow Muslim should serve as witness. Aref said yes to the task. At a fake office in a dreary shopping plaza near Albany International Airport, with the FBI watching through a camera hidden inside a clock, Hussain tried unsuccessfully to get Aref to praise Osama bin Laden and condone suicide bombing. He also made oblique references to a plot involving a missile, but Aref, whose English was limited and who had never seen Hussain’s supposed anti-aircraft weapon, ignored the remarks.

As far as getting the men to participate in or endorse violence, the sting was a bust. But that didn’t matter. Neither Aref nor the pizzeria owner ever reported Hussain or his jihadi bombast to law enforcement. The government deemed that this was itself an indication of wrongdoing. The men had “failed” a “test,” as a prosecutor put it, and in 2004 the Justice Department charged them with a range of crimes, including money laundering in support of terrorism.

Steve Downs, the Albany lawyer, read about Aref and came out of retirement to join his defense. Downs had spent his career with the New York State Commission on Judicial Conduct, investigating

corrupt judges and prosecutors. Their crookedness struck him as prosaic. “People were lazy, they were sloppy, they didn’t care,” he says. “There was nothing particularly shocking about it.” Aref’s prosecution, however, struck him as desperate, vicious, and un-American. He regarded it as a criminal act and one of the worst betrayals of public trust he had ever known. “This was the first case I’d seen where the government prosecuted a man they knew was innocent,” he says.

Aref’s case outraged civil libertarians, not only for its reliance on entrapment but for its use of secret evidence. Prosecutors presented material that Aref’s lawyers were forbidden to see, let alone challenge. (The *New York Times* reported that the NSA’s warrantless wiretapping program played a role in Aref’s arrest.) Even with such advantages, the case almost collapsed. Prosecutors acknowledged that a crucial piece of evidence had been mistranslated and that it referred to Aref not as *commander* but merely *brother*. A federal judge reversed himself and granted the defendants bail. “After one year’s undercover operation and surveillance, the government and the FBI have come up with no real evidence that the men are connected with terrorist groups,” he said.

Hussain rescued the government at trial, where he was the prosecution’s star witness. According to Kevin Luibrand, another defense lawyer, the turning point came when Hussain, who arrived in court escorted by FBI agents, testified that the defendants had shrugged when he told them about an impending attack on New York City. There was no tape of the alleged conversation—Hussain claimed he had dropped the recorder—but the jury was

shocked. Aref and the pizzeria owner were convicted and sentenced to 15 years in prison.

The FBI paid to relocate the Hussains to Memphis, Tennessee. They were no longer welcome in Albany, where the Muslim community regarded Shahed Hussain as “the lowest of God’s creations on earth,” according to Shamshad Ahmad, a co-founder of the mosque where Aref had preached. With \$60,000 in compensation for his undercover work, Hussain resolved his identity-fraud charges with a guilty plea and a fine of \$100.

AS IN RUSSELL BANKS’S 1991 novel *The Sweet Hereafter*, about a fatal school-bus accident in an upstate hamlet, the limo crash seemed like a targeted demolition of a community—a cataclysm that “wiped out nearly whole generations of some families,” according to the *Albany Times Union*. Afterward, the victims’ survivors were tortured by unanswerable questions: Why didn’t the driver pull over sooner? When did the passengers realize what was happening? Would such a death trap have been on the road if its owner hadn’t been a precious government asset?

Shahed Hussain’s symbiosis with the FBI has been richly documented. There have been books, most notably *The Terror Factory*, by Trevor Aaronson, as well as newspaper investigations, magazine articles, and documentaries—plural. But as a rule, people in power here will simply not discuss whether Hussain’s undercover work played any role in allowing his businesses to flout safety regulations. Take, for example, Democratic congressman Paul Tonko, a “son of Amsterdam” who knew many of the victims. Last year, Tonko’s then-communications director, Matt Sonneborn, began an hour-long interview by specifying

that neither he nor Tonko would have anything to say about the Hussains or the FBI. Chris Tague, a genial Republican assemblyman from Schoharie, burst into tears when I called. Like many in Schoharie, Tague has been traumatized by the crash, but between sobs, he made it clear: The Hussains and the FBI were a no-go area.

This reticence is not prevalent outside Albany officialdom. On the contrary, the first thing one learns about the Hussains is how obsessed people are with them: lawyers, journalists, activists, members of the upstate Muslim community. That makes sense, of course—the innermost circle of hell is for traitors and snitches. But Shahed Hussain does not appear to have been a typical snitch.

THE HUSSAINS DID NOT last long in Memphis before returning to Albany in 2006. That July, the burned shell of the family's former home was purchased for \$450,000, more than three times its former value. (The transaction is one of many events in Hussain's life that have never been fully explained. Property records show a buyer with a Tennessee address that Hussain has also used to conduct business. Investigators for the mortgage company have never been able to locate the person, and the local newspaper reported that he "appeared not to exist.") Hussain used the windfall to purchase the Hideaway Motel, an establishment near the Saratoga Springs racetrack. He renamed the property the Crest Inn and shifted the business model, renting squalid bungalows to low-income residents whose stays might be paid for by the state. (Unsuspecting travelers would sometimes drift in and leave withering reviews on Tripadvisor. "I've slept in mud and felt less disgusting," read one.)

Hussain also went back to work for the FBI—this time with a new level of respon-

sibility and independence. Previously, the agency had selected his marks; now it was his job to identify people who could be talked into phony terror schemes. In 2008, he found a target-rich environment in Newburgh, an enduringly poor city in the Hudson Valley that was home to a large mosque, Masjid al-Ikhlās. Every Friday for more than a year, Hussain would drive 90 minutes downstate, park outside the mosque in a BMW or Hummer, and mingle after prayer with the congregants, some of whom were low-level drug offenders rebuilding their lives after prison.

One of these was David Williams, a soft-eyed 27-year-old who had recently served time for drug possession. His mother, Elizabeth McWilliams, remembers the day David introduced her to Hussain. "He said, 'I want your son to work for me in clothing distribution,'" McWilliams says. Hussain, who was using the alias "Maqsood," immediately made her nervous: "We drove past a car and he said, 'Look at them Jews. We should kill them.' I said, 'How do you know they're Jews?' He said, 'Don't you see the little curls?' I said to David—excuse my French—'What kinda motherfucker you got me in the car with?'" As she recalls the incident, McWilliams, who is now 60, wears a cut-off T-shirt revealing broad shoulders and cannonlike arms. She says she once told Hussain, "There's something about you, and when I put my finger on it, I'm gonna let you know what it is."

**"This was the first case I'd seen where
THE GOVERNMENT
PROSECUTED A MAN THEY
KNEW WAS INNOCENT."**

By the time she did, it was too late. Hussain had enmeshed her son and three other Black men in a scheme to blow up a military airplane and two synagogues. None had terrorist connections or weapon-making abilities. "These guys had absolutely no religious or political beliefs," Kathy Manley, who represented some of the men, says. "They weren't even really Muslim." But the men had dim prospects. Williams was a part-time college student, another was a stocker at Walmart, and one was a homeless immigrant with severe mental illness. Hussain offered them a BMW, a vacation, and hundreds of thousands of dollars, and they followed along as he gave them what they thought were bombs and a Stinger missile.

On the night the FBI arrested Williams and his associates, agents raided his mother's apartment, kicking down her front door. "They came out in helicopters, in gas masks," she recalls. "I was on the toilet. I said, 'You gonna let me wipe my ass?' They was standing right there with a big dog. So I wiped my butt, and I showed him the toilet paper so he could see the shit on it. He turned around and then he took me in the room, and he opened up the curtains and the light from the helicopter was shining. I still didn't know who they was and then I seen on his jacket, HOMELAND SECURITY. And that's when I said, *I'm in some big shit.*" Evicted after the raid—the government refused to cover the damage to her apartment—McWilliams found



● FBI surveillance of the Newburgh sting; David Williams.

herself homeless, bathing in McDonald's bathrooms on the way to work.

Her son was charged with conspiracy to use weapons of mass destruction and conspiracy to acquire and use anti-aircraft missiles. Just as in the Albany case, the judge castigated the prosecution. "I believe beyond a shadow of a doubt that there would have been no crime here, except the government instigated it, planned it, and brought it to fruition," said Judge Colleen McMahon.

Hussain testified for 13 days. Written up in the national press, his testimony was the trial's blockbuster centerpiece. He portrayed himself as a swashbuckling operative who had worked more than 20 cases for the FBI. Defense lawyers, eager to cast the government's star witness as a fabulist, subjected him to a brutal cross-examination. They argued convincingly that Hussain had lied on his tax returns and immigration papers and had even misled his FBI handlers. Hussain seemed incapable of giving a straight answer. "Yes or no!" the judge shouted at him during one exchange. "I'm tired of your playing games."

These aspersions faded after the jury reviewed the audio and video evidence Hussain had compiled, which showed the defendants scouting locations to fire shoulder-mounted missiles, spewing hatred about Jews, and discussing what their code names should be. The Newburgh Four, as they came to be known, were convicted in October 2010, setting a precedent that in terrorism cases, citizens have little chance of succeeding with an entrapment defense against the government.

David Williams has spent much of the past 12 years in the Pollock Federal Correctional Institution in Louisiana, often in solitary confinement. The prison is nearly 2,000 miles from his family, who haven't visited since 2015. As Elizabeth McWilliams describes his ordeal, she begins to shake violently and has to leave the room. "I never was a person that thought about killing somebody," she says quietly when she returns. "I have that in me now. I feel like I could kill somebody. That's why I tell people I am not the person to mess with because, I swear to God, I could kill somebody. I never felt like that. Because I used to speak to my son every day. I could smell him. I could close my eyes, and that was my child."

WHY WAS SHAHED HUSSAIN doing this—adopting alter egos, concocting elaborate acts of destruction, ruining lives? It wasn't the threat of prison. After the Albany case, the government had no more leverage on him. The next most plausible incentive was financial. "We were convinced that Mr. Hussain was a poor person who had extreme motive to lie for money," says Mark Gombiner, a lawyer for one of the Newburgh Four.

But that wasn't driving Hussain either. "In fact, he had huge amounts of money available to him," says Gombiner. The lawyers discovered during the proceedings that Hussain had been receiving funds from Pakistan since the mid-1990s—almost \$700,000 in total. Much of the money went through the Crest Inn. "There is money flowing in and out of this deadbeat motel up in Saratoga Springs," says Gombiner. "We don't know what it is. Maybe there is an innocent explanation, but it's highly suggestive of some sort of criminal activity, money laundering, some attempt to disguise funds."

At the trial, Hussain claimed that he came from a rich family and that the money had come from a trust fund and even in the form of a gift from Benazir Bhutto, the late prime minister of Pakistan. This was seen at the time as fabulizing. But it was not: Hussain indeed comes from a prominent Pakistani family, one with ties to the highest levels of the military and the intelligence service. His oldest brother, Malik Riaz Hussain, is a billionaire and, in his country, a household name synonymous with wealth and graft.

The 72-year-old Riaz (his third name is typically omitted) began his career as a modest clerk, then became a military contractor. As the army became the de facto ruler of the country, he leveraged an unparalleled facility for bribery into one of the largest real-estate portfolios in Asia. The alleged beneficiaries have included the son of the chief justice of the Supreme Court of Pakistan; in 2019, without admitting guilt, he agreed to a settlement with the U.K.'s National Crime Agency to hand over £190 million in assets (including a £50 million house overlooking London's Hyde Park) that authorities said might have been obtained illegally. Britain has rescinded his visa, with a judge writing, "Your exclusion

from the U.K. is conducive to the public good due to your conduct, character, and associations." "He buys everything," says Ayesha Siddiqa, a prominent Pakistani scholar. "Judges, politicians. No one is aboveboard as far as Malik Riaz is concerned. He is institutionalized corruption."

If poverty and fear of incarceration are out as Hussain's motives—what then? There remains a simpler, darker explanation for his actions. Delivering headline-generating terror convictions put the American government in his debt and gave Hussain something priceless: a sense that he did not have to answer to the law.

On the witness stand in the Newburgh trial, he acknowledged a litany of seemingly criminal acts, from tax evasion to bankruptcy fraud, much of it committed while he was in danger of deportation. "He just sat up there and smirked," says Gombiner. Some found Hussain's manner unnerving. While many people would be distressed by the work of setting someone up to commit a federal crime, he seemed to enjoy it. The jury watched as he lounged with his targets on a safe-house couch and drove around with them in his Hummer, making jokes.

Gombiner, though, finds Hussain's lack of compassion less troubling than the conduct of the FBI and the prosecution, "who were so anxious to believe they had found something." He was shocked by the FBI agents' credulousness. Perhaps the second-most-riveting testimony of the trial came from Hussain's handler, Robert Fuller. The special agent was part of the FBI team that is considered to have missed opportunities to thwart the 9/11 attacks. Hussain's handiwork, in contrast, helped Fuller seem like a hero. In front of the Newburgh jury, the agent theatrically unzipped a canvas bag that contained what looked like a powerful bomb. Hussain had helped the defendants plant the device, which was harmless, at a synagogue in the Bronx.

Michael German, a fellow at the Brennan Center for Justice who spent years investigating terrorism for the FBI, told me that from the government's point of view, an informant who is deceptive and transactional is neither unusual nor frowned upon. "Based on his documented criminal history and success in recruiting people into sting operations, the FBI clearly knew they were utilizing a talented manipulator," German says of Hussain.

As Hussain's mutually beneficial collaboration with the FBI continued, he diversified his business interests around Albany. In 2012, he opened Prestige Limousine. As recently as 2016, he was enjoying the FBI's favor. One day that year, Horayra Hossain, a 19-year-old cabdriver, booked a room at the Crest Inn. His father, Mohammed, was

Delivering terror convictions put the FBI in Hussain's debt and gave him something priceless: A SENSE OF BEING UNTOUCHABLE.

the pizzeria owner in the Albany entrapment scheme and had been in prison for ten years. As Horayra was checking in, he recognized Shahed Hussain behind the counter. He considered what to say, walked away, then returned.

“Do you know who I am?” Horayra asked. Hussain smirked and said no.

“You should remember me,” Horayra said. “It’s how you’re living lavish. I wonder how you sleep at night.” He mentioned his father’s case.

Still smirking, Hussain said he was mistaken. The confrontation was brief, and Horayra left. A day later, he got a call from the FBI. He never bothered Shahed Hussain again.

THE SCHOHARIE CRASH was a major disaster—a level-D mass-casualty incident—and fell under the jurisdiction of the National Transportation Safety Board. The day after everyone died, October 7, 2018, a rapid-response NTSB “go team” arrived, led by the agency’s chair, a courtly southerner and former US Airways pilot named Robert L. Sumwalt. During his nearly 15 years at the agency, it had investigated plane crashes, bridge collapses, boat sinkings, train derailments, and hot-air-balloon mishaps. Widely praised for its scrupulous, above-the-fray independence, the NTSB typically gets immediate, unfettered access to the scene of any accident involving a vehicle. In Schoharie, a visibly shaken Sumwalt gave a press conference—then discovered he had been frozen out of the investigation.

The New York State Police had taken charge. It moved the Excursion to its headquarters, and for the next week, Sumwalt’s investigators were forced to stand in a pen at a distance as troopers took it apart inside a tent the NTSB had helped pay for. The agency took the extraordinary step of going to the media to complain but even then gained little ground.

Publicly, the person responsible for excluding the agency was Susan Mallery, Schoharie County’s district attorney. Mallery, 54, whose father was DA before her, presides over one of the smallest prosecutor’s offices in the state, with a docket mainly of incidents along local roads. From the beginning, Mallery was viewed as “overmatched,” says Casey Seiler, the editor of the *Times Union*, and her battle with Sumwalt—in which “the state police appeared to work with the DA to thwart the NTSB,” as Seiler puts it—helped to create an atmosphere of secrecy and mistrust. Why was the independent expertise of the premier transportation-safety body

in the U.S., if not the world, so unwanted?

Mallery avoided the press. More than once when a reporter cornered her, she resorted to hiding in her office. And she became especially unreachable when word began to spread last spring that Nauman Hussain, facing 20 charges of criminally negligent homicide and second-degree manslaughter, might never spend a day in prison.

MUCH OF WHAT the community has learned about the incident has come from one person: Larry Rulison, a baby-faced reporter for the *Times Union*. Rulison primarily covered business, but on the Monday after the crash, an editor asked him to field a call from a former employee of the New York State Department of Transportation. The caller had the Excursion’s DOT records, which showed a long history of mechanical trouble. Rulison has since written more than 175 articles, many based on documents exposing government agencies’ records of leniency toward the Hussains.

“I like finding records,” he says. “It takes time. You have to drive to the courthouse, and you have to know which door to go in. And then you have to be nice. A lot of reporters are jerks.” Rulison’s obsessive reporting—largely undertaken in the small hours, on his wife’s computer in the family playroom, after filing his quota of regional business dailies—has added layers of intrigue to the limo story. “Larry goes down rabbit holes,” says Kevin Cushing, whose 31-year-old son, Patrick, died in the Excursion. “And he gets rabbits.”

Rulison solved one of the bigger mysteries of the case when he located Shahed Hussain, who had gone missing, leaving Nauman to face the fallout from the crash. It was thought that Shahed had traveled

to Pakistan in the middle of 2018, but when a family of some of the victims hired a process server specializing in tracking down litigants abroad, the server came up empty. From his basement, Rulison started searching Facebook “for, like, literally every random picture from Lahore for hours and hours a day,” he says. He eventually found a photo of Hussain in front of a building there. (Hussain has never responded to any of Rulison’s requests for comment, nor to mine.)

Rulison’s reporting demonstrates a pattern: The Hussains compulsively ignore rules and regulations, especially in matters of safety, yet never face consequences. He believes it suggests help from high places. Take the family hotel, he says, which was run by Haris Hussain, Nauman’s older brother, and racked up code violations. Raw sewage flowed out of the flimsy cabins into a muddy field. Electrical wiring and gas lines lay exposed. There was \$30,000 in unpaid property taxes. Somehow the hotel wasn’t shuttered by tax collectors or health inspectors—not even after a 5-year-old fell into an unsecured septic tank and nearly died, nor after a fatal shooting on the premises. Only when the crash brought more scrutiny on the Hussains was the hotel condemned.

Prestige Limousine was an “outlaw limo company,” Rulison says. The Hussains avoided a state rule mandating tougher inspections for extra-large vehicles like the Excursion by falsifying reports, lying about its alteration by listing its seating capacity as 11 one year, eight the next, and ten the year after. Prestige never obtained operating authority, a state requirement for certain businesses that transport passengers. “When they got caught, they just blew it off and kept operating,” (Continued on page 74)



● A vigil for the Schoharie victims.

LAST SANE MAN ON WALL STREET

Nathan Anderson made his name exposing—and betting against—corporate fraud. But short selling in a frothy pandemic economy can be ruinous.

BY ANDREW RICE

Photograph by Philip Montgomery



ONE DAY,

a man with dreams of riches placed a truck on top of a hill. The vehicle was a big white tractor-trailer, a prototype built by an automotive start-up called Nikola. The company's boastful founder, Trevor Milton, claimed it was the "holy grail" of the commercial-trucking industry, a semi that ran on hydrogen and was both green and powerful, capable of doing thousand-mile hauls with zero carbon emissions. In reality, the truck had no engine. It was towed up a straight two-lane road. Its driver released the brakes, and it rolled down the hill under the force of gravity, like a child's wagon. The road had a 3 percent grade, gentle enough that with some creative camerawork, the prototype would appear to be barreling across a flat desert landscape.

On January 25, 2018, Nikola's official Twitter account posted a swooshing 39-second video of the demonstration. "Behold," it declared, "the Nikola One in motion."

Four years and one federal criminal indictment later, the story of the engineless truck can be seen in many ways: as the high point of a scandal at an automaker that briefly had a market cap larger than Ford's; as a manifestation of this era's fake-it-till-you-make-it, flack-it-till-you-SPAC-it business ethos; as a cautionary tale of social media's power to intoxicate the stock-trading masses; as yet another indicator that the market has become detached from reality; and maybe even as a big honking metaphor for an entire economy that is rolling down a hill, inflating, going deranged as crypto wizards conjure imaginary fortunes, companies without a hint of revenue reach multibillion-dollar valuations, and our richest men blast off into outer space.

On a practical level, though, the rolling truck was the killer detail—the spark that incinerated a high-flying stock to the career-making benefit of Nathan Anderson, the proprietor of Hindenburg Research.

Anderson belongs to a cranky cohort of "activist" short sellers. They make money by taking positions in the stocks of shaky or shady companies, which pay off if the price goes down—an outcome the shorts hasten with public attacks, publishing investigations on their web platforms and blasting away at their targets (and sometimes at one another) on Twitter. To their many powerful enemies, they are little more than internet trolls, a fun-house-mirror image of the day-trading dumbasses on Reddit who drive up meme stocks for the lolz. Anderson prefers to think of himself as a private detective, identifying mischief and malfeasance that might otherwise go undetected by snoozing regulators. He used to poke around in shad-

owy corners, but lately he has been seeing fraud sitting right in the blazing light of day.

"The scale of it is quite massive," the lanky, bearded 37-year-old told me when we first met one sultry morning in August. "I don't think any system can sustain itself with that scale of gifts happening."

A hurricane was on the way, and we had arranged to meet up for breakfast at a café near his apartment on the Upper West Side. "The market's crazy," Anderson said laconically. "Dogecoin is worth, like, \$40 billion. In this economy, a company, regardless of whether it is complete trash, can shoot up 1,000 percent." Anderson said he was just back from a conference in San Francisco, a rare in-person gathering of around 30 short-selling activists—"the remaining survivors," he joked, of a market that had been crushing contrarians.

It's an axiom of short sellers that you can be right about the stock but ruined by the trade. If a stock ends up rising despite the evidence assembled against it, a short can end up taking huge losses—a danger that has led many otherwise risk-addicted financiers to forsake the practice. Every so often, though, a short bet pays off so well that the rest of the world takes notice. In Anderson's case, that big score was Nikola. In 2020, Hindenburg released a devastating report on the truck-maker, alleging that the company—which at its peak was worth \$34 billion—was "an intricate fraud built on dozens of lies." The report sent Nikola's stock price plummeting and prompted a criminal investigation that culminated in Milton's indictment by federal prosecutors in Manhattan this past July. For Anderson, it was the highlight of an astonishing hot streak. Hindenburg had registered five of the top-ten short calls of 2020, according to the research firm Breakout Point.

Although those bets paid off well and Anderson says he's "been able to make a

very good living," he's still a small fry by Wall Street standards. He doesn't manage a fund. He probably could be making more money trading muni bonds. But he's had a lot more fun on his finance-world capers. Anderson has smoked out scammy cannabis operations. He has investigated alleged ties between a Colombian drug cartel and the owners of a glass company profiting from Miami's pandemic building boom. For a report on a dubious biotech firm, he infiltrated a sales meeting by feigning a sports injury. He has delved into old-fashioned pump-and-dumps, COVID profiteers, and a do-it-yourself orthodontics scheme.

The recent craze in special-purpose acquisition companies—vehicles for businesses to go public via a merger without the usual regulatory oversight—has created a target-rich environment. Take the case of HF Foods Group, which owns warehouses that supply Chinese restaurants across the U.S. In 2020, Anderson published a report alleging that the company's share price had been pushed up through questionable merger activity as well as a pattern of "highly irregular transactions." One company subsidiary seemed to have been used to assemble a fleet of Ferraris. Some appeared to sport crude vanity tags (IPULL, DIKTATOR, IMHUMBLE) and showed up in the Instagram feed of the chief executive's son. (HF Foods later disclosed that it is under investigation by the Securities and Exchange Commission; the company did not respond to a request for comment.)

"Nate was the success story of last year," Carson Block, another well-known activist short, tells me. That success was all the more remarkable in a market that has driven many other shorts, including Block, to the brink of despair. "We can find compelling stories all day long, things that we think are totally fucked up," Block says. "But it's a lot harder to

get investors to think that it matters.”

After all, you have to be a little crazy to bet against a market that has proved impervious to inflation, supply-chain instability, and a plague that has killed millions of people. You have to be even crazier to do it in defiance of the stresses that come with being a short seller, which can include (in reverse order of annoyance) being yelled at by Jim Cramer, being doxed, being hacked, fending off shadowy private-intelligence firms, defamation lawsuits, and the distinct possibility that, rather than following up on your findings, government regulators will instead start investigating *you*. And after all that, your warnings may still be ignored or, even worse, trigger a counterreaction among bullish investors that could end up costing you everything.

“Yeah,” Anderson says. “That’s the torture.”

TWO MONTHS AFTER our August meeting, I saw Anderson again, this time in a fifth-floor apartment he uses as an office. Children were playing down in the courtyard, and a brisk breeze carried a glistening bubble past his window. “A lot of investors prefer the market to be sort of this mass hallucination,” Anderson said. On the screen of his laptop, a ticker showed that bitcoin was trading at \$63,682.60, heading toward an all-time high. “The market is designed to be a place where these scarce resources of society—capital, labor, materials—are allocated to their most efficient use,” he said. “But it has just become this otherworldly casino, which is disconnected from the real world.”

Anderson, wearing a dark T-shirt, jeans, and polka-dot socks, was fiddling with the wording of a new post to the Hindenburg website. Another researcher was nearby, one of eight full- and part-time employees who work for him. Besides serving as

Hindenburg’s headquarters, the apartment is a storage space for three bicycles that belong to him, his fiancée, and his daughter.

Anderson was on the case of Tether Holdings, the company that created a cryptocurrency called tether. Tether is a stablecoin, or a unit of crypto that is pegged to something of real-world value—in this case, the U.S. dollar. In theory, each tether is backed by a real dollar held by Tether Holdings, which makes it a useful bit of the infrastructure undergirding the exchange of digital currencies, such as bitcoin and dogecoin. But a recent *Bloomberg Businessweek* investigation had raised serious questions about how tethered the coins really are, including speculation that a supposedly rock-solid portfolio of some \$30 billion in short-term commercial loans might not be real.

Anderson said that Hindenburg had been looking into this possibly phantom portfolio. “From a research perspective, it’s hard to find something that may not exist,” Anderson said. “You have to canvass the world to find something that is not there.” The post on his screen was headlined “Hindenburg Research Announces \$1,000,000 Bounty for Details on Tether’s Backing.” The bounty’s terms stated that the firm wanted to know whether tether’s “actual backing may have differed from its public disclosures.”

Short sellers usually play the stock market, but you can theoretically short almost anything that has a fluctuating value, including currencies. (George Soros famously made a fortune by betting against the British pound.) But Anderson said he did not have a direct profit motive for offering the bounty. He claimed he was acting out of curiosity and general principle. “It’s unclear whether it’s something that can be monetized,” he said. “But it’s definitely something we want to solve.” His cursor arrow hovered

over the blue button that would publish the post. He clicked.

Anderson said he was anticipating an uproar on Twitter. “It’s going to be an absolute disaster,” he predicted with a note of relish. Sure enough, while the bounty has so far yielded no actionable information, it did trigger a vociferous response from Tether Holdings, which issued a statement calling it a “pathetic” attempt “to discredit not just Tether, but an entire movement.” The company’s CTO tweeted out a meme of “the Tether Truthooooor,” a red-eyed, stubble-bearded weirdo with Hindenburg’s logo superimposed on his forehead. For Anderson, that seemed to be the stunt’s most immediate payoff: eliciting a reaction from the cryptomaniacs on social media that aligned nicely with his firm’s chaotic-good brand identity.

Like many shorts, Anderson was drawn to the downside both by personality and by chance. He grew up in Connecticut, where his father was a professor and a family therapist and his mother was a nurse and a teacher. He went to UConn, served as an ambulance medic in Israel, then got into finance, working as an intermediary at boutique firms that connected hedge funds with wealthy individuals. It was in this capacity, around the end of 2014, that a contact asked him to check out a fund called Platinum Partners.

Platinum managed around \$1.4 billion and claimed average returns of 17 percent a year—quite good. Anderson, impressed, started investigating. Platinum’s largest holding turned out to be an oil-exploration company that was under a criminal investigation related to a fatal platform explosion. It had also invested in a Florida Ponzi scheme and in an insurer that regulators had accused of seeking to “profit from the imminent deaths of terminally ill patients.”

Anderson thought Platinum looked fraudulent. He put together a 67-page document summarizing his analysis. “I was upset,” Anderson said. “I didn’t know what to do about it, but I knew I wanted to stop it.” His financial-industry clients didn’t really care, so he tried to interest journalists. He sought advice from Harry Markopolos, the analyst who first sounded alarms—to little avail—about Bernie Madoff. Markopolos introduced him to a lawyer who helped to prepare a submission to the SEC under the regulator’s whistleblower program. Within months, the FBI raided Platinum’s office, and two top executives were eventually convicted on securities-fraud charges. “Which was pretty cool,” Anderson said. “Because you don’t see any impact a lot of times.”

Under the SEC program, whistleblowers are eligible for a cut of up to 30 percent of any fines collected as a result of information



Trevor Milton
at a presentation
of Nikola’s new
trucks in 2019.

they provide, which can amount to millions of dollars. But Anderson soon discovered that the SEC works at an inching pace. (He has yet to receive any award for his work exposing Platinum.) Anderson was now operating a small brokerage and a software firm that offered due-diligence services to hedge funds. He struggled to make a living. In 2017, his landlord filed suit to evict him from his Inwood apartment. His brokerage reported a net-capital balance of just \$58,482 at the end of the year.

Anderson had hoped to make a business out of filing whistleblower claims, selling 5 or 10 percent stakes in the potential awards to investors to create short-term income. Short selling started as a secret side hustle. He would post anonymously on the crowdsourced website Seeking Alpha. He called himself Hindenburg Research to sound more authoritative, but it was just him.

In December 2017, early in Hindenburg's existence, Anderson published a report on a Colorado biotech company that had abruptly pivoted into cryptocurrency, renaming itself Riot Blockchain. Barry Honig, a colorful Florida investor whom Anderson describes as the "LeBron James of pump-and-dumps," was the company's largest shareholder. ("What is the definition of a pump-and-dump?" Honig asked rhetorically when reached on his cell phone. In 2018, the SEC charged Honig and the CEO of Riot Blockchain with fraud. Both men later settled without admitting guilt and were barred from trading penny stocks. Riot Blockchain itself was not implicated.)

"I took a very big position" in Riot Blockchain, Anderson said. "And I had a very small account. I had a very, very young child at home, and I wasn't doing that well. But I believed so strongly in this thesis, and the evidence was dead-on, unassailable. I published—and the stock went up, and it kept going up."

Anderson's analysis was sound, but no one was listening. He recalls that beneath one blog post about his report, a commenter wrote, "Who cares if it's a scam? It's blockchain, it's going up."

SHORT SELLING HAS BEEN around, in one form or another, for as long as there have been speculators and dupes. The first truly famous short was probably Jesse Livermore, the "Boy Plunger," an early-20th-century trader who made \$100 million betting against stocks before the crash of 1929 but later lost it all and shot himself in the cloakroom of the Sherry-Netherland, leaving a note to his wife that concluded, "I am a failure." The profession tends to attract volatile characters. "Shorting is just a notoriously

difficult business," says the former hedge-fund manager Whitney Tilson, who got out of the game. It involves taking a lot of risk for what is, by finance standards, relatively little upside. The people who do it often behave as if conflict were its own reward.

When it works, defying the foolish crowds can make you look like a genius, as it did for the traders who made billions betting against the mortgage bubble in 2008, some of whom ended up being immortalized in the book and movie *The Big Short*. But it's a high-anxiety activity. The best thing that can happen is that a security becomes worthless, an outcome the shorts call "going to zero." But if its price rises, traders can lose much more money than they stood to make from a victory. "Mathematically," Tilson says, repeating a common adage, "shorting is a business where the most you can make is 100 percent, and your potential losses are infinity."

A trader might have a portfolio of ten short positions. "You can be right on eight of them," Tilson says, "but if one of them is Tesla, you've just been blown up." This is not a hypothetical. A lot of shorts—including Tilson—have bet wrong on Tesla. Their skepticism could yet be vindicated. Plenty of reasonable people question the sanity of a market that assigns Elon Musk's electric-car company a value greater than that of almost every other automaker in the world combined. But as somebody—maybe John Maynard Keynes, though the attribution is iffy—once said, the market can remain irrational longer than you can stay solvent. No wonder hedge-fund managers like Bill Ackman, who are famous for some of their big shorts, have decided there are easier ways to make their billions. "It's not worth the brain damage," Ackman once explained.

Their departure has opened the field to smaller predators with names like Scorpion Capital and Wolfpack Research. Rather than shorting stocks simply because they are overvalued, they focus on rooting out corporate wrongdoing. The model is not new. In its modern incarnation, it traces back at least three decades to Jim Chanos, the legendary founder of the fund Kynikos Associates. (It is named for the original Greek Cynics.) Chanos is best known for being the guy who drew attention to the shifty accounting at the energy-trading firm Enron, which generated a scandal that collapsed the company in 2001. A new generation of activists, however, has given the old method an extremely online twist. Instead of simply handing over their research to reporters and hoping for the worst, they publish on their own platforms and hound their targets on social media. They say they are meting out justice in a realm in which the

authorities can be sluggish and easily outwitted.

"If the SEC isn't going to take action and the DOJ isn't going to take action against these bad actors," says Christopher Carey, a former newspaper reporter who runs a firm called Sharesleuth, "really the only way is exposure to the market."

A cynic might point out that this commitment to transparency can be inconsistent. Activist-research firms, including Hindenburg, tend to get evasive when it comes to some basic questions, like who supplies them with information and who, if anyone, backs their positions. (It takes serious money to make serious money as a short.) The activists hunt in packs, leading inevitably to allegations of conspiracy and stock

**"THE FED JUST
REINFLATED
THE BIGGEST
ASSET BUBBLE
OF ALL TIME,"
ANDERSON
SAYS.**

manipulation. Adding to the murky atmosphere, some of them, like Anderson, start off by posting anonymously. He describes that as a practical defense: "You are just one guy with no assets, just doing research on your own, squaring off against incredibly well-resourced, powerful corporations and investment firms."

Some critics of the activist approach contend that short-research firms do little of the actual detective work but rather act as fronts for investment firms that possess damaging information and an interest in maintaining a deniable distance. The loudest voice advancing this theory, Marc Cohodes, is a veteran short seller who says newcomers like Anderson are doing business the wrong way. Cohodes, a polarizing figure in the industry, ran a short-oriented hedge fund he shut down after the 2008 financial crisis and now tweets crankily from a ranch in Montana. "How are these nobodies with very little experience or training coming in and knocking the ball out of the park?" he asks. "Hedge funds, they do the deep work, and they have the money. In order for them to get the story out, they give it to these guys."

There is little doubt that short researchers often have undisclosed relationships

with interested parties—for example, angry ex-employees looking to take down their old firm. In one high-profile case this past summer, a researcher was compelled by litigation to admit that, in collaboration with a Dallas-based hedge fund, he had published an error-filled report that temporarily tanked a stock. In its most extreme form, Cohodes argues, the relationship allows sinister traders to take short positions and quickly cover them for a profit on the release of distorted negative reports, a strategy he calls “smash and grab.”

The claims made by Cohodes are echoed by other adversaries of the activist model and appear to have recently gotten the attention of the authorities. In December, Bloomberg News reported that the Department of Justice had initiated an “expansive criminal investigation” into allegations of “symbiotic relationships” between hedge funds and activist researchers and is examining prominent players in the industry, including Block’s firm, Muddy Waters Capital. (“We make enemies of powerful and wealthy people who propagate false narratives about our industry,” Block tells me via a spokesman, “which we assume led to this investigation.”)

**“AT THAT POINT,
IT WAS JUST
A QUESTION OF
HOW CRAZY
IT COULD
GET.”**

The full scope of the inquiry is unknown, and Anderson says Hindenburg has received no indication it is a subject of the DOJ’s scrutiny. He declines to describe his stock-trading strategies in detail, except to say he collaborates with a group of roughly ten “investors”—presumably wealthy individuals or financial institutions, although he won’t name names. For each investigation, he may take on one backer. The investor gets an advance look at the report that allows that party to take a short position, and Hindenburg takes a cut of the profits on the trade. Anderson says his investors sometimes pass along tips about potential targets. “We develop our own leads, and sometimes market participants share leads with us,” he says. But he claims nothing is spoon-fed: “We do our own research.” And if

a lead doesn’t pan out, he says, Hindenburg doesn’t publish anything.

“Color me skeptical,” says Cohodes, who refuses to believe that a modestly sized shop like Anderson’s could produce such a large volume of destructive information. “It is impossible to put out the research that Nate did in 2020 unless the shit was given to him.” When Anderson heard Cohodes was questioning his work, he reached out, offering to explain his methods, but got nowhere. Anderson then prepared a characteristically exhaustive 70-page document called “The Strangest Fight We Never Picked,” which laid out the evidence for what he believes is a “bizarre behind-the-scenes war” that Cohodes is waging against him. Cohodes denies having a vendetta, but he says he thinks Hindenburg and other activist researchers may sometimes be engaging in behavior that is damaging and potentially illegal. “I think that what these guys do is bad,” he says, “and if they were ever investigated, I think they’d be in a lot of trouble.”

From the beginning, Anderson has been defending Hindenburg against accusations of stock manipulation. His very first report, which identified fishy transactions at a publicly listed Bollywood production company called Eros International, led to a defamation lawsuit. Eros alleged that Hindenburg and a cabal of other short sellers were victimizing the company in a “short and distort” scheme. The lawsuit quickly revealed that Anderson was the man behind Hindenburg, but it was ultimately dismissed.

Years later, after he was more firmly established, Anderson got his revenge. Hindenburg hired a private investigator to check out an Indian production company that had received \$153 million in payments from Eros. It had produced little, and it turned out to be run by an in-law of Eros’s chairman and CEO. Its tiny office was in an apartment building in a downscale neighborhood in Mumbai. In 2019, Hindenburg issued a follow-up report disclosing its findings and predicting the stock would “end up worthless.” Eros traded at around \$12 on the NYSE at the time Anderson first started to investigate it. It is now down to 25 cents a share.

ON FEBRUARY 9, 2020, as the S&P 500 index vaulted to an all-time high, Anderson was following the spread of a new coronavirus in China. “I said we’d leave New York when there were ten confirmed cases,” he recalls. “I think we left when there were seven.” He retreated to an Airbnb—a renovated barn—near his parents’ house in Connecticut and waited for the long-predicted market correction. Anderson says he was anticipating it would put a lot

of overvalued companies out of business, “a healthy but painful process,” which he felt would be cleansing for the economy. On March 12, as the world locked down, the stock market suffered its worst one-day decline since the crash of 1987.

From the safety of the barn, Anderson took to Twitter, where his voice-of-doom persona (@ClarityToast) had developed a healthy following. “S&P hits new lows ... as Trump and the Fed try to paper over everything,” he tweeted on March 13. “It’s not working anymore, folks.”

But then it did work. The federal government opened its macroeconomic sluices, printing trillions of dollars. The stock indexes stabilized and before long were ascending past their previous highs. Newbie investors, killing time during the lockdown, started playing with stocks on apps like Robinhood. “Getting the impression that a large portion of those stimulus checks went straight into Robinhood accounts to buy YOLO calls,” Anderson tweeted incredulously that April. “The Fed just turned around and reinflated the biggest asset bubble of all time,” he says now. “At that point, it was just a question of how crazy it could get.”

Then, on June 9, 2020, Anderson came across a tweet from Milton. His truck company, Nikola, had gone public on NASDAQ five days before: “I’ve wanted to say this my whole adult life; \$NKLA is now worth more than Ford and [Fiat Chrysler]. Nipping on the heels of GM ...”

“He basically was saying that, like, he had overcome two of the largest automobile-makers in history, which have collectively produced millions of vehicles,” Anderson says. “And I just remember looking at that and thinking how completely unearned that statement was.”

In press coverage, Milton was often described as a “serial entrepreneur,” a polite circumlocution. He had no engineering background and had gotten into electric vehicles after running a home-alarm-systems franchise and a classified-ad website in his home state of Utah. He launched his truck business in 2014, naming it Nikola in homage to Tesla and, it seems, in imitation of Musk. (“There’s two people in this world who know EVs better than anyone,” Milton once said, “and that’s Elon and myself.”) Unlike Tesla, though, Nikola had yet to sell or lease a single vehicle.

Milton had promised to revolutionize the carbon-spewing trucking industry by making hydrogen-fuel-cell vehicles that were as powerful as big diesel rigs, capable of hauling “80,000 pounds more than 1,000 miles” without stopping to refuel. An impressive roster of investors had bought into his vision. The most prominent was Jeff Ubben, a billionaire (Continued on page 76)

TRAVEL IN STYLE THIS YEAR WITH INSIDER JOURNEYS

Make this year one to remember with our exclusive 2022 Insider Journeys. In partnership with luxury travel-planning company Indagare, we've curated a series of exceptional escapes. From the sleek architecture of Stockholm to enchanting and iconic enclaves in the south of France, experience the best in wellness, style, design, food and culture.

Stockholm Style & Design
June 7–12, 2022

South of France Art & Design
September 15–20, 2022

Blackberry Farm Escape
March 31–April 3, 2022 (*Waitlist Only*)

A Taste of Modena With Massimo Bottura
September 20–23, 2022 (*Waitlist Only*)



PHOTO COURTESY ETT HEM UTSIDA

Discover the wonders of traveling again.

LEARN MORE ABOUT THESE AND FUTURE TRIPS
[INDAGARE.COM/WSJMGAGINE](https://indagare.com/wsjpgazine)
646.780.8383

STRATEGIST

..... THE LOOK BOOK GOES TO
..... DRIED PERSIMMONS

THE PORT
IN THE WEST VILLAGE ..

BEST BETS

Dog Coats They'll Actually Wear

➤ IT'S A COMMON misconception that a dog's fur can function as a winter coat. Small dogs in particular can get quite sick if exposed to freezing temperatures for too long. And though bigger dogs fare better, without jackets they'll need to be bathed after every slushy walk. Fortunately, the canine winterwear market is saturated—filled with four-armed puffer snowsuits and tiny Swedish raincoats. We asked 15 discerning pet owners to tell us about the most practical and stylish **outerwear their dogs don't wriggle out of**, including a pair of rainproof overalls preferred by an Italian greyhound named Nola, a puffer that one Canadian dog parent pulls out on subzero days, and the “perfect” raincoat that designer Ellen Van Dusen puts on her Boston terrier, Snips.

Best Overall Coat

1. Carhartt Chore Coat, \$45
Carhartt's chore coat for dogs comes recommended by Greenpoint dog mom Kelly Mittendorf, Strategist editor Maxine Builder, Yena Kim (owner of Shiba Inu Bodhi and Jindo Luc), and dog walker Will Ferman. Ferman likes that it keeps larger dogs warm without limiting their range of motion. Kim appreciates how the sleeveless design doesn't snag on the fur of dogs' armpits. Plus it saves time by keeping mud off rambunctious dogs like Luc, who rolls around at the park.

Best Overall Rain Jacket

2. Ruffwear Sun Shower Dog Raincoat, \$60
Kate Anello, a project manager for Apple, compares this coat to one from Patagonia. Tory Waxman, co-founder of Sundays dog food, is another fan, especially for the rain. It has easy on-and-off side buckles and reflective trim for visibility on evening walks.

Best Overall Vest

3. Little Beast the Super Duper Reversible Parka Vest, \$88
If your dog refuses to wear a coat with full sleeves, you might want to consider a puffer vest. Three of the dog owners we talked to recommend this reversible one from Little Beast. Designer Lila Habermann says, "It adds the perfect level of puffiness to keep Sofi warm while allowing her to move, jump, and play." (The first time the dog wore it, she was "so comfy she went directly to sleep.")

Insulated All-Weather Parka

4. Hurtt Summit Parka, \$85
Three of our panelists praised Hurtt's dog coats, and its Summit parka is Waxman's all-time favorite. Unlike coats with open bottoms, this one is designed to keep extra-sensitive areas like the chest and abdomen warm.

Aesthetically Pleasing Puffer

5. LoveThyBeast Quilted Nylon Puffer Jacket, from \$75
Logan Mikhly, co-owner of Boris & Horton, Manhattan's first dog café, likes this "really sleek and secure" jacket: "It's amazing—easy to clean, warm, and superfast to put on, which is helpful since I also have a child who needs to get bundled up to go outside now."

Puffy Parkas, Neck-to-Tail Slickers, and Fleecy Vests



Subzero-Appropriate Option

6. Noize Karter Dog Coat, \$95
"Noize coats are rated up to minus-15 degrees Celsius, making them great for Canadian winters," says Toronto dog mom Tiana Feng. Her pup, Bacon, has three coats from the brand, but this one with a faux-fur hood is Feng's favorite. "It closes with Velcro, so it's really easy to put on."

Snowsuit for Small Dogs

7. LoveThyBeast Quilted Puffer Snowsuit, \$64
Little dogs are more vulnerable to icy winds and snow, so this machine-washable quilted puffer snowsuit with full-body insulation is a practical choice. Per Waxman, the extra coverage helps reduce the need for grooming when they come inside.

Throw-Style Coat

8. Canine Styles Horse Blanket, from \$100
Waxman's dog, Mabel, wears this quilted horse-blanket-style coat on quick walks when it's very cold outside. Her owner loves that it's super-easy to get on and off and very high quality. "Ours is seven years old, and it looks brand new," she says.

Lightweight Puffer

9. FuzzYard Harlem Puffer Jacket, from \$34
On milder winter days, Gramercy dog mom Jenn Lee puts this on Oak, her social-media-famous Pomeranian. "It's ideal for light-snow days," she says.

Head Protector

10. Push Pushi Dog Raincoat, from \$20
Dusen Dusen designer Ellen Van Dusen dresses her dog, Snips, in this yellow raincoat. "It's perfect," she says, "and has a clear plastic hood so she can still see if it goes over her eyes."

Waterproof Overalls

11. Harvoola Rainproof Overalls, \$38
Cristina Camara-Mandy, owner of an Italian greyhound named Nola, says this slightly looser rainsuit gets tons of compliments on Instagram and in real life: "It's a very thin fabric, so it's something she can wear on top of onesies if the weather is cold. If it's hot, she can wear it as a light rain jacket, and it covers her whole body so her back legs and chest won't get covered in mud."

Nonirritating Fleece

12. GoldPaw Duluth Double Fleece, from \$38
Of all the coats on this list, GoldPaw's fleeces are least likely to bother a fussy dog. Waxman says they allow for maximum flexibility, while bulkier coats hinder movement.

Warmer-Weather Windbreaker

13. LoveThyBeast Waxed-Cotton Jacket With Plaid Lining, from \$76
For weather that is brisk but not freezing, the best jackets are those that block the wind and keep dogs dry in case of drizzle. On such days, Anello puts this waxed-cotton jacket (basically a Barbour coat for dogs) on her Border-collie mix, Zane. "It's longer than other jackets, so it covers the butt," she says.

THE LOOK BOOK GOES TO

A Staten Island Shipping Dock

Longshoremen of the ILA Local 920 union took a break from 18-hour shifts to tell us about the supply chain and winter accidents.

INTERVIEWS BY LOUIS CHESLAW
AND DANIEL VARGHESE



MIKE HENNESSY

Shop steward, Great Kills

How's the work been lately?

We're getting hammered here. My guys can't get a day off. But there isn't a backlog like there is on the West Coast. We're processing everything on time. There, I think the problem is getting enough men to work as well as a lack of space and a lack of chassis. But, you know, we're right on the cusp of having a chassis shortage here too.

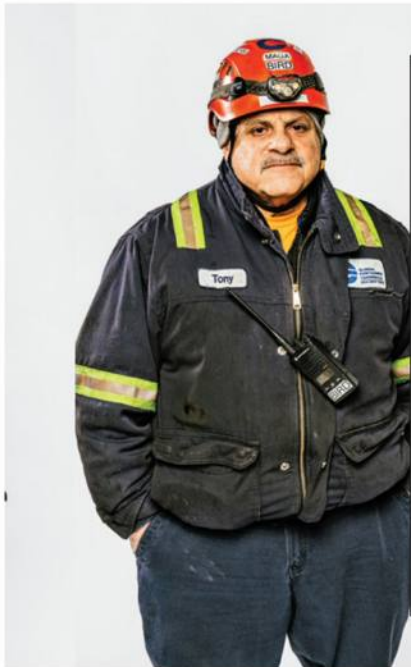
How long have you been on this dock?

Thirty-eight years. I started working with my father when I was 17. My three nephews are down here now too. They're fourth generation on the docks; I'm third.

What has kept the whole family in the industry?

Listen, the money here is astronomical. I don't even want to quote the salaries, but some of us are making what doctors are making—I'm not exaggerating. There are men on the waterfront who are making \$250,000 a year, and that's low. Because the salary is limitless. You can pretty much make whatever you want if you're able to work 24/7. And some guys do.

THE LOOK BOOK: STATEN ISLAND DOCKWORKERS



ANTHONY VESCE

Assistant foreman, Florham Park, New Jersey

← **What kinds of things go wrong?** Lots, especially in the winter, when ice and snow break the cranes. But most recently, the crane operator got the festoon—a series of cables—tangled up. So we're in the middle of pulling apart 1,000 feet of electrical cables right now. No one gets angry at anyone, though—it's kind of a "Shit happens" thing.



JEROME MCCAIN

Longshoreman, Graniteville



FERNANDO FERREIRA

Welder-mechanic, Newark, New Jersey



PERCELL DIXON

Longshoreman, Graniteville



GLENN GOODWIN

Longshoreman, Dongan Hills

→ **What did you think of the job at first?** Tough. I had to learn how to back up these 40-foot reefers, the containers that store cold food. The first time, I started crying. I was like, *I'm leaving this job!* One of the bosses, God bless him, was just like, "Don't worry. I'll help you. You're not going anywhere."



GLADYS GARCIA

Longshoreman, Tompkinsville



GAETANO GRILLO

Maintenance foreman, Huguenot

← **Are people out sick?** Right now, around 11 maintenance personnel, not including guys who are doing cargo. But we have to keep going. We can't stop the supply chain—especially because, sure, some of those containers have pencils, but some have diapers and medical supplies.



FRANK CINQUE

Crane mechanic, Annadale



ANGELO RIVERA JR.

Assistant foreman, Eltingville



CHARLES CAROLLO
Chief delivery clerk, Manalapan Township, New Jersey

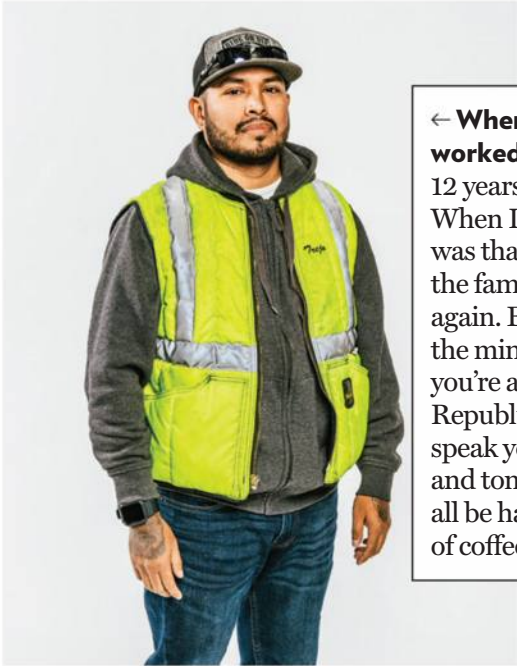


FRANK FERRARA
Longshoreman, Bulls Head

➤ **Do people misunderstand the supply-chain situation?** Yes, they read in the papers that it's on us, but the longshoremen are actually working more efficiently than ever. If a ship comes at 11 at night, things start at 11. And we work until it's finished. People just don't get what goes into getting things to their door.



STEVEN WARNOCK
Chief customer-service clerk, Graniteville



MARIO TREJO
Longshoreman, Fort Greene

← **Where else have you worked?** I served 12 years in the Marines. When I got here, it was that "Welcome to the family" feeling again. Everybody has the mind-set that if you're a Democrat, Republican, you can speak your mind today and tomorrow you'll all be having a cup of coffee together.



GIANCARLO BARRERA
Maintenance-and-repair worker, Rossville



ROBERT SHER
Mechanic, Westerleigh



SALVATORE CIPRIATI
Longshoreman, Freehold, New Jersey



RASHIDAH DIXON
Longshoreman, Graniteville



STEPHEN BRACCO
Dock boss, Annadale



A Photo of His Living Room From 1969 ...

Staying Put for 60 Years

Architectural historian Andrew Alpern bought his one-bedroom apartment in Chelsea's Penn South co-ops in 1962 with no intention to ever leave. And he hasn't.

BY WENDY GOODMAN



... And What It Looks Like Today

IT WAS LATE in '64 when I finally had a little income that I decided, *Okay, now I can get rid of Mother's castoffs*," says Andrew Alpern on a tour of the one-bedroom co-op in the Penn South middle-income complex in Chelsea he's lived in since 1962, when it was new. "And I went to B. Altman"—the long-gone department store whose genteel building still stands on 34th and Fifth—"and bought that couch you are sitting on. I paid \$468, on sale, which back then was a lot of money."

Alpern, 83, often digresses in the course of conversation, one thing leading to another that reminds him of any number of references and stories relating back to his original topic, because he is an expert in excavating the history of life in this city, where he has lived all his life (as did his parents).

Alpern grew up on West 82nd Street. He went to Columbia University, where he studied architecture; as a student, he bought this sensible 17th-floor apartment when it was still being built. After working as an architect for more than 20 years, he had a second

Andrew Alpern's apartment was photographed by Louis Reens for *House & Garden's Guide for Young Living* in 1969 (opposite, and all the black-and-white photos that follow). It hasn't changed much since. The Safari chairs have been replaced by Wassily chairs, and the homemade plywood cubes were replaced in 1975 by a stacked-books coffee table from Maitland-Smith. He eventually donated his harpsichord to a music school and installed the filing-cabinet unit in its place.

↓ The Terrace

Alpern covered the concrete floor of the outdoor space with redwood duckboards and filled in the aluminum railing with bamboo. He later enclosed it to make room for more books and shelving for his collections and mirrored the ceiling for extra light and views.



career as a lawyer. But he is well known for his 11 books on Manhattan's architecture since around 1860 and has written about, among other subjects, Rosario Candela's buildings and the Dakota. (His most recent book, *Posh Portals: Elegant Entrances and Ingratiating Ingresses to Apartments for the Affluent in New York City*, was published in 2020.) He's written them all while living in Penn South, which was sponsored by the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union, where resale prices are capped, as are the incomes of buyers, in order to maintain affordability. (There is a long waiting list.) Meanwhile, the blocks around it, especially adjacent to the High Line, have become home to some of the fanciest buildings of our current Gilded Age.

Alpern paid just \$3,000 for this apartment. When he moved in, he took down—by hand with a small mallet—two walls that enclosed the eat-in kitchen. He built bookcases; filled the walls with posters from the now long-gone Wittenborn art-book shop; and bought paper lanterns from Azuma, the beloved and also long-gone venue for Japanese paper lanterns and home accessories—as well as one small cubic lantern by Isamu Noguchi. He covered the concrete floor of the balcony with redwood duckboards from the lumberyard across the street (redwood was still legal at the time). But it was his decision to skew the furniture at a 45-degree angle within the south-facing living room that really opened up the space.

His apartment was featured in *House & Garden's Guide for Young Living* in 1969. The black-and-white photographs by Louis Reens show it very much as it looks today. Over the years, as the books and collections of skulls, claws, and toy soldiers have accumulated, more shelves have been added, and he donated his underused harpsichord to the Berkeley Carroll School to make room for more storage.

The balcony was enclosed, adding more space for books. Today, a dramatic carved-oak throne in the shape of a skeleton resides near the unsigned portrait of Francesco Maria della Rovere, the fourth Duke of Urbino. ("I have a three-volume set of all six dukes of Urbino,"

→ The Kitchen and Dining Area

Alpern designed two bookcases to close off the galley kitchen. The original redwood cabinets are still in place; two are covered in reproductions of the walls of the Studiolo Room from the Ducal Palace in Gubbio at the Met. "They are just screwed to the back," Alpern explains. "They happen to fit exactly, and the color happens to be right."





Andrew Alpern Today →

He stands next to his dining table in front of a painting by Argentine artist Fernando Maza. The walls are covered in a light fabric with small stained cork chips layered on top.



Alpern says, “so I know he was born in 1490. He died, probably poisoned, in 1538.”) The portrait “was in wretched condition. I had it relined, restretched, cleaned, repaired, and framed,” he says. “The only other known painting of him was done by Titian in 1538, the year he died. It hangs in the Uffizi.” If the skulls, claws, and the possibly poisoned duke all sound a bit macabre, it’s worth noting that Alpern had a notable collection of Edward Gorey drawings, books, and ephemera he donated to Columbia in 2010.

Was Alpern ever tempted to move? “When I bought the place from plans when I was 21, my intention was that it be my permanent home,” he says. “And knowing the Manhattan real-estate market, I knew that once I had my own place, it would be forever. We Alperns don’t move around a lot.” And that B. Altman sofa hasn’t moved from where he first put it, either. ■

← The Bedroom

The window didn’t have a view, so Alpern put the bed against it. “I never turn on either the heat or the AC in the bedroom, so that freed up my ability to put the bed with its head against the window,” he says. “But the real reason for that placement was to accommodate the two bedroom bookcases. They are the only ones I didn’t design and build myself.”





Semma

Dining and Dashing

Attempting to savor South Indian delights at Semma during a surge.

BY ADAM PLATT

SO HOW DO YOU enjoy a lavish feast from the south of India while dining indoors (because at Semma there's a "hospital-quality air-filter system" but currently no outdoor dining) during the great Omicron spike with your KN95 mask firmly affixed to your face?

"You don't, Dad," said one daughter as we waited, a bit apprehensively, for dinner to arrive at the latest Chintan Pandya-Roni Mazumdar operation, which has been open for a couple of months now on Greenwich Avenue in the West Village.

"I think we scarf everything down really quickly, like we're in the Army, Dad, and then we get out of here," said the other daughter as alluring, though possibly messy, platters of mung-bean pancakes, great three-cornered dosas, and delicate helpings of stewed goat intestines (kudal varuval) began to clatter down on our table.

In spite of the city's oft-repeated, though slightly garbled, health guidelines, no other

guests seemed to be wearing masks in the narrow, boisterous, increasingly crowded room, which, unlike Pandya and Mazumdar's other hit restaurants (Adda, Dhama), looks less like a casual Indian canteen than a posh hotel bar in Mumbai, say, or the tourist precincts of Goa. The sleek, dimly lit space, which once housed Pandya and Mazumdar's original New York venture, the star-crossed Rahi, has been redone in shades of woodsy, tropical brown. Rattan lampshades hang from the rafters, and the ceiling is covered with a pattern of woven bamboo designed to resemble the roof of a southern-Indian houseboat. Polished wood café tables are closely packed to enhance a noisy party atmosphere in the pre-COVID style, and the long bar in front is manned by barkeeps vigorously shaking up jauntily named fusion cocktails tinged with curry leaf and cardamom.

"I'm not taking my mask off for stewed goat intestines, Dad," announced Daughter No. 2 as Dad attempted to shovel dainty

bites of this fiery Tamil dish over his briefly lowered mask, before waving one arm wildly in the air and making frantic, muffled cries for a glass of water. The same thing happened with the excellent *attu kari sukka* lamb appetizer (flavored with slivers of coconut, plenty of black cardamom, and an impressive dose of Tellicherry peppers), though no one had any trouble tackling milder southern-Indian specialties like the crispy-edged mung-bean crêpe, or the vegetable-covered *uttapam*, a pancake made from pounded lentils and rice, or the golden-colored house *dosa*, which the kitchen seasons with black garam and chile "gunpowder" spice and folds like a large tri-corner napkin around a mash of spiced potatoes and onions.

As with the other "unapologetically Indian" establishments in the Pandya-Mazumdar portfolio, the idea behind Semma ("fantastic" in Tamil) is to introduce New Yorkers to regions of the Indian culinary map most have never experienced before, which in this case is the homestyle cooking of southern India, particularly the coastal state of Tamil Nadu. Instead of Pandya, however, the chef in the kitchen here is Vijay Kumar, who, according to our (well-masked) server, has conjured up many of these recipes from his rural childhood. These include the aforementioned goat intestines, vegetable dishes like simple bowls of mustard greens tossed with chunks of butternut squash, and the kind of tender

Semma
60 Greenwich Ave.,
nr. Perry St.
212-373-8900
semma.nyc

Health Salad

little snails that he used to forage for as a child, flavored here with tamarind and ginger and served with spongy wheels of rice-and-lentil-based kal dosa.

I had enjoyed these snails on a previous, merrily unmasked visit, but when I broached the possibility of ordering them again, my increasingly grouchy guests (“I’m focusing more on this mask than the food, Dad!”) shook their heads in protest. The same thing happened when I mentioned the lobster tail in coconut milk and the signature, undeniably messy Kanyakumari nandu masala, a crab dish named for the town on India’s southern coast, which is reimaged here as a festive preorder group feast complete with plastic Maryland-style crab-boil bibs and a giant Dungeness crab flown in from the West Coast. “Imagine smelling that crab in your mask?” one of my dining companions said, at which point both they and their cousin (“We seem to be drinking less with these masks on, which is less exciting”) decided to abandon Dad’s little experiment altogether.

As a health-conscious working professional, Dad will continue with his personal mask mandate, however, especially when there’s no option to sit shivering outside in what’s shaping up to be another difficult, gloomy winter for New York restaurants and those of us who love them. Did my KN95 make a difference in how I experienced the rest of our dinner, which included snaky green long peppers drowned in an overly heavy peanut sauce; helpings of leaden, slightly gummy southern-style goat biryani that didn’t seem half as artful or satisfying as the goat’s-neck version available at Dhamaka; and what we all agreed were a couple of forgettable coconut-themed desserts? I suppose the answer is yes, though my daughters would like everyone to know that they noticed no difference between the dyspeptic critic in his sauce-stained mask and the forgetful, genially grumpy gentleman they see around the apartment every day.

BITES

RECOMMENDED DISHES: Nathai pirattal (snails), gunpowder dosa, parotta, kal dosa, valiya chemmeen moilee (lobster tail), Kanyakumari nandu masala (Dungeness crab for two).

NOTE: It’s suggested to order the crab two days in advance. There are potential plans to reopen an outdoor-dining space in the spring, but until then, the COVID-conscious should agitate for the slightly less crowded tables at the front of the house. **OPEN:** Dinner Tuesday through Sunday.

PRICES: Small plates, \$9 to \$25; larger plates, \$28 to \$44; Dungeness crab for two, \$125.

➤ IT’S UNLIKELY THAT anyone hoping to shed a few pounds this New Year is considering eating more health salad. Health salad, for the uninitiated, is a Jewish-deli staple consisting primarily of shredded cabbage and carrots thoroughly sloshed with a slightly sweet white-vinegar dressing. (The kitchen at 2nd Ave Deli adds green peppers, celery, and chives to the mix; up at Zabbar’s, the deli-case crew is partial to cucumbers.) One reason health salad is considered healthy is because, unlike its cousin coleslaw, it forgoes mayo. The reason it may not be considered healthy is guilt by association: It runs with a rough and calorific crowd, including pastrami, blintzes, potato pancakes, noodle kugel, and chopped liver. No one goes to a deli for their health, after all, let alone just to eat health salad.

An odd thing about health salad is the name itself. The fact that salads are generally understood to be healthy and nutritious is a point seemingly lost on whoever it was that coined the term. What was the thinking behind it? Maybe it was to distinguish it from the kitchen’s line of Instant Heart Attack Salads. Or maybe it was supposed to serve as a warning to old-school cholesterol addicts: *This is something that’s good for you; you may not like it.*

That might explain why, although health salad is traditionally served gratis in a big bowl or stainless-steel bucket and delivered to the table before you even order, it’s often neglected, if not left untouched. Which is too bad, because a good health salad is a beautiful thing—cool and crunchy and fairly invigorating. It is our homegrown version of a juice cleanse, a native New York, post-resolutions way to greet the New Year (although cabbage happens to be a winter crop, which is why our thoughts turned to it, health salad knows no season).

Like delis themselves, health salads are on the wane. But during the pandemic, we discovered a new favorite, not at a deli but at **Poulet Sans Tête**, the superb four-year-old rotisserie-chicken takeout wing of West Village restaurant Left Bank. Chef Laurence Edelman put it on the menu as a nod to the diners and delis of his South Orange, New Jersey, youth, including Eppes Essen and the kosher-hot-dog spot Don’s. Edelman’s version goes heavy on the sliced cucumbers and skips the sugar, which makes for a sharper, snappier, picklier bite, enhanced by celery seed and dill. It’s as great a foil for crisp-skinned roast chicken and drippings potatoes as it would be for a pastrami on rye, and it will, as some departed deli connoisseurs of our acquaintance might have said, put hair on your chest.

R.R. & R.P.



THE FOOD BIZ

Battle of the Roasted Garlic Achaars

A Trader Joe's knockoff has put condiment-maker Brooklyn Delhi in a pickle.

BY ROBIN RAISFELD & ROB PATRONITE



LAST SEPTEMBER, Chitra Agrawal started getting messages from excited friends and customers regarding what appeared to be her latest retail expansion. The founder, with her husband, Ben Garthus, of a line of Indian-inspired condiments and simmer sauces called Brooklyn Delhi had been growing the brand for seven years, from a stand at holiday markets to national shelf space at Whole Foods and a partnership with Blue Apron. And now her fans were curious: Was Brooklyn Delhi private-labeling its garlic achaar—an intricately balanced, chile-spiked Indian condiment—for Trader Joe's?

No, it wasn't. Trader Joe's garlic achaar was unrelated to Brooklyn Delhi's garlic achaar. But there was more to the story, as Agrawal revealed on Instagram. "I wasn't

going to post about this but I've been tagged enough to realize that either people think we are making this watered down version of our Roasted Garlic Achaar or being led to believe that achaar is a simmer sauce," she wrote. "Let's just set the record straight, Trader Joe's has launched a cheap knock off of our product (not to mention ripped off our simmer sauce label design) ... Their version is cheap because the first ingredient is not even garlic which is a very expensive ingredient when using whole, fresh cloves like we do and the garlic purée they use is cut with water and citric acid. I am mentally spent thinking about all the time and effort that went into developing this product and educating people on what achaar is to then have a large corporation bastardize the recipe and capitalize on what we have built."

As it turns out, beginning last January, Agrawal had been in talks with Trader Joe's about producing a private-label item for the grocery store. The garlic achaar—Brooklyn Delhi's most popular product, and its most expensive to make—wasn't a contender, but "they were interested in our curry ketchup and our korma," says Agrawal. "Then at one point, the buyer came back to me and said, 'Sorry, we're actually launching another Indian sauce,' and that was the end of it." That is, until the debut of Trader Joe's achaar.

You can't trademark a recipe, and Brooklyn Delhi doesn't have trademark protection on its packaging, distinctive as it may be, which could be why the Trader Joe's design ended up looking so similar. The grocery chain declined to comment on its new product and its dealings with

Brooklyn Delhi, but in an Instagram post touting the versatility of its garlic achar, it recommends using the condiment in a number of ways that mimic the suggestions listed on the Brooklyn Delhi jar and website. And that's not the only similarity.

Agrawal points out that Trader Joe's spells *achar* the way Brooklyn Delhi does—with three *a*'s instead of the more common two. "When we launched, we were selling it to people who were unfamiliar with achar—which means 'pickled' in Hindi—and we intentionally spelled it that way because we thought it was phonetic," says Agrawal. It's not like spelling *cheese* with a *z*, as with Cheez-Its or Cheez Whiz, but Agrawal thinks it's close. Why didn't she just call her product a pickle as many brands (like, say, Kalustyan's) do? "We considered it," she says. "But then we thought that since we're selling it at markets where people possibly don't know what Indian pickle is, let's go with a traditional name, and let's do a lot of education around it."

Another Brooklyn Delhi quirk copied by Trader Joe's, according to Agrawal: It roasts its garlic. Indian garlic pickle, or achar, is just that: raw garlic that gets pickled. It isn't roasted, and the garlic is usually crunchy. "I love the flavor of roasted garlic, so I wanted to combine the flavors of traditional Indian garlic pickle with roasted garlic clove," she says.

Oddly enough, the worst thing about the whole sordid affair for Agrawal are the reports she's been receiving from the Indian-pickle cognoscenti that Trader Joe's garlic achar is ... lacking. After a TikTok named Vruti tasted it, she winced as if she had suddenly seen a rat dragging a slice of pizza down a subway staircase. To be fair, the comments on social media that take Trader Joe's to task for churning out a dumbed-down product designed for a western audience and for misguidedly calling achar a "sauce" on the label are off the mark. Agrawal, too, created her product with a non-Indian target demographic in mind and stamped the words "garlic-chili sauce" on her label. Having tried both side by side, though, our sympathies are with TikTok Vruti and Brooklyn Delhi, whose garlic achar is hotter, better balanced, and far more complex and delicious than Trader Joe's. Introducing achar to a wider audience is great, says Agrawal, to sum it all up, "but if it's the first time someone is trying it, and they're like, 'OMG, that is not good,' then they might write off the whole category, and that scares me."

IN SEASON

Dried Persimmons



IN THE TIME OF COVID, one man's empty dining room is another's hoshigaki parlor. At least that's what visitors to the West Village tearoom **Té Company** might have surmised when they stopped in for a takeout order in December only to look up and see the ceiling hung with neat rows of slowly drying hachiya persimmons, each acorn-shaped fruit attached to a beam with a length of red-and-white butcher twine knotted around a screw embedded in its top.

Frederico Ribeiro, the chef who owns Té with his wife, the tea maven Elena Liao, first encountered the traditional preservation technique as a sous-chef at Per Se, where the fruit was aged in dry storage and paired with cheese, and he began experimenting with it himself at Té. But it wasn't until the pandemic caused the snug shop to suspend table service that Ribeiro ramped up production from a few recreational hachiyas behind the counter to this year's room-dwarfing crop of 200.

Hoshigaki ("dried persimmon" in Japanese) has become more popular Stateside in recent years among chefs and home DIY-ers, especially in California, where the fruit is ubiquitous and the climate favorable. Like maintaining

a sourdough starter or fermenting cabbage, it is a project that demands commitment: Unripe persimmons must be peeled, hung, and massaged periodically (hands washed with unscented soap, Ribeiro cautions) to break down the fibers. By the time a sugar bloom coats the darkened, shriveled flesh, which by then should have achieved what the chef calls a "gummy bear" texture—chewy and succulent, dense but not dry. The transformation from hard and glossy to wizened and sweet requires air, light, and time, afforded, in Té Company's case, by a cracked window, a small fan, and the temporary absence of lingering customers.

Considered an auspicious food in many Asian countries, including China, where the fruit originated, persimmons are often present at Lunar New Year celebrations, and Ribeiro will mark the holiday by selling his both at the shop and online (\$25 for a box of five). For him, hoshigaki is less a pandemic pivot than a deep-seated culinary pursuit. "I love to make them," he says. "The old way of preserving ingredients, the concept of drying to preserve—for me, it's fascinating." *163 W. 10th St., nr. Seventh Ave. S.*

R.R. & R.P.

NOW IN PERFORMANCES

In Paris...

Five generations of a Jewish family ask:
Is home still safe?

FROM THE AUTHOR OF *SIGNIFICANT OTHER*
AND THE DIRECTOR OF *THE BAND'S VISIT*

PRAYER
for the
FRENCH
REPUBLIC

WRITTEN BY
JOSHUA
HARMON

DIRECTED BY
DAVID
CROMER

Photo: Alamy Stock Photo/Classic Stock

MTG
MANHATTAN
THEATRE CLUB
STAGE I

TICKETS ON SALE NOW
FrenchRepublicPlay.com



AGNIESZKA PILAT / DIALECT COACHES / HANYA YANAGIHARA / CRITICS / TO DO

The CULTURE PAGES

Mitski in Nine Acts

If the musician has to reveal herself at all, she'd rather do it one short burst at a time. *By E. Alex Jung*

1.

ON A BRIGHT NOVEMBER day, Mitski is waiting for me in my hotel lobby in Nashville. She's dressed practically, in a hunter-green fleece, jeans, and light-lavender sneakers. Her face is bare, with spots of acne dotting her jawline; her hair is a clean bob that sways above her shoulders. There's an understated audacity to Mitski's person. She's deliberate and resolute in her decisions, including the hiatus that sent tremors through the Mitski fandom when she said her performance at Central Park's SummerStage in 2019 would be her "last show indefinitely." She had been planning on the break for a while, making sure she had enough money saved up before she pulled the plug. ¶ Then she moved to Nashville. She wanted to live in a place that wasn't New York or Los Angeles and still had ready access to music studios, but she has spent the past two years like most of us: in a hole. It might be the ordinariness of her regular life that makes her feel worlds apart from the movie stars she loves, like Julia Roberts and Nicolas Cage. That "It" factor?

She claims not to have it. "I'm not a star," she says. "I can say that with confidence because I have met real stars. And I have cowered before them."

Mitski recalls being backstage at a benefit concert: Taylor Swift, Lana Del Rey, St. Vincent, Blake Lively. "I started to get a headache and heart palpitations. My hands started to shake. I thought I was gonna throw up, I really did. I told my manager, 'I need to get out of here,' and I practically ran out. I remember Taylor Swift talking to me, but I don't remember what I said back to her. I remember her saying, 'Well,' and then leaving." She laughs.

"Is it stardom or is it power?" I ask.

"Maybe that's what it is," she says. "It was like all the people around them together emitted an energy that made me feel like I was on a bad high. I think you're always conscious of something when you feel you don't have it."

We're taking a trip to Mammoth Cave, the world's longest known cave system. I'm driving—Mitski doesn't drive. As we head north on I-65, I think about the opening to her song "Lonesome Love":

*I call you, to see you again
So I can win, and this can finally end
Spend an hour doing my makeup
To prove something*

*Walk up in my high heels
All high and mighty
And you say, Hello
And I lose.*

2.

A MITSKI SONG lasts about as long as it takes to poach an egg. It is small and will knock you out, like a pearl slipped inside the left ventricle of your heart. She has suggested that the brevity of her songwriting comes from a need to make herself known upon entrance, an awareness that she has only a short time to make an impression. She has tried her hand at lengthier forms of prose but finds her attention flags. The song is the ideal vehicle for the emotional journey she wants to create: an economy of words suffused with an oversaturation of feeling. Her lyrics speak to the lonely hearts aching in the corner, waiting for a furious love to crush them.

At SummerStage, Mitski wore a cropped white tee, black biker shorts, and kneepads. She was accompanied by a four-person band. She barely spoke, but when she did, she did so with characteristic concision: "Hello, my name is Mitski, and this is my band." There is a corseted quality to her performances—good posture, fine diction,

precise choreography—that barely contains the roiling fury, destructive impulses, humiliation, longing, heartache, and hunger of her lyrics. A straight back that suffers the tempests of life.

3.

MITSKI QUIT social media during that last 2019 tour, when many in her place might have doubled down on the moment. While she had accumulated a steady following with her previous rock albums, her fifth, *Be the Cowboy*—which grafted her songwriting onto disco, country, and pop—was pronounced one of the best of 2018. Later, it was called one of the best of the decade. The greater her fame, the more people have tried to locate the originary hurts in her biography, the more she has withdrawn. By her own admission, her growing profile has made her paranoid. Even small talk can feel dangerous.

"Do you have any pets?" I ask as we drive.

"I have two cats."

"What are their names?"

"Mmmm, I shouldn't say. The kids on the internet now are very savvy. They could type in the names, figure out where I live."

"Do your cats have Instagrams?"

"No, but they're shelter cats. Usually they have microchips where they have their information. And if people know what their names are, they can go, *Oh, I see*. And then they would see, behind the picture of the cats, the interior of my house. And then they can pinpoint perhaps what that house is."

"I see," I say. "Do you live alone?"

"Mm." She pauses. "I would rather not say that."

4.

"HERE'S THE THING," says Mitski. "In terms of press out in the world, there's no notion of consent, like the way that there's consent in sexual situations. Once you say something, it's public record. Anyone can ask you about it and demand an answer about it at any time. I remember my first press trip to Europe. I'm still traumatized by it. I was nobody, had no power. And because I was nobody, and also because I was an Asian woman, almost all white men, one after the other, would say the most racist, sexist things I have ever heard to this day. I got a lot of sexual harassment. And it wasn't just one person. I felt like a toilet stall, where I just had to sit there and take shit. I kept saying yes because I didn't know that I could say no. The traumatic part wasn't just having things said and done to me. The traumatic part was me sitting there allowing it, over and over."

5.

MITSKI MIYAWAKI was born in Mie prefecture, located on the southeast curve of Japan. Her mother is Japanese, her father a white American. She has lived in various countries—Malaysia, Turkey, the U.S.—and tried on various personae. She discovered that all of those iterations were a part of her. She could make herself outgoing and be one of the popular girls or become the ultimate loner and not speak to anyone, not a soul, then break herself open singing “I Will Always Love You” at the end-of-year talent show. She feels as though she could be anyone and live anywhere. And, actually, that anyone could be anyone. Put culture and circumstance into a jar and apply enough pressure and anything can emerge: a diamond, an accountant, a rock star.

6.

INITIALLY, SHE HAD suggested we go spelunking. Mitski has a sharp, fond memory of wriggling through the bowels of the Earth during a high-school field trip. The idea was nixed (too dangerous), but walking through the cave with a tour group of 50 children and their grandparents, I found myself craving dirt, solitude, the euphoria of what Mitski called a “squeeze hole.”

The cave metaphor is maybe too apt for an artist whose music makes you feel like you’re being ushered into a private opera house of melodrama. Working in the music industry creates a paradox: Writing demands vulnerability, but capitalism dehumanizes. “Every day, all the time, is exploitation,” she says. “You can’t be a human being. You have to be a product that’s being bought and sold and consumed, and you have to perceive yourself that way in order to function. Everything in the world has a cost: If I truly want the greatest magic in the world, the highest euphoria, the best thing, I’m going to have to pay an equivalent price.” She accepts this, mostly.

Still, she wishes she hadn’t released music under her real name. “Seeing my name just reminds me of the world,” she says. “I am a foreigner to myself now.”

7.

WE ARE GAZING upward at the ceiling of the caves’ Rotunda, a space as wide as an amphitheater. The overarching dome and walls are pure limestone—gray and dry and millennia old. One feels like a supplicant entering the shrine of a disinterested god.

Ghostly white scratches crisscross the rock, bearing the names of the proud

offenders: JACK + ROSE, ETTA, JERRY. Older explorers marked their presence with the soot from a candlestick: JOHN NEWTON, LANDRAM’S SAX-HORN BAND AUG. 1855. Everyone just wants to leave an imprint. Below us are the remnants of a saltpeter-mining operation: large leaching vats and pipes made of poplar where enslaved Black people scraped the earth and mixed it into a slurry to be boiled into gunpowder for the nation’s war machine. The cave is a site of extraction, the sublime turned to profit.

“Is this the metaphor?” I ask as we survey the ruins.

“Yes,” she says, laughing.

8.

SHE MAY SING of unrequited love, but onstage, Mitski captivates the audience by going inward. A flick of the boob elicits screams. She has worked with Monica Mirabile, a performance artist and choreographer, and studied up on theater, reading about Antonin Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty, the Polish theorist Jerzy Grotowski, and *The Empty Space* by Peter Brook, a former director at the Royal Shakespeare Company, from whom she learned that theater is what happens when “a man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him.”

“Performance can be as deep as you wanna make it,” she says.

“How deep is it for you?” I ask.

“It’s ... it’s my everything. It’s my whole life. I’ll take anything just to get to perform. I feel like myself. In my daily life, my head is just crowded with thoughts, my past, the

future. But when I’m onstage, it’s just that moment, and I feel so connected to other people and to the world and to myself. That’s when I know what I’m doing. That’s when I’m the creator of a world. I am God.”

She pauses. “I sound like an asshole,” she says. “If someone heard what I was saying, didn’t know who the fuck I was, they would be like, *Who the fuck does she think she is?*”

9.

MITSKI IS QUIET the deeper we descend into the cave, her fingers swirling through the chilled air as though conducting a silent symphony. We keep to the periphery of the group as we go down a passageway named Broadway. The tour guide stops and turns on a lantern. Mitski edges along the grapefruit glow and looks out into the void. Now that we’ve experienced lantern light, our guide suggests we go a step further, and he snuffs the light out: true darkness. I put my hand in front of me and flutter my fingers and, for a brief moment, feel as though I can see a flicker—a phantom bird flitting into my field of vision. But it’s just the brain groping for a ledge. I imagine myself unspooling into the void. I sense Mitski drifting away. Too quickly, the light returns and breaks the spell.

“I’m sorry I left you all alone,” Mitski says, walking back toward me.

“I’m sad he turned the lights back on,” I say.

“I know,” she whispers. “I wanted to trip right here and be trampled. I wanted to fall down and be destroyed in this cave.” ■



*Mitski performs in Berlin
in August 2019.*

SEE SPOT PAINT

Agnieszka Pilat has become the Silicon Valley elite's favorite artist. Even *The Matrix*'s Neo owns her work.

By SHAWN MCCREESH

WHEN I MEET Agnieszka Pilat, a pixie-ish Polish émigré who has become the court painter of the potentates of Silicon Valley, she has just returned from Necker Island, the private Caribbean domain of Richard Branson. “I’m always the poorest person in the room” at places like that, she says with a laugh, curling her paint-flecked Yves Saint Laurent sneakers beneath her on the couch as she absentmindedly twists and untwists her hair. We’ve met up in her Chelsea studio, in which paintings of robotic limbs in repose dot the concrete walls. She has another studio in San Francisco. In each, she kennels a duplicate Spot, her 70-pound emergency-yellow cybernetic dog, muse, studio assistant (it paints, too), and, in some sense, protector, both on loan to her from Boston Dynamics, where she was once artist in residence.

Despite her Chelsea digs near the blue-chip Gagosians and Zwirners, Pilat does not have much of a reputation in the mainstream art world. She hasn’t been sought after in big biennials and isn’t owned by major museums, and the critics mostly ignore her. But the 48-year-old is beloved by a group of very well-off men—her collectors are mostly men—who don’t participate much in the art world and are likely turned off by its



*Agnieszka Pilat
with her robot dog
and muse, Spot.*



Photograph by Mark Sommerfeld

snobberies and sanctimonies. Instead, she puts Silicon Valley's Ayn Rand-ian, futurist ideologies into paint. Her work can even be found, if you look carefully, decorating the sets of the new *Matrix* movie. And she's definitely not being ironic about any of it.

"I am always that kid who grew up in Poland, in communism," she says, "and for me, America and American aristocracy, which you guys don't have—aristocracy like we have in Europe—the aristocracy here is the industry. So I think it's important to give moral tribute to people in technology." She is merrily in service to the tech *nomenklatura* at a time when much of the country has come to despise its members for the forces they have unleashed on society and for their obscene levels of wealth.

Pilat describes Craig McCaw, the press-averse telecommunications billionaire who also purchased his own island, as her top patron and "angel." Another collector is John Krafcik, the former CEO of Waymo, Google's self-driving-car unit. "Agnieszka's work captures the magic of technology in a human, heroic way, and

affectionate. "They're all wrapped up in themselves. It's like talking to a fish out of water. They just don't get it."

Jaron Lanier, the Silicon Valley oracle who is often described as the godfather of virtual reality, sums up some of Pilat's appeal to this cohort: "Successful techie guys love, love, love it when an attractive woman speaks their language, even if not everything she says is supportive. They find it irresistible. I don't think what she actually says is uniformly positive, but people hear what they want to hear."

Born in 1973, Pilat grew up during the bitter, last-gasp years of the Cold War. Her mother was a gym teacher and her father a pastry chef. "There was just overall misery around," she recalls. "Everyone was poor and lived in these gray big blocks. It didn't matter if you were a doctor or a janitor; you had everything the same." The early-pandemic rush on two-ply made her nostalgic: "We never had toilet paper. It was, like, the biggest commodity." She laughs. "I remember always standing in line as a little kid." She hated the Soviets and longed for the West. In 1985, her "love for America" crystallized when Rocky

next collector was Steve Jurvetson, one of Silicon Valley's top venture capitalists. Jurvetson was a board member of Tesla and currently sits on the board of SpaceX. "He's the one who opened a lot of doors for me," recalls Pilat.

And she genuinely admired what they were building, unlike many in San Francisco, which she calls "the center of liberal crazies": "They don't understand what collectivism leads to and what punishing someone just because they're successful leads to." A friend gave her a copy of Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*. "I would not be the artist that I am without that book," she says. "It gives you a moral right to develop your talent to the fullest and focus on what you think your talent is, and there's an amazing power that comes from that, and I think America is a lot about that." The brutality of Randian individualism, of the cult of the ego and its success, galvanized Pilat.

"In Silicon Valley, the book is very popular, of course," she says. "But it's quiet because if you are very wealthy, and white, and you like *Atlas Shrugged*—oh boy, you are a target." She remembers being astonished at a dinner party when she discovered that Mark Pincus—the tech billionaire who co-founded the online-gaming company Zynga (*Words With Friends*, *FarmVille*, etc.) and made early investments in Facebook and Twitter—was, in Pilat's telling, "all about Ayn Rand." (Pincus says he has no recollection of this.) McCaw, Pilat says, "is so old and wealthy he doesn't care at this point, but he's famously a Republican, but he will not have a conversation about it because it's just bad for business to be a Republican openly in those tech circles."

"It's our obligation to have a relationship with machines so they grow up to be good citizens."

I think that helps us all better relate to it," he says.

Krafcik introduced her to Yuri Milner, the reclusive Russian Israeli venture-capital billionaire. He has reportedly sprinkled Kremlin cash across Silicon Valley, where he spent \$100 million on a nouveau château in Los Altos Hills. "He's very hard to reach," says Pilat. "Even his billionaire neighbors don't know him." Milner commissioned a painting of a piece of machinery found in self-driving cars. "He liked it," she says, "but he'll never hang the painting. He never displays real work. His whole house is like a digital Sistine Chapel, so you come into the house and it's like a very opulent kind of cathedral-looking thing, and you think all these are paintings, but then everything changes. They're huge, like, the whole ceiling—it's all LEDs." She says he'll probably just keep the analog painting in storage.

What is it like dealing with these dudes? "They're all egomaniacs," she says, sounding thoroughly amused, even a bit

Balboa knocked out Ivan Drago: "Everyone in Poland was like, 'Yeahhhh!'"

Her father adapted well to the transition to capitalism and ended up owning many bakeries. The family grew prosperous. "I have a love for free enterprise and also value the value of hard work, because that's how I grew up," she says.

In 2004, as it happens, the year that what was then called TheFacebook was founded, she moved to San Francisco. Her first job was at Gold's Gym, and she enrolled in the Academy of Art University to study illustration. She was technically skilled. One of her earliest commissions came from Paul Stein, a developer who built Airbnb's headquarters. He wanted a portrait, not of a man but of a machine. Pilat did an oil painting of an old-school fire alarm that he loved. Soon word got around about her work. "The Bay Area is a very small crowd," Pilat says. "When you meet one person, you meet many." She found a patron in the tech executive Peter Hirshberg and scaled up from there. Pilat's

MOST RECENTLY, PILAT'S work was featured in the home of another tech-world legend: Neo. She was commissioned to do art for *The Matrix Resurrections*, and one of her paintings can be seen while Neo—er, Thomas Anderson—chews a piece of steak in his penthouse apartment. She thinks the Matrix is already coming true in the form of the metaverse. The masses will increasingly, and voluntarily, plug in. The waking world, real-life experiences, will be for only the one percent. "I think the divide is happening already," she says, telling me about some real-estate deals going down in the metaverse that she knows about. "The myth of the metaverse, it's happening in front of our eyes, and the pandemic only accelerated it." Holy Wachowski!

"Machines are children of humanity," she adds, waxing philosophical next to



Walking Spot in Chelsea.

Spot. “So us, as good parents, stewards of machine technology and AI, it’s our obligation to culturally and morally have a relationship with them so they grow up to be good citizens.”

Spot’s movements are uncanny, those of a blood-and-guts pup. Up the stairs, down the hall, and lumbering around the corner it goes. Pilat can simply point to an object in the room with her controller and the dog will maneuver over and snatch it up with an outstretched claw.

Pilat sometimes affixes an oil stick to the dog’s claw to paint. “It’s like an extension of my arm,” she says. In other paintings, presumably made the archaic way—by hand—Spot is the subject, emulating works from art history. There it is posing for a reimagined version of Marcel Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase* (No. 2). And here are two roboclaws

nearly touching, an homage to God and Adam on Michelangelo’s ceiling in the Sistine Chapel.

Dorka Keehn, a San Francisco-based art adviser and curator who was on the city’s arts commission, calls Pilat “an incredible painter” and says she’s “doing a service to the art world” by engaging the tech machers. “It’s very intimidating to go into a contemporary museum or gallery and look at some of this stuff if you don’t have any kind of context,” says Keehn, “and I think these titans don’t like not knowing. They’re used to being the smartest person in the room, and so they come in and who’s telling them? Some 20-something right out of art school.” But with Pilat, says Keehn, “they’ve got Spot the dog, which they can kind of geek out on the robotic aspect of it, but then she’s making these classical references to art, to the Renaissance.”

I ask this magazine’s art critic, Jerry Saltz, to take a look, but he is less convinced. “Derivative dreck,” he says. “Not one lick of life, originality, idea about surface, color, structure, or even subject matter. This work is and will be worth nothing—except to the Silicon rubes who see that other Silicon rubes like them bought art like this.” Not long ago, one painting Pilat made with Spot, *B70 Self Portrait 02*, sold for \$31,500 at Sotheby’s as part of an auction presumably designed to appeal to Bay Area types called “Boundless Space ... The Possibilities of Burning Man.”

“Not surprised about Jerry,” says Pilat when I tell her about his harsh review. “The art world is notoriously unhappy about tech billionaires, and I am singing their song. Unlike Diego Rivera, I won’t put Lenin in a commission paid by an industrialist.” (In 1932, Rivera was commissioned to do the main mural in the lobby of 30 Rockefeller Plaza. Rivera’s finished work, *Man at the Crossroads*, which contrasted socialism and capitalism with a worker at the center, got destroyed when he refused to remove a depiction of Lenin.)

In any case, it’s clear whose side she is on: the machine’s. She says about Spot, “I think this is going to be the first celebrity robot.” Indeed, Spot is Pixar-cute. But sinister, too. Remember that wild episode of *Black Mirror* with the killer dog-bot? When the NYPD got its paws on a version of Spot (its was blue) and sicced it on a crime scene in the Bronx, it was swiftly banished back to Boston.

“It was a horrible PR moment,” Pilat says. She believes the public must be properly introduced to the machines. We take the dog for a walk on West 26th Street. “I try to always dress in yellow so that you can easily see there’s a human with it,” she says. A woman approaches, trepidatious, to ask if it’s sold on Amazon. (It is not.) I post a video of Spot on my Instagram Story with a poll asking if the dog is “cute or scary”; 88 percent of respondents choose the latter. “KILL IT NOW BEFORE IT’S TOO LATE,” one replies.

“My patrons are actually the machines of the future,” Pilat says matter-of-factly. “I work for the machine, not the man. When you go to a museum today in Europe and you see a picture of an aristocrat or some rich guy, you think, *Oh, these are my cultural ancestors*. So in my mind, I see the museum of the future when an intelligent AI comes in and looks at this”—she gestures to a painting of Spot—“and, in the same way, is like, *Oh, these are my ancestors*.” ■



Accent Anxiety

Few things scare actors more than mangling an accent—so say their dialect coaches. Here, the pros offer a few words of advice for perfecting every single vowel, consonant, and diphthong.

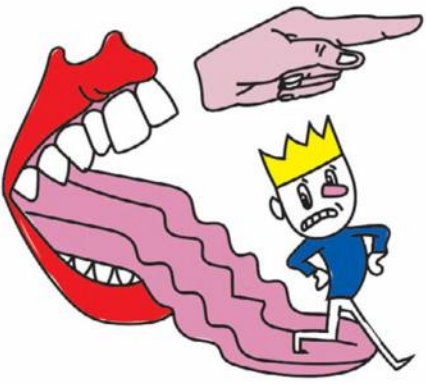
By CHRIS LEE



DONE PROPERLY, the work of a dialect coach is everywhere and nowhere at once. Done wrong, a so-called dialect disaster will preoccupy viewers to distraction.

This awards season, accents have become the topic du jour on the press circuit. Exhibit A: director Ridley Scott's *House of Gucci*. The \$75 million biographical drama features a mish-mash of Italian accents, including Jared Leto saying, "He's-ah no-ah spring chicken-ah!" while Jeremy Irons elocutes in quasi-English Chiantishire diction. Lady Gaga—who worked with a personal dialect coach for six months prior to production—speaks in an accent another coach on the film later derided as sounding "more Russian." In *Being the Ricardos*, Javier Bardem "can't mimic a Cuban accent to save his life," wrote the Daily Beast's Laura Bradley. At a town hall at the University of Puerto Rico, *West Side Story* director Steven Spielberg discussed his apprehension about getting the accents right and talked about working with multiple coaches to "help Puerto Ricans who have lived in New York too long to remember where they came from." The people doing the coaching say the actors don't make it easy. "Anything you could attribute to a 3-year-old boy you could attribute to an actor trying to avoid learning a language, accent, or dialect," says Mary McDonald-Lewis, who coaxed Robert Pattinson to drop his native Britishisms for *Twilight*. We spoke to four veteran coaches, who laid out the path to accent perfection in four simple steps.

1. Let go of your ego.



COACH:

Mary McDonald-Lewis

STUDENTS:

Robert Pattinson (*Twilight*),
Patrick Stewart (*Green Room*),
James Wolk (*Front of the Class*)

“To work on an accent with another person, a degree of trust is required. **They have to make themselves very vulnerable to you.** Many actors coming to that process are filled with fear. Now, I have empathy for that. I understand the terrible power of shame and what that does to the artistic process. **The first thing that happens is their own dark voice comes up and says, “Sit down and shut up. You’re not good enough.”** The resistance takes many forms. One is “Why have I been put with this nanny, this babysitter? I will discover this character’s 1953 Sicilian accent because I’m an *artiste*.” They can be short with you. They can be mean. They can be unavailable, which is a form of avoidance. But all of it is fear. When I was hired to give Robert Pattinson his American accent for the first *Twilight* film, he’d been refusing to do his American accent. Rehearsals had begun, but he was still performing in his British accent. He was a scared boy. He admitted to me, “I’m angry about it.” He said to me in a very polite, well-educated British-schoolboy manner, “I rather hate it. I don’t think it’s necessary.” My challenge as a dialect coach is to let them know, “Hey, friend, let’s talk.”

Little by little, if you’re able to do that, a switch flips and they shift from hating you to coming to rely on you in a wonderful way.

On set, sometimes I walk up to them between scenes. And I’m like, **Oh my God, this accent isn’t going to do anybody any good at the premiere.** My mind often goes to what the critics are going to say. Under those circumstances, I can be extremely straightforward. I put my hand on their shoulder—which is an important part of it—and look them in the eye. In a low voice, I make the specific sound adjustments. I use gentle language. I call it “slipping in like smoke” between takes. If you’re Patrick Stewart, you let me come in and make an adjustment. If you’re Patrick Stewart, you pat me on the shoulder and say, “Oh, that’s much better.” He only has his art involved, and he’s fearless.

2. Avoid “dialect acting.”



COACH:

Jessica Drake

STUDENTS:

Will Smith (*King Richard*),
Josh Brolin (*W.*),
Tom Hanks (*Forrest Gump*)

“When a dialect works right, it enhances a performance. It adds another layer and more honesty. **When it’s done badly, it’s tacked on. It’s boring.** You can see it in certain performances: An actor is so worried about the next vowel sound that that’s all they’re thinking about. I call it

dialect acting. There’s the acting process, and there’s the dialect process, and you want to marry them. A dialect should be like a limp, a fake nose, or a wig; it’s another thing you add to make you somebody else. Working with Will Smith on *King Richard*—he’s extremely auditory. He has an amazing ear, and I find that often to be the case with an actor who has any kind of musical talent.

3. Find your signature sounds.

COACH:

Liz Himmelstein

STUDENTS:

Margot Robbie (*I, Tonya*),
Ewan McGregor (*Halston*),
Andrew Garfield
(*Tick, Tick ... Boom!*)

“It’s very important that the dialect is specific and at the same time fits the character’s needs. If they are playing a historical person, I will find primary sources for the actor so they will have the person speaking in context. **With Halston, the one Ewan McGregor and I loved was when he was on The Oprah Winfrey Show.** He was more authentically himself than in his other interviews. I typed out Halston’s lines from the interview so Ewan could speak what he heard. That’s a good warm-up. Then I create a drill sheet, signature sounds for each of the characters. We can go through every vowel, diphthong, consonant, and special pronunciation, and we break it down. With Halston, his last back-vowel sound is



an *ah* that opens up, like in “hot coffeepot.” He was doing this very midwestern *ah*. So I found every word that had that sound in it from the script. That was our drill.

4. Don’t worry about offending anyone when you’re practicing.



COACH:

Samara Bay

STUDENTS:

Gal Gadot (*Wonder Woman 1984*),
Rachel McAdams
(*Eurovision Song Contest*),
Penélope Cruz (*The Assassination of Gianni Versace*)

“I don’t like to use the term *offensive* when it comes to accents. **We’re trying to make something real** and that, yes, is respectful and honors the culture it is rooted in. But this is a safe space where you get to play. I often say, “Let’s do the big, loud, bad version to start.” It’s rarely big or loud or bad, but it gives them **the freedom to not jump away and think, Oh no, I’m going to offend somebody.** Let’s find out what someone else’s life might sound like in your mouth without the fear that we’re going to mess up. No one is listening. It’s just us. Then we refine. If we’re listening to an audio clip and then pop back over and try it, we’ll say, “How does that fit? Does it make your spine taller? Which sounds are essential to this accent?” Then we go back to the source material and make sure we’re respecting it as we get more and more nuanced.

Hanya's Boys

The novelist tends to torture her gay male characters—but only so she can swoop in to save them.

By Andrea Long Chu

TO PARADISE is out now from Doubleday.



BY THE TIME you finish reading *A Little Life*, you will have spent a whole book waiting for a man to kill himself. The novel, the second from author Hanya Yanagihara, begins as a light chronicle of male friendship among four college graduates in New York before narrowing its focus to Jude, a corporate litigator whose decades-long struggle to repress a childhood of unrelenting torments—he was raised by pedophiles in a monastery, kidnapped and prostituted in motels, molested by counselors at an orphanage, kidnapped again, tortured, raped, starved, and run over with a car—ends in his suicide.

An unlikely beach read with a gothic rip-tide, *A Little Life* became a massive best seller in 2015. Critics lavished praise on the book, with one declaring it the long-awaited “great gay novel” for its unsparing approach to Jude, who falls in love with his male best friend. (A rare pan in *The New York Review of Books* prompted an indignant letter from Yanagihara’s editor.) *A Little Life* would go on to win the Kirkus Prize and was a finalist for the National Book Award and the Man Booker Prize; in December, readers of the *New York Times* nominated it next to finalists like *Beloved* and *1984* for best book of the past 125 years.

Yanagihara’s motivations remained mysterious. The author was born in Los Angeles to a third-generation Hawaiian Japanese father and a Seoul-born Korean mother. She has lived in Manhattan since her 20s, but her heart is in Tokyo and Hawaii. (She has called that state “the closest thing Asian Americans have to Harlem.”) Her first novel, 2013’s *The People in the Trees*, about a doctor who discovers immortality in an island paradise, was well but quietly received. That book featured homosexuality and pedophilia; not until *A Little Life* would these be revealed as consistent preoccupations.

The People in the Trees took Yanagihara 18 years to write, off and on, during which time she worked as a publicist, book editor, and magazine writer. *A Little Life*, which she wrote while an editor-at-large at *Condé Nast Traveler*, took only 18 months.

How to explain this novel’s success? The critic Parul Sehgal recently invoked *A Little Life* as a prominent example of the “trauma plot”—fiction that uses a traumatic backstory as a shortcut to narrative. Indeed, it’s easy to see Jude as a “vivified DSM entry,” as she put it, perfectly crafted to appeal to “a world infatuated with victimhood.” But Jude hates words like *abuse* and *disabled* and refuses to see a therapist for most of the novel, while Yanagihara has skeptically compared talk therapy to “scooping out your brain and placing it into someone else’s cupped palms to prod at.” More compelling about *A Little Life*—and vexing and disturbing—is the author’s omnipresence in the novel, not just as the “perverse intelligence” behind Jude’s trauma, in the words of another critic, but as the possessive presence keeping him, against all odds, alive. *A Little Life* was rightly called a love story; what critics missed was that its author is one of the lovers.

This is Yanagihara’s principle: If true misery exists, then so might true love. That simple idea, childlike in its brutality, informs all her fiction. Indeed, the author appears unable, or unwilling, to conceive love outside of life support; without suffering, the inherent monstrosity of love—its greed, its destructiveness—cannot be justified. This notion is inchoate in *The People in the Trees*, which features several characters kept on the brink of death and ends with a rapist’s declaration of love. In *A Little Life*, it blossoms into the anguished figure of Jude and the saintlike circle of friends who adore him. In Yanagihara’s new novel, *To Paradise*, which tells three tales of people fleeing one broken utopia for another, the misery principle has become airborne, passing aerosol-like from person to person while retaining its essential purpose—to allow the author to insert herself as a sinister caretaker, poisoning her characters in order to nurse them lovingly back to health.

TWO YEARS AFTER *A Little Life* was published, Yanagihara joined *T* magazine, the *New York Times*’ monthly style insert, as editor. She has called the publication “a culture magazine masquerading as a fashion magazine”—though you’ll have to sift through many pages of luxury advertisements to confirm that. During her time at *Condé Nast Traveler*, the publication sent her on a staggering 12-country, 24-city, 45-day, \$60,000 journey from Sri Lanka to Japan for a 2013 issue called, incredibly, “The Grand Tour of Asia.” “A trip to India isn’t complete without a stop at the legendary Gem Palace,” she wrote in a photo spread titled “The Plunder,” “and a few souvenir diamonds”—four diamond bangles, to be exact, priced up to \$900 each.

This may be surprising. But it is easy to forget that *A Little Life* is an unapologetic lifestyle novel. Jude’s harrowing trials are finger-sandwiched between Lower East Side gallery openings, summers on Cape Cod, holiday in Hanoi. Critics remarked on its mouthwatering (or eye-rolling) spread of culinary delights, from duck à l’orange to escarole salad with pears and jamón, followed by pine-nut tart, tarte Tatin, and a homemade ten-nut cake Yanagihara later described as a cross between Danish rugbrød and a Japanese milk bread she once ordered at a Tokyo bakery. The book inspired celebrity chef Antoni Porowski to publish a recipe called “Gougères for Jude,” based on the canapés Jude makes for a New Year’s party before cutting his arms so badly he requires emergency medical attention; it can be found on the website for Boursin, the French herbed-cheese brand.



Yanagihara's onslaught of horrors could allow readers to block out, like a childhood trauma, the fact that they were reading luxury copy. In *To Paradise*, Yanagihara has not lost the voice of a professional chronicler of wealth. Here are rose-hued Oriental carpets, dark-green douppioni-silk drapes, wood floors polished with macadamia oil; here are wok-fried snow peas, ginger-wine syllabub, a pine-nut tart (another one!).

Perhaps I am being ungenerous. Surely novelists should describe things! Better, they should evoke them, like the dead, or the Orient. Yanagihara has a tourist's eye for detail; this can make her a very engaging narrator. Here's that holiday in Hanoi from *A Little Life*:

[He] turned down an alley that was crowded with stall after stall of small, improvised restaurants, just a woman standing behind a kettle roiling with soup or oil, and four or five plastic stools ... [He] let a man cycle past him, the basket strapped to the back of his seat loaded with spears of baguettes ... and then headed down another alley, this one busy with vendors crouched over more bundles of herbs, and black hills of mangosteens, and metal trays of silvery-pink fish, so fresh he could hear them gulping.

Now here are days 23 and 24 of *Condé Nast Traveler's* "Grand Tour of Asia":

You'll see all the little tableaux ... that make Hanoi the place it is: dozens of pho stands, with their big cauldrons of simmering broth ... bicyclists pedaling by with basketfuls of fresh-baked bread; and, especially, those little street restaurants with their low tables and domino-shaped stools ... [The next day] you'll pass hundreds of stalls selling everything for the Vietnamese table, from mung bean noodles to homemade fish paste to Kaffir limes, as well as vendors crouched over hubcap-size baskets of mangoes, silkworms, and fish so fresh they're still gulping for air.

Now, it is no crime to put your paid vacation into your novel. My point is simply that Yanagihara remains at heart a travel writer, if not an unreconstructed one. She seems to sense that wealth can be tilted, like a stone, to reveal the wriggling muck beneath. In a few cases, she is even making a political point, as with her abiding interest in the colonization of Hawaii. But more often in these books, wealth's rotten underbelly is purely psychological: There are no wrong-

ful beach houses in *A Little Life*, no ill-gotten hors d'oeuvre. Luxury is simply the backdrop for Jude's extraordinary suffering, neither cause nor effect; if anything, the latter lends poignancy to the former. This was Yanagihara's first discovery, the one that cracked open the cobbled streets of Soho and let something terrible slither out—the idea that misery bestows a dignity that wealth and leisure, no matter how sharply rendered on the page, simply cannot.

TO PARADISE IS not a novel at all. It is three books bound into a single volume: a novella, a brace of short stories, and a full-length novel. The conceit is that its three tales are set in 1893, 1993, and 2093 in alternate versions of a Washington Square townhouse. The first is a Henry James-esque period romance: David, a wealthy scion with a secret history of nervous breakdowns, rejects a proposal from the boring Charles to flee west with roguish pauper Edward. The second, a weird post-colonial fable, finds gay paralegal David hosting a dinner party with his older HIV-positive boyfriend, Charles, in honor of a terminally ill friend, while David's father, the rightful king of Hawaii, lies dying in a psychiatric facility. The third book, the novel-length one, is a fitful attempt at speculative fiction complete with surveillance drones ("Flies"), boring names ("Zone Eight"), and a biodome over Central Park. In this New York ravaged by a century of pandemics, brain-damaged lab tech Charlie discovers her husband Edward's infidelity, while her grandfather, a brilliant virologist, reveals his role in creating the current totalitarian government. (In a desultory bid to sew the three parts together, Yanagihara has given multiple characters the same name without their being meaningfully related.)

The third part of *To Paradise* may sound topical, but Yanagihara has a lifelong fascination with disease. She was a self-described "sickly child" whose father, a hematologist-oncologist, used to take her to a morgue where a pathologist would show her the cadavers, folding back the skin flaps like flower petals so the young girl could sketch their insides. Years later, *The People in the Trees* would center on a zoonotic disease that extends the sufferer's life span while rapidly degrading cognitive function. In *A Little Life*, Jude's history of trauma is equally a nutrient-rich soil for infection: his venereal diseases, acquired from clients; his cutting, which results in septicemia.

Like its predecessor, *To Paradise* is a book in which horrible things happen to people for no reason. The agents of misery this time have become literally inhuman:

cancer, HIV, epilepsy, functional neurologic disorder, a toxic antiviral drug, the unidentified viral hemorrhagic fever that will fuel the next pandemic. A virus makes perfect sense as Yanagihara's final avatar after three novels. The anguish it visits on humanity—illness, death, social collapse—is an indifferent side effect of its pointless reproductive cycle. Biologists do not even agree on whether viruses are living organisms. A virus wants nothing, feels nothing, knows nothing; at most, a virus is a little life.

This is ideal for Yanagihara: pure suffering, undiluted by politics or psychology. Free of meaning, it may more perfectly serve the author's higher purpose. Reading *A Little Life*, one can get the impression that Yanagihara is somewhere far above with a magnifying glass, burning her beautiful boys like ants. In truth, Jude is a terribly unlovable character, always lying and breaking promises, with the inner monologue of an incorrigible child. The first time he cuts himself, you are horrified; the 600th time, you wish he would aim. Yet Yanagihara loves him excessively, cloyingly. The book's omniscient narrator seems to be protecting Jude, cradling him in her cocktail-party asides and digressions, keeping him alive for a stunning 800 pages. This is not sadism; it is closer to Munchausen by proxy.

IF DISEASE IS Yanagihara's angel of death, gay men are her perfect patients. The majority of her protagonists to date are gay men, or at least men-loving men, and she approaches them with a distinct preciousness. When Jude finally reveals the details of his horrific childhood to his lover Willem, the two are lying on the floor of a literal closet. In *To Paradise*, Yanagihara's sentimentality has begun weeping like a sore. "We could never be together in the West, Edward. Be sensible! It is dangerous to be like us out there," pleads one David. "If we couldn't live as who we are, then how could we be free?" Indeed, the entire first book of *To Paradise* is set in an alternate version of 19th-century New York preposterously founded on the freedom of love; you'll forgive me for being unmoved, at this moment in history, by the heartbreak caused over marriage equality.

And then there is the matter of AIDS. It's true that *To Paradise* is not an AIDS novel; the actual crisis, which unfolds here just as it did in reality, is little more than a faint backdrop for a hundred pages. But this is only because Yanagihara appears to see all diseases as allegories for the human immunodeficiency virus. Charles's ex-boyfriend Peter may only be dying of "boring old cancer, I'm afraid," but the virus hovers over his farewell party and lingers

through the novel's succession of pandemics. The next Charles, persona non grata in a fascist state of his own design, will join other mildly oppressed gay men of New York in seeking love and support in a riverside rowhouse on Jane Street in the West Village—three blocks from the real-life AIDS memorial in Hudson River Park. This detail is mawkish in the extreme, a shameless attempt to trade on the enviable pathos of a disease transmitted through an act of love.

When *A Little Life* was first published, the novelist Garth Greenwell declared it “the most ambitious chronicle of the social and emotional lives of gay men to have emerged for many years,” praising Yanagihara for writing a novel about “queer suffering” that was about AIDS only in spirit. This was a curious claim for several reasons. First, many of the novel's characters, including Willem and Jude, fail to identify as gay in the conventional sense. Second, Yanagihara is not gay, though she says she perfunctorily slept with women at Smith College. Now, perhaps the great gay novel should move beyond the strictures of identity politics; Yanagihara has stubbornly defended her “right to write about whatever I want.” God forbid only gay men should write gay men—let a hundred flowers bloom. But if a white author were to write a novel with Asian American protagonists who, while resistant to identifying as Asian American, nonetheless inhabited an Asian American milieu, it might occur to us to ask why.

Why, then? “I don't know,” Yanagihara told one journalist. To another, she insisted, “I don't think there's anything inherent to the gay-male identity that interests me.” These are baffling, even offensive responses given that she has had almost a decade to come up with better ones. But I do not think Yanagihara, an author who believes in fiction as a conscious act of avoidance, is being dishonest. “A fiction writer can hide anything she wants in her fiction, a power that's as liberating as it is imprisoning,” she has written, explaining her refusal to go to therapy despite the urging of her best friend, the man to whom *A Little Life* is dedicated and whose social circle inspired the book's friendships. “As she grows more adept at it, however,” Yanagihara continues, “she may find she's losing practice in the art of telling the truth about herself.”

That well may be. Regardless of Yanagihara's private life, her work betrays a touristic kind of love for gay men. By exaggerating their vulnerability to humiliation and physical attack, she justifies a maternal posture of excessive protectiveness. This is not an act of dehumanization but the opposite. There is a horrible piety to Jude; he has been force-fed sentimentality.

When the author is not doling out this smothering sort of love through her male characters, she is enacting it at the level of her narration. Indeed, the conspicuous absence of women in her fiction may express Yanagihara's tendency, as a writer, to hoard female subjectivity for herself.

This brings us to Charlie, a narrator in *To Paradise* and Yanagihara's only female protagonist to date. Charlie is a technician who takes care of mouse embryos at an influenza lab in Zone Fifteen. The antiviral drug that saved her life as a child has left her affectless and naïve, pitifully incapable of comprehending the extent of her own loneliness. After Charlie is raped by two boys her age—the only rape in this whole book, if you can believe it—her grandfather Charles desperately tries to ensure her safety by marrying her off to a homosexual like himself. But it is with Charlie, who longs for her husband to touch her even as she knows he never will, that the sublimation of romantic love will finally slouch into despair. When Charlie follows him to a gay haven in the West Village, having discovered notes from

luxuries Yanagihara has spent her career recording are nothing in the end. For paradise, insofar as it means heaven, also means death.

Not even love will save Yanagihara's characters. Her fantasies of suffering are designed to produce a kind of love that is not curative but palliative—it results in the death of the thing. If this is fatalism, it is not the sanguine fatalism of Prospero, another rightful king on another island paradise, reminding his audience, “We are such stuff / As dreams are made on, and our little life / Is rounded with a sleep.” No, it is the exsanguinating fatalism of Jude, who, out of love for his boyfriend, will try to show “a little life”—a phrase he learned from his pimp—while Willem makes love to his reluctant body. The same phrase appears in *The People in the Trees*, where it describes the bleak vegetative state that befalls the islanders whose disease has stretched out their life spans. In *To Paradise*, Charles reflects on a set of immunocompromised twins, explaining that he never became a clinician because he “was

This was Yanagihara's first discovery— the idea that misery bestows a dignity on the page that wealth and leisure cannot.

his lover, she is heartbroken. “I knew I would never be loved,” Charlie thinks. “I knew I would never love, either.”

But this isn't entirely true. After Charlie's husband dies of an unknown illness, the only woman Yanagihara has ever asked readers to care about will lie next to his corpse and kiss him for the first time—the space between them closed, at last, by death.

THERE IS NO PARADISE for Charlie. The odd and tuneless phrase *to paradise* provides a destination but withholds any promise of arrival. Perhaps this is why Yanagihara has tacked it half-heartedly onto the last sentence of each of the novel's three books. Doom shadows every character who decides to abandon one apocryphal heaven on earth for another: the plutocratic Northeast for the homophobic West, the colonized state of Hawaii for a delusional kingdom on the beach. Every paradise is a gossamer curtain; behind it lies a pit of squalor, disease, torture, madness, and tyranny. Freedom is a lie, safety is a lie, struggle is a lie; even the

never convinced that life—its saving, its extension, its return—was definitively the best outcome.” The twins die, possibly by suicide, and Charles goes on to design death camps. “There's a point,” Yanagihara once said of Jude, at which “it becomes too late to help some people.”

These are difficult words to read for those of us who have passed through suicidal ideation and emerged, if not happy to be alive, relieved not to be dead. It is indeed a tourist's imagination that would glance out from its hotel window onto the squalor below and conclude that death is the opposite of paradise, as if the locals did not live their little lives on the expansive middle ground between the two. But even Yanagihara's novels are not death camps; they are hospice centers. *A Little Life*, like life itself, goes on and on. Hundreds of pages into the novel, Jude openly wonders why he is still alive, the beloved of a lonely god. For that is the meaning of suffering: to make love possible. Charles loves David; David loves Edward; David loves Charles; Charlie loves Edward; Jude loves Willem; Hanya loves Jude; misery loves company. ■

The CULTURE PAGES

CRITICS

*Bilge Ebiri on A Hero ... Craig Jenkins on Dawn FM ...
Kathryn VanArendonk on Somebody Somewhere.*

MOVIES / BILGE EBIRI

Did the Right Thing

No one passes the purity test in this heavy-handed morality tale.

ASGHAR FARHADI'S *A Hero* is a moral fable and a mousetrap, a drama that plays like a thriller—the gripping, often infuriating tale of a beleaguered Good Samaritan who learns that no good deed goes unpunished. Farhadi is one of the world's great filmmakers; as a further demonstration of his ability to build stomach-gnawing suspense out of everyday interactions, this movie is well worth seeing. But the generosity of spirit that was so pivotal to his earlier work seems to be in retreat.

A Hero's story is set in motion while Rahim (Amir Jadidi), an inmate at a debtors' prison, is on a two-day leave. His girlfriend, Farkhondeh (Sahar Goldust), finds a handbag full of 17 gold coins, and Rahim decides to return it. The gold could have gone some way toward repaying his standing debt to Bahram (Mohsen Tanabandeh), a copy-shop owner and the brother-in-law of Rahim's ex-wife; under Iranian law, Rahim can be freed when he pays off the debt or if Bahram agrees to forgive it. Rahim and Farkhondeh do initially try to cash in the coins. Rahim, however, has second thoughts and chooses to do the

right thing, putting up signs asking the unknown owner of the handbag to call him at the prison.

When the prison authorities catch wind of this act of good citizenship, they concoct a plan to present Rahim to the public as a kind of hero. (They need good publicity in the wake of another inmate's recent suicide.) Rahim's selflessness does turn him into something of an overnight celebrity, and freedom looks to be right around the corner when a charity that raises funds to help prisoners be freed gets involved. There is one big roadblock: The intransigent, glowering Bahram still distrusts Rahim and refuses to forgive any share of the debt. Our hero's increasingly desperate attempts to buy his freedom complicate things further, and all is exacerbated by his newfound fame and a narrative that insists his actions are either totally pure or totally base.

A HERO
DIRECTED BY
ASGHAR FARHADI.
MEMENTO FILMS.
PG-13.

Played by the likable Jadidi with a cautious smile and hangdog uncertainty, Rahim is a man thoroughly out of step with the world and increasingly at the mercy of fragile public opinion, which can adore you after a TV appearance, then turn on you with one short video uploaded to the internet. Everyone around him is consumed by technology, from smartphones to surveillance cameras to TV shows; Rahim doesn't even have a cell phone as they're not allowed in prison. (We learn the reason for his debt was the failure of his sign-painting business, which collapsed when computers made his services irrelevant.) After getting out of prison at the start of the picture, the first place Rahim goes is the massive Tomb of Xerxes, a nearly 2,500-year-old catacomb carved into the side of a mountain, to see his brother-in-law Hossein (Alireza Jahandideh), who works there. It's an incredibly striking location—frankly, every movie should start at the Tomb of Xerxes—but perhaps it's a visual clue that Rahim is a figure out of time.

Nearly every major decision Rahim makes, be it honest or duplicitous, is suggested by someone else. It's Farkhondeh who first tells him, in a moment of exasperation, that he should find the bag's original owner; it's a bank employee who advises him to put up the signs asking the owner to call him. This lends the story a certain simplicity, bringing it further into the realm of parable. By depriving Rahim of any real agency, Farhadi turns him into more of a symbol than a man—not a human trying to do the right thing but an impressionable vessel constantly acted on by external forces. Among other things, this renders moot the question that emerges later in the film of whether Rahim's actions were driven by decency or opportunism.

Farhadi remains a sharp, economical storyteller as well as a terrific director of actors. Rahim's delicate presence—he's all smiles, though he looks as if you could knock him over with a feather—contrasts both conceptually and physically with his creditor, whom Tanabandeh portrays with rocklike, head-down obstinacy. These two figures are not just narrative adversaries but aesthetic ones. Clever design will get you only so far, though, and there's an awkwardness to the way the plot gears creak into place as Rahim's tale unfolds. His dodgy decisions feel less like the actions of a flawed, honest man and more like the contrivances of a filmmaker working toward a preordained conclusion.

What *A Hero* often lacks is what

made so many of Farhadi's previous pictures rich and captivating: the sense that beyond the frame lies a real world populated by real people, each trying to live a decent life—what the critic Tina Hassannia, in her excellent 2014 book on the director, called his “pluralistic perspective on morality.” If Farhadi let his characters twist in the wind a bit, it never felt opportunistic or cheap.

A Hero doesn't entirely fail in this regard. Farhadi acknowledges that characters such as Bahram—along with his daughter, Nazanin (Sarina Farhadi, the director's daughter), who winds up playing a larger than expected role in Rahim's undoing—have their own reasons. Here, too, the director seems more interested in using them as narrative devices. In order for Rahim's tale to achieve maximum levels of suspense and outrage, some of these characters have to act like sociopaths. It feels like the supremacy of storytelling over humanity, whereas before in Farhadi's work, those two forces were often inextricably intertwined. (I'll admit that his acclaimed 2016 film, the Oscar-winning *The Salesman*, left me similarly frustrated, so perhaps he has simply moved on.)

Watching *A Hero*, I was reminded of the director's second feature, *Beautiful City* (2004), another story of incarceration and forgiveness. In that film, a teenage ex-con attempts to save his best friend, an 18-year-old on death row for killing a girl, by trying to convince the victim's father to grant clemency (again, another feature of Iran's Sharia-based legal system). *Beautiful City* is told largely from the point of view of the ex-con and the sister of his imprisoned pal. But in key moments, Farhadi lets us into the intimate world of the grieving father, a broken, embittered, sometimes violent man trying to do right by his dead daughter, who was his sole remaining connection to his late first wife. By allowing us to experience the father's inner torment, Farhadi builds a tale of breathtaking complexity, one in which a genuinely happy outcome—that once felt so clear and attainable—seems increasingly impossible. *Beautiful City* isn't perfect by any means; though lovely, it's a far cry from Farhadi's later masterpieces, such as *About Elly* (2009) and *A Separation* (2011). But its awesome, heartbreaking ambiguity feels miles away from *A Hero*'s often transparent manipulations. ■

POP / CRAIG JENKINS

Don't Touch That Dial

The Weeknd makes purgatory sound like fun.



THE PAST FEW Januarys have not been kind. 2020 arrived under a pall of fear about a new virus wreaking havoc overseas; the first week of 2021 was marred by chaos at the U.S. Capitol and rumors of possible escalation with Iran. This month has barely started, and hundreds of thousands are falling ill each day while we wonder how much future is left for us. The all-consuming darkness of a protracted public-health crisis forces a choice: Lean in or look away. Take stock of the horrors facing us or seek peace in distraction or denial. Pandemic-era pop culture shares this dilemma. Creatives never seem quite sure how thick to lay it on, whether our peaking nihilism is best addressed via dire allegory or brutal directness, whether our entertainment ought to even mirror our circumstances at all.

The Weeknd's 2020 album, *After Hours*, soundtracked the early days of the pandemic, dovetailing with the horny jitters of a public suddenly and indefinitely stuck in the house. The choice to drop an album the moment a wave of cancellations struck live concerts, awards shows, and television performances ultimately blazed a trail for pop-music peers worried that releasing an album then was akin to screaming into a void. Club closures couldn't stop the single "Blinding Lights"—on which the singer-songwriter born Abel Tesfaye

DAWN FM
THE WEEKND.
XO/REPUBLIC.

revisits the electro-rock attempt of his 2016 song “False Alarm”—from storming global charts. “Blinding Lights” is odd, a tune that tacitly conjures another tune (in this case, ’80s synth-pop classic and international chart topper “Take on Me,” by A-ha), without stepping on its toes and cribbing melodies. Situated near the end of an album that skates effortlessly across styles that the Weeknd had already pursued before—the trap drums and insatiable libido of “Often,” the sleek electronics of *My Dear Melancholy*, the trendy dance-pop of “Can’t Feel My Face”—“Lights” and the slower, sweeter “Save Your Tears” suggested Tesfaye had reached the logical conclusion of the sinister psychosexual excess that had characterized his work since 2011’s *House of Balloons*. His Weeknd alter ego—as he suggested in a *GQ* interview last fall—had its limits.

The new *Dawn FM*, Tesfaye’s fifth studio album, completes a journey that started with “Can’t Feel My Face,” the singer’s first pure pop hit as a solo artist. Back in 2015, when he released that song, it felt as though Tesfaye was minding the direction of the charts, attaching his name to a sound that was a surefire path to a smash. A few album cycles later, his knack for melodies has grown to match the breadth of his ideas. The new music luxuriates in the joy the Weeknd gets from throwing his loyal listeners for a loop.

Dawn FM is a slow pivot away from the downcast songs of the Weeknd’s earlier work about cold self-gratification, recreational drugs, and meaningless sex. It’s a more assured approach to his musical exploration of the past several years—at least since 2016’s *Starboy*, an album ambitious enough to send for Daft Punk, Kendrick Lamar, Benny Blanco, and

Future but not yet accomplished enough to incorporate them into a spotless work. *Dawn FM* tries a lot, often all at once, but the partnerships between Tesfaye and Daniel Lopatin—who’s best known as Oneohtrix Point Never and whose balance of avant-garde sonics and pop smarts powers their collaborative work on earlier projects—and among Tesfaye and Swedish hitmakers Max Martin and Oscar Holter, strike a useful balance. The hooks hit hard, and the production is full of surprises, of unexpected combinations, of disparate ideas and collaborators.

Dawn FM is presented as a radio playlist DJ-ed by Jim Carrey, Tesfaye’s friend and neighbor. It’s a slow slide from uptempo love songs to brooding ballads and back, punctuated by chipper commercials for imaginary products, a perfect FM-radio hour of the mind. It’s lighter in spirit and on its feet than its predecessor. Tesfaye had been working on a batch of songs informed by a bout of pandemic depression and inertia last year, but he began to yearn for a fresh approach. Instead of leaning on lurid stories about lives in disrepair, he dreamed up a new concept about leaving that darkness behind. “Picture the album being like the listener is dead,” Tesfaye told *Billboard* last fall. “And they’re stuck in this purgatory state, which I always imagined would be like being stuck in traffic waiting to reach the light at the end of the tunnel.”

The new songs trace the singer’s trip from a lonely place along a roller-coaster ride of hookups, betrayals, and new contenders in his love life. *Dawn FM* takes inspiration from the saccharine lyricism and robot funk of ’80s soul but keeps its gaze trained further afield. “Sacrifice” outfits a sample of Detroit singer Alicia Myers’s post-disco classic “I Want to

Thank You” with the kind of abrasive dance-funk arrangement that populated Daft Punk’s *Homework* album. (Daft Punk are as notable an influence here as they were on *Starboy*, but that sound is just one piece of *Dawn FM*’s extensive tool kit; there’s a whiff of Stevie Nicks’s “Edge of Seventeen” on “Take My Breath.”) Chunky synths and clattering drum machines abound. The vulnerable “How Do I Make You Love Me?” and “Don’t Break My Heart” reimagine the pillow-y sentimentality of “Hold On, We’re Going Home” as bubbly electro. These songs aren’t cheap imitations, though. They’re stacks of impressively jarring experimental ideas like “Here We Go ... Again,” which touts production from Beach Boy Bruce Johnston, a charming guest verse from Tyler, the Creator, and backing vocals by Mike Love’s son Christian floating by on silky synths and gorgeous harmonies.

Dawn FM isn’t so much a nostalgia trip as an exercise in dislodging oneself from time. There’s too much joyful anachronism happening to plop it in with the unsubtle ’80s revival washing through pop right now. *Dawn FM* sees value in the slick, synthetic sonics of the era but rarely settles for simple pastiche. (When it does so, it does it authentically: The vocal affectations and drum programming of “Gasoline” conjure the specific moment the U.K.’s ’80s pop elite discovered hip-hop.) This album’s kindred spirits are records like the Strokes’ *The New Abnormal*, in which the New York rockers adapt to sunny New Wave with predictable ease; Tame Impala’s *The Slow Rush*, in which Kevin Parker folds disco, hip-hop, and psych rock into impressive shapes; M83’s *Junk*, in which the French composer Anthony Gonzalez fashions a mutant pop music out of ersatz supermarket schmaltz; and Benny Sings’s *Beat Tape* series, in which hip-hop, yacht rock, city pop, and smooth jazz rub elbows.

It’ll probably be seen as a sharp left for the Weeknd. Following the late-night reverie of *After Hours* with a record enamored of morning drive-time radio certainly implies that this is meant to be a kind of fresh start. But you could argue that *Dawn FM* is merely a flowering of ideas that were there all along. The Weeknd’s music has never been easy to nail down. It has also never been this delightfully slippery. (All the era’s really missing is a world-beating tour. Will 2022 ease up long enough for that?) The Weeknd’s last album neatly summarized all the places his music had been; *Dawn FM* suggests there’s nowhere he can’t take this project going forward. ■



PHOTOGRAPH: UNIVERSAL MUSIC GROUP/REPUBLIC RECORDS



TV / KATHRYN VANARENDONK

Locals Only

A cabaret star asks: Can you find yourself without leaving home?

A CHICKEN. A cornfield. A tractor with a faded American flag flapping in the foreground. As this montage plays, Connie Conway croons a '50s tune called "Kansas State Line" about how he has never left home but is a "rover at heart." After this opening to *Somebody Somewhere*—the new HBO series created by and starring comedian and cabaret singer Bridget Everett—there's a hard cut to someone whose dream of leaving has failed: Sam Miller (Everett), who sits in a fluorescent-lit room, marking a standardized-test booklet and filing it among a sad stack of folders. Sam does not fit in her hometown of Manhattan, Kansas. She may have tried to get out for a while. Now she's in her 40s, with a job she dislikes, disconnected from everyone and unsure of what she wants or who she is.

Somebody Somewhere is a patently personal project for Everett, who also grew up in Manhattan, Kansas, but went on to become a fixture of the New York comedy-and-music scene. Everett sings, does stand-up, and performs in shows that combine cabaret, storytelling, and big, raunchy spectacle. (This is her first successful project for TV; she made a well-reviewed but fruitless pilot for Amazon Prime in 2017.) Her path to a theater career came in part via her popular karaoke performances. One of her go-to songs was Janis Joplin's "Piece of My Heart," a number Everett's charac-

ter, Sam, also performs. This makes the show feel like an alternate history, one that wonders what might have happened if Everett had never left home, never found her voice after high school.

We learn that Sam originally moved back to Manhattan to care for one of her sisters, who then died and left Sam grieving and completely adrift, lacking purpose or close friends. We also learn that Sam's mother is an alcoholic, something the whole family tries to ignore. The show's pilot episode is blunt, offering a quick found-families narrative that tries to abruptly stanch Sam's pain. Joel (Jeff Hiller), a co-worker at Sam's test-grading job, approaches her: He remembers a performance she did in high school, and he soon invites her to what he calls "choir practice"—an unsanctioned late-night gathering at his church, where town oddballs (read gay, liberal, not white, or otherwise out of place) get together to sing karaoke and drink and feel safe. Egged on by Joel, Sam gets up and performs for the first time in years. The lights sparkle. The crowd is awed. Sam lost a lot of time, but now she has found her people.

A lesser show would veer in one of two directions: Sam would traverse the flimsy obstacles thrown in her way until some weepy conclusion (mom sobers up, tells her she loves her), or there would

be a pivot toward darkness (choir practice collapses, Sam is caught in a loop of self-loathing). *Somebody Somewhere* is too honest to take either route. Her and Joel's lives both continue to meander. They just do it in a direction that trends ever so slightly away from isolation, lurching and regressing and groping their way toward feeling okay.

And Everett is fantastic. Even with strong performances from Hiller as Joel and Mike Hagerty as Sam's dad, Ed, *Somebody Somewhere* lives and dies with Everett's remarkable tenderness toward this other, imagined version of herself. She hits her comic beats just hard enough and projects uncertainty with lovely subtlety. In the all-important karaoke scenes, Everett—who knows how to dominate a stage—allows her voice to wobble, a performance of ambivalence. She walks through the scenes with an instantly legible posture: You can see that Sam knows this place, and she knows these people. She loves them, and she knows they love her. And, even so, everyone knows she doesn't quite fit. Sometimes she slinks. Sometimes she walks defiantly. Sometimes her stance dares people to criticize her body (often clad in T-shirts with the hems cut off, unlike her surviving sister's prim floral-embroidered tops), while in other scenes she tries to disappear.

It's worth triangulating this show within TV's growing lineage of serious-funny half-hours, such as *Girls*, *Better Things*, *Master of None*, *Atlanta*, *Insecure*, and *Transparent*, whose star Jay Duplass directs some of *Somebody Somewhere* and has a producer credit along with his brother Mark. These series tend to be obliquely autobiographical—a sideways exploration of the artist, who often plays an alternate self, with more jokes of circumstance and character than formal setups and punch lines.

The genre's proliferation has made it easier to see the devices and shapes that recur or distinguish one show from another. *Somebody Somewhere* steers clear of *Girls*' comedic knives. It avoids the dreamy, occasionally excessive artiness of *Transparent* or *Master of None*. For a series about someone who has only ever felt at home on a stage, it is not showy or melodramatic or—God forbid—twee. It's a confident story about a woman who lacks confidence, full of the pleasure and tentative uncertainty of new adult friendships, with only brief swerves into sentimentality. *Somebody Somewhere* feels like a homecoming where the definition of *home* is still under negotiation. ■

SOMEBODY
SOMEWHERE
HBO MAX.

For more culture coverage and streaming recommendations, see **vulture.com**.



The CULTURE PAGES

To

DO



Twenty-five things to see, hear, watch, and read.

JANUARY 19–FEBRUARY 2

TV

1. Watch Pam & Tommy

The tale of the sex tape.

Hulu, February 2.

You might think you are mentally prepared to watch this limited series about the relationship between Pamela Anderson and Mötley Crüe's Tommy Lee and the stir caused by their leaked sex tape. But having watched some of the episodes, please know: You are probably not prepared for what you're about to see.

JEN CHANEY

BOOKS

2. Read Fuccboi

Championed by the late Giancarlo DiTrapano.

Little, Brown and Company, January 25.

This nervy, blustering first novel by Sean Thor Conroe examines the life of a 20-something, also named Sean, who makes bike deliveries, keeps a shifting roster of "baes," and obsesses over his literary influences. Eerily true to anyone ever ghosted by a fuccboi of their own.

EMMA ALPERN

POP MUSIC

3. Listen to Ghetto Gods

EarthGang's long-awaited sophomore set.

Dreamville Records, January 28.

After a year spent tightening their craft across promising releases like the soul-sampling "Aretha," the neo-soul flip "Erykah," and the political-message song "American Horror Story," Atlanta hip-hop duo EarthGang, comprising high-school friends and rappers Olu and WowGr8, follow up the 2019 major-label debut *Mirrorland* with *Ghetto Gods*. Expect more of Wow and Olu's tuneful lyrical excellence, airtight interplay, and expert beat selection this time around.

CRAIG JENKINS

THEATER

4. See The Hang

From the now-postponed Prototype festival.

HERE Arts Center, January 20 to February 20.

Epic drag artist Taylor Mac's much anticipated *The Hang* is a maximalist glitter-and-political-theory treatment of Socrates' final moments after he's sentenced to death. As the play opens, the ancient philosopher has downed his hemlock and—in Mac's conception—triggered millennia of musicalized introspection, queer frolic, and pointed comments about the State. Would you use your last moments on earth to contemplate virtue? Bottoms up!

HELEN SHAW

TV

5. Watch Ozark

Season four, part one.

Netflix, January 21.

Will the Byrde family be tied more deeply and dangerously to a drug cartel or will they find a way out of crime for good? Since there will be a part two to this final season, I'm going to go ahead and guess they're not done being bad yet.

J.C.

MOVIES

6. See Sundance Class of '92: The Year Indie Exploded

Thirty years later.

The Criterion Channel.

A revealing retrospective features a remarkable array of established auteurs (Paul Schrader's *Light Sleeper*, Jim Jarmusch's *Night on Earth*, Derek Jarman's *Edward II*) and dazzling newcomers (Gregg Araki's *The Living End*, Allison Anders's *Gas Food Lodging*, Tom Kalin's *Swoon*).

BILGE EBIRI

ART

7. See Alec Soth

Daily life reexamined.

Sean Kelly Gallery, 475 Tenth Avenue, through February 26.

The great contemporary photographer Alec Soth's new pictures give us America, always with a level of mystery and insight into inner lives. His becalmed, detailed images keep us lingering, breathless, fitting together pieces to make deeper narratives come into focus.

JERRY SALTZ

CLASSICAL MUSIC

8. Hear The Knights

In collaboration with a jazz virtuoso.

92nd Street Y, January 19.

Pianist Aaron Diehl reaches into the 20th century to find the point when jazz and concert music mingled: to Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* (1924) and Mary Lou Williams's *Zodiac Suite* (1945).

JUSTIN DAVIDSON

TV

9. Watch As We See It

Jason Katims is ready for your tears.

Prime Video, January 21.

The producer behind *Parenthood* returns with a comedy-drama of 20-something autistic roommates, starring Albert Rutecki, Rick Glassman, and Sue Ann Pien, who identify as living on the spectrum. Given Katims's track record, expect to reach for the tissues.

ROXANA HADADI

PODCASTS

10. Listen to Wild Things: Siegfried & Roy

The rise and fall.

Apple TV+, through February 23.

White tigers. Tight suits. Extravagance. The German-born magicians Siegfried & Roy built an entertainment empire out of their illusions and fondness for big cats—until a tragic accident ended their careers. Steven Leckart's podcast series promises to shed some light on the famous and famously private duo.

NICHOLAS QUAH

BOOKS

11. Read Devil House

Fact or fiction?

MCD, January 25.

A washed-up true-crime writer moves to the site of a seemingly occult violence. John Darnielle, front man for the Mountain Goats and a National Book Award nominee, makes a puzzle of it, sending up Satanic Panic clichés but taking it all utterly seriously.

E.A.

TV

12. Watch The Gilded Age

It's Downton but not Downton.

HBO, January 24.

This period drama from *Downton Abbey* creator Julian Fellowes, set in 1880s New York, stars Carrie Coon, in elaborate gowns, vowing to make old-money snobs pay for underestimating her. J.C.

CLASSICAL MUSIC

13. Go to Focus Festival

Via Juilliard.

Peter Jay Sharp Theater, January 23 to 27;
Alice Tully Hall, January 28.

American music didn't spring from some enchanted headwaters; rather, it was swept together out of rag-ends of practices and inventions, traditions and eccentricities. Few conductors are better placed to explore that eye-of-newt-and-toe-of-frog approach than Joel Sachs, in a series of chamber concerts that snuffles around the early-20th century and concludes with music by Scott Joplin, Charles Ives, and Florence Price led by guest conductor Mei-Ann Chen. J.D.

MOVIES

14. See The Conversation

In a new Coppola-approved 35-mm. print.

Film Forum, through January 27.

Part character study and part Hitchcockian thriller, Francis Ford Coppola's 1974 masterpiece follows a reclusive surveillance expert (Gene Hackman) who spirals into paranoia after overhearing a murder plot. Its themes drew comparisons to the unfolding Watergate scandal, but it endures as a portrait of a carefully constructed life unraveling. CHRISTOPHER STANTON

TV

15. Watch Snowpiercer

Climate change inside, outside, everywhere.

TNT, January 24.

This sci-fi series adapted from Bong Joon Ho's 2013 film continues to boast one of the most dynamic TV casts (Daveed Diggs, Alison Wright, Sean Bean) and adds Archie Panjabi in season three as a mysterious survivor named Asha. How could someone live for years in the icy wasteland that the titular train cuts through—and why is the Earth warming? R.H.

OPERA

16. Hear Sonya Yoncheva

A solo recital at the Met.

Metropolitan Opera, January 23.

In the opera world's wedding cake of prestige, singing a principal role on opening night at the Met, as soprano Sonya Yoncheva did in 2015, is enviable. But the tiny little bride-and-groom's platform at the pinnacle is reserved for those who get to sing a solo recital from the Met's stage. J.D.

THEATER

17. See The Tap Dance Kid

And a one and a two.

City Center, February 2 to 6.

City Center's Encores! series kicks (and shuffle ball changes) off with a revival of Charles Blackwell, Henry Krieger, and Robert Lorick's 1983 musical about a boy who dreams of tap stardom though his father forbids him from dancing. Lydia Diamond has adapted the script, and Kenny Leon directs a cast that includes Alexander Bello and Joshua Henry, all doing new tap sequences by choreographer Jared Grimes. H.S.

The Short List SUNDANCE FILM FESTIVAL

This year's fest is online only—for the first time ever. Here, some films making their world premiere.

Sharp Stick

Director Lena Dunham's first film since 2010's *Tiny Furniture* is about a 26-year-old who embarks on a journey of sexual exploration.

Nanny

Nikyatu Jusu makes her feature debut with a horror film about an undocumented Senegalese nanny (Anna Diop) in Manhattan.

Call Jane

Phyllis Nagy directs this film about a '60s housewife (Elizabeth Banks) seeking an abortion.

2nd Chance

The first feature doc from Ramin Bahrani (*The White Tiger*) focuses on Richard Davis, the inventor of the bulletproof vest.

jeen-yuhs

Are you prepared for 270 minutes of Ye? Try this three-part doc from Clarence "Coodie" Simmons and Chike Ozah. ALISON WILLMORE

TV

18. Watch The Afterparty

When the high-school reunion goes wrong.

Apple TV+, January 28.

Is every comedic actor in this whodunit-comedy, created by Chris Miller, co-producer of *Spider-Man: Into the Spiderverse*? I mean, of course not, but it feels like that when you see the cast includes Tiffany Haddish, Sam Richardson, Dave Franco, Ilana Glazer, Ike Barinholtz, John Early, Jamie Demetriou, and Zoë Chao. J.C.

POP MUSIC

19. See The War on Drugs

Their latest album is tailor-made for MSG.

Madison Square Garden, January 29.

The psychedelic roots-rock band fronted by the shockingly talented Adam Granduciel blows through town on tour behind *I Don't Live Here Anymore*, the fifth War on Drugs album and a delicate blend of heartland rock, jaw-dropping solos, and gossamer synths. If the show goes on as planned, it'll be a treat. C.J.

PODCASTS

20. Listen to The World According to Sound

A live audio show.

theworldaccordingtosound.org, January 20.

Former ambient-audio micropodcast *The World According to Sound* is now a virtual "communal listening series," where audiences are mailed eye-masks and are made to tune in to a 70-minute livestream curated mix of sound art, archival tape,

field recordings, and more. It's kind of like radio but more interactive and carved out for a smaller audience. This iteration will feature pieces pegged to the theme of "Time," along with a Q&A with the musical artist and academic Leah Reid. N.Q.

CLASSICAL MUSIC

21. Hear Penelope

Waiting for Odysseus.

Carnegie Hall, January 23.

When André Previn died in early 2019, he was working on the musical portrait of history's most famously patient spouse, a collaboration with Tom Stoppard. Another collaborator, David Fetherolf, finished the score. Soprano Renée Fleming, pianist Simone Dinnerstein, and the Emerson Quartet, with Uma Thurman narrating, performed the work at a few 2019 summer fests. The same team belatedly brings it to New York. J.D.

TV

22. Watch Janet Jackson

Miss Jackson speaks.

Lifetime, January 28.

This career doc has a broader focus than *Malfunction: The Dressing Down of Janet Jackson*, *The New York Times Presents* episode focused on the way she was treated after the 2004 Super Bowl mishap. *Janet Jackson* also has something else that the FX doc didn't: new interviews with the artist herself. J.C.

BOOKS

23. Read Camera Man

Buster Keaton and beyond.

Atria Books, January 25.

Dana Stevens of Slate, one of America's great film critics, has written the book of her (and our) dreams, the story of Buster Keaton's remarkable life and career and a wide-angle work of cultural history. It'll inspire you to watch (or rewatch) his remarkable and enduring movies. B.E.

CLASSICAL MUSIC

24. Hear Anthony Roth Costanzo and New York Philharmonic

The artist in residence.

Rose Hall, January 27 to 29; Alice Tully Hall, February 3 to 5.

First up for the tireless countertenor is a version of the campy cabaret-opera mash-up he created with Justin Vivian Bond, inserted into an orchestra concert that purports to explore "questions of identity." A week later, Costanzo sings Berlioz's *Les Nuits d'Été* plus songs by Gregory Spears. J.D.

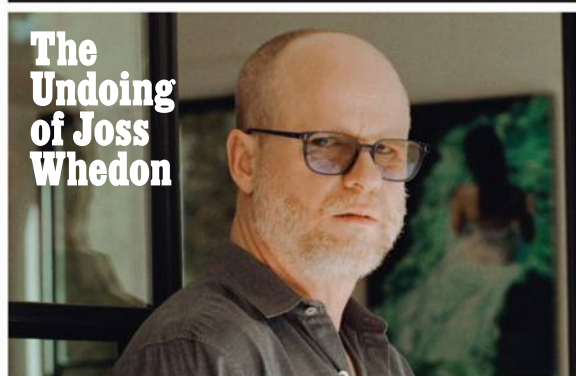
TV

25. Watch We Need to Talk About Cosby

W. Kamau Bell dissects Dr. Huxtable.

Showtime, January 30.

In this four-part docuseries, W. Kamau Bell analyzes the career and legacy of Bill Cosby, the Black comedian and TV star who is now just as well known for the many sexual-assault charges brought against him. J.C.



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 18

mannerly," he said. Still, he was bewildered by her account of their relationship. "Most of my experiences with Charisma were delightful and charming. She struggled sometimes with her lines, but nobody could hit a punch line harder than her." I asked if he had called her fat when she was pregnant. "I did not call her fat," he quickly replied. "Of course I didn't."

But he did call other pregnant women fat. Rebecca X, as she asked to be called, was known as Rebecca Rand Kirshner when she wrote for the last three seasons of *Buffy*; since then, she has dropped her "patriarchal last name." She saw Whedon at a photo shoot a few years after the show ended, when she was weeks away from giving birth. "I was happy to see Joss, and the first thing he said to me was, 'Oh, you're fat,'" she told me. She knew he was joking, but she didn't find it very funny. "Did it hurt me? Yes. Did I say, 'Hey, I got a baby in here, what's your excuse?' In so many unsaid words, yes. But I think he was actually slim at that point. My point is, it was a dick move. But I wouldn't call it abuse."

One day, I took a walk with Rebecca X around the Huntington Botanical Gardens near Pasadena. She wore dark glasses and an Hermès scarf tied around her dark-gold hair and spoke with an inflection that called to mind the mid-Atlantic accent of an old-fashioned Hollywood star. I had reached out to her after hearing Whedon had made her cry in the writers' room. In the months leading up to our meeting, she had sent me a series of probing emails, excavations of long-buried memories. Once she was in the middle of pitching an idea when Whedon placed his hands on the back of her chair. "Keep going," he told her, as he tilted the chair backward and lowered her to the ground. "Is that a toxic environment?" she asked me. "I don't know. What is normal behavior and what isn't?"

As she led me down a winding garden path past the Terrace of Shared Delights and the Pavilion for Washing Away Thoughts, she alternated between criticizing Whedon, questioning her reasons for criticizing him, and questioning her reasons for questioning those reasons. Yes, she said, she had once burst into uncontrollable tears after

Whedon gave her notes on a script outline, but she couldn't say for certain whether this was his fault. The writers' room was as rowdy as a pirate ship. She and the other writers would spend all day sitting around on chintz couches making one another laugh while plumbing their most painful memories for story ideas. They would fuck with each other, and Whedon would fuck with them too—though if you ever fucked with Whedon, he might get mad. "Did he approach giving notes in a way that was healthy and consistent with the ideals of the endeavor?" she wondered. "No. He's a blunt instrument, but I'm a very delicate receiver."

She'd always thought the people who worshipped him had it wrong. "I thought he was a false god," she said. "I talked about Joss as if he were a human, and people gave me shit for it." Still, she wondered if those who'd been hurt by him had misunderstood him. Whedon was not the first boss in the history of moving pictures to make a writer cry. On his sets, the budget was tight and the hours were long. Everyone was exhausted. And by many accounts, Whedon didn't always clearly convey what he wanted. A *Buffy* writer once spent a week researching Irish folklore because it was unclear that Whedon had been kidding when he said he wanted to do an episode about leprechauns. Joss "is a layered and complex communicator," one longtime collaborator told me. "His tone is deflecting, it's funny, it's got wordplay, rhyme, quote marks, some mumbles, self-deprecation, a comic-book allusion, a Sondheim allusion, and some words they only use in England. This means you, the recipient, have to do some decoding. You have to decide if there was a message in there that was meant to correct you, sting you, rib you affectionately, or shyly praise you."

"Can a person have many bad parts and yet another person they encounter only experiences the good parts?" Rebecca mused in one of her emails. "Can we miss the bad parts of people? I know we can. Did I?" She went on: "Joss was a dweeb and Joss was sharp as hell and Joss was a dick, but to me he wasn't a toxic dick, he was the kind of dick a person is on the path to becoming someone better. I did believe that." A few days later, she sent me a text. "Joss is a beautiful person," she wrote. "But you know what," she added dryly, "I'm actually particularly vulnerable to abusive people."

ON OUR SECOND DAY of interviews, I asked Whedon about his affairs on the set of *Buffy*. He looked worse than he had the day before. His eyes were faintly bloodshot. He hadn't slept well. "I feel fucking terrible about them," he said. When I pressed him on why, he noted

"it messes up the power dynamic," but he didn't expand on that thought. Instead, he quickly added that he had felt he "had" to sleep with them, that he was "powerless" to resist. I laughed. "I'm not actually joking," he said. He had been surrounded by beautiful young women—the sort of women who had ignored him when he was younger—and he feared if he didn't have sex with them, he would "always regret it." Looking back, he feels shame and "horror," he said. I thought of something he had told me earlier. A vampire, he'd said, is the "exalted outsider," a creature that feels like "less than everybody else and also kind of more than everybody else. There's this insecurity and arrogance. They do a little dance."

Buffy ended in 2003, but his affairs did not. He slept with employees, fans, and colleagues. Eventually, his wife found out. In 2012, they split up. In Cole's open letter to fans, she accused him of using feminism as a cover for his infidelities. "He always had a lot of female friends, but he told me it was because his mother raised him as a feminist, so he just liked women better," she wrote. After learning he had been deceiving her for 15 years, she was diagnosed with complex PTSD, the same condition as him. "I want the people who worship him to know he is human," she concluded.

I spoke with three women who dated Whedon after his marriage ended. In their stories, he was not the hero they had read about in the press, the one who wanted to see women in control; he was more like the cold-blooded men he depicted in his work. Sarah, a pseudonym, met Whedon when he was promoting *Age of Ultron*. She was a 22-year-old freelance writer who interviewed him for a pop-culture website; after the piece published, they began a sexual relationship. "He led me to believe he was single," she said. One night she went out for drinks alone with a friend Whedon wanted her to meet. After the friend mentioned she had a long-term boyfriend, Sarah asked what his name was. "I'm dating Joss Whedon," the woman replied. Sarah went into the bathroom and threw up. "What the fuck is he playing at?" she remembers thinking.

Erin Shade, a television writer who moonlights as a psychic medium, got involved with Whedon in 2013 while working as a showrunner's assistant on *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*, a series he created with one of his younger half-brothers and the brother's wife. He was 49; she was 23 and a virgin. One day, Whedon texted her with an unusual request: Would she come over to his house for the weekend to watch him write? He would pay \$2,500—more than Shade made in a month as an assistant. There was one caveat: She had to hide

it from her bosses. They dated on and off in secret for nearly a year before she slept with him. Not long after, he sent her a brief email telling her he couldn't have a girlfriend. Seven years later, she made a ten-hour YouTube series called *Erin the Snake Whisperer* that chronicled the painful consequences of the relationship. Surrounded by candles and crystals, she described their relationship as an abuse of power. "People like Joss offset their trauma on other people in exchange for their energy, and take their energy to keep going—to keep themselves alive, almost," she told me. "That's why he's so good at the vampire narrative." (Whedon says he "should have handled the situation better.")

When Arden Leigh met Whedon in 2012, she was a sex educator in her 20s and author of *The New Rules of Attraction*, a book about being a female pickup artist. She picked him up at a club. After their second date, Whedon sent her DVDs of *Dollhouse*. The heroine, played by *Buffy* alum Eliza Dushku, has no friends, no family, and no personality. A secret corporation has used advanced technology to erase her memory and turn her into a "doll"—a living robot customized to cater to the darkest desires of the company's wealthy clients. Some critics argued the premise was sexist, but Leigh, who'd worked as a professional dominatrix, related to the

dolls and was moved by Whedon's depiction of them. She and Whedon began a relationship as "owner and doll." For the most part, she found it gratifying, and she believed he did too.

Whedon told Leigh he identified with a character in *Dollhouse*: Topher, the nerdy scientist who imprints the dolls with their personalities. It's not a flattering comparison. As one of Topher's colleagues points out, he was picked to work at the dollhouse because he had no morals: "You had always thought of people as playthings. This is not a judgment. You always take good care of your toys." That last line is disingenuous. Topher doesn't take good care of his dolls, and in the end, according to Leigh, neither did Whedon. On *Dollhouse*, she reminded me, bad dolls are banished to "the attic," a room where they are forced to relive their worst nightmares over and over. In her epilogue to *The New Rules of Attraction*, Leigh wrote that one of her worst memories was of a boyfriend breaking up with her on her birthday. Whedon read the book, and they talked about the epilogue. In 2015, hours before her birthday, he came over to her house and told her their relationship was over. "If he was like, *What could I do to Arden that would be her worst nightmare?*, that would have been it," she said. "Joss destroyed a beautiful thing just to show he

had the power to. That's literally everything you need to know about him."

Whedon didn't want to talk about his relationships with women in any detail, but it was possible to infer from various remarks he made throughout our conversations that he'd been aware, at least to some extent, of the pain he had caused. The year his marriage ended, he saw the Globe's production of *Richard III* with Mark Rylance playing the conniving, sadistic, charismatic aristocrat who slaughters everyone in his path to the throne and winks at the audience while he does it. Richard is an ugly hunchback. Women have always rejected him. His own mother loathes him. As he seeks the crown, he tricks women into bed and has them murdered when he no longer has use for them. He appears devoid of empathy, but in one of the play's final scenes, he awakens, tormented by fear, and for the first time displays a pang of remorse:

*Alas, I rather hate myself
For hateful deeds committed by myself.
I am a villain. Yet I lie. I am not.*

As Whedon quoted from that scene, he let out a choked groan and mimicked the act of plunging a knife into his stomach. "It just reached into my fucking guts," he said. He confessed that he identified more closely

BILL CAMP
ATO BLANKSON-WOOD

ELIZABETH MARVEL
JASON BOWEN

NOW THROUGH FEBRUARY 20

A PLAY BY
EUGENE O'NEILL

LONG DAY'S JOURNEY INTO NIGHT

DIRECTED BY
ROBERT O'HARA

audible theater • LongDaysOffBroadway.com • Minetta Lane Theatre, NY

with Richard than with any other character in Shakespeare's canon—with the possible exception of Falstaff, the "holy fool."

WHEDON'S EXPERIENCE of seeing *Richard III* coincided with his own coronation of a kind. He had just directed Marvel's *Avengers*, a commercial juggernaut featuring an all-star cast led by Robert Downey Jr., Chris Evans, and Scarlett Johansson. In a profile pegged to its release, *GQ* hailed Whedon as "the most inventive pop storyteller of his generation." By then, he had influenced an entire generation of TV creators. His delight in quirky language, his playful subversion of genre conventions, his affinity for powerful female protagonists—you could observe these hallmarks reflected in any number of shows that arrived in *Buffy's* wake, from *Veronica Mars* to *Battlestar Galactica* and *Lost*.

But as the culture around him continued to change, certain fans began to see Whedon's work through a more critical lens, discerning an attitude toward women that seemed unenlightened by the standards of the female-centered shows and movies his success had in some cases helped spawn. In 2017, the same year Cole published her letter, an old *Wonder Woman* screenplay he had written surfaced online. Compared

with the *Wonder Woman* movie Patty Jenkins had recently directed, his version struck some readers as creepy and sexist, with passages that seemed to linger gratuitously on the Amazon's sex appeal. "You cannot tell me Joss Whedon didn't write the original *Wonder Woman* script while furiously cranking his hog," one woman tweeted.

That year, Whedon took a job doing rewrites for the Warner Bros. film *Justice League*, a DC property directed by Zack Snyder. For two white men in their 50s making comic-book flicks, he and Snyder could hardly have been less creatively or philosophically aligned. While Whedon's superhero epics were leavened by irony and wordplay, Snyder's were brooding and self-important, with a visual style that combined the artificiality of a video game with the fascist aesthetic of a Leni Riefenstahl production. Snyder's fans were every bit as ardent as Whedon's had been, but his previous effort, *Batman v Superman*, had faltered at the box office and offended critics, with A. O. Scott going so far as to assert that Snyder and his corporate backers had "no evident motive" to produce such a joyless spectacle of power "beyond their own aggrandizement." Now, those backers were concerned about how their new venture was shaping up. An early screening did not reassure them. "They asked me to fix it, and

I thought I could help," Whedon told me. He now regards this decision as one of the biggest regrets of his life.

At first, the studio executives told Whedon his role would be restricted to writing and advising, but soon it became clear to Whedon they had lost faith in Snyder's vision and wanted him to take full control. (A representative from Warner Bros. denied this. Snyder has publicly stated he left the project to spend time with his family; his daughter had died by suicide two months earlier.) Whedon, now installed in the director's chair, oversaw nearly 40 days of reshoots, a complicated and laborious undertaking. From the start, things were tense between him and the stars. It wasn't just that he wanted to impose a whole new vision on their work; he introduced an entirely different style of management. Snyder had given the actors exceptional license with the script, encouraging them to ad-lib dialogue. Whedon expected them to say their lines exactly as he'd written them. "That didn't go down well at all," one crew member told me. Some actors criticized his writing. By Whedon's account, Gal Gadot, who played Wonder Woman, suggested that he, the director of the highest-grossing superhero movie at the time, didn't understand how superhero movies worked. At one point, Whedon paused the shoot and,

LIBERATOR
Love Boldly

liberator.com
Publicly traded under LUVU

VOXMEDIA

advertising@voxmedia.com

SOLUTION TO LAST ISSUE'S PUZZLE

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

according to the crew member, announced that he had never worked with “a ruder group of people.” The actors fell silent.

The actors, at least some of them, felt Whedon had been rude, too. Ray Fisher, a young Black actor, played Cyborg; it was his first major role. Snyder had centered the film on his character—the first Black superhero in a DC movie—and he’d treated Fisher as a writing partner, soliciting his opinions on the film’s representations of Black people. Whedon downsized Cyborg’s role, cutting scenes that, in Fisher’s view, challenged stereotypes. When Fisher raised his concerns about the revisions in a phone call, Whedon cut him off. “It feels like I’m taking notes right now,” Whedon told him, according to *The Hollywood Reporter*, “and I don’t like taking notes from anybody—not even Robert Downey Jr.”

Gadot didn’t care for Whedon’s style either. Last year, she told reporters Whedon “threatened” her and said he would make her “career miserable.” Whedon told me he did no such thing: “I don’t threaten people. Who does that?” He concluded she had misunderstood him. “English is not her first language, and I tend to be annoyingly flowery in my speech.” He recalled arguing over a scene she wanted to cut. He told her jokingly that if she wanted to get rid of it, she would have to tie him to a railroad track and do it over his dead body. “Then I was told that I had said something about her dead body and tying *her* to the railroad track,” he said. (Gadot did not agree with Whedon’s version of events. “I understood perfectly,” she told *New York* in an email.)

As for Whedon’s claim that he doesn’t threaten people, an actress on *Angel* told me that hadn’t been true back when she knew him. After her agent pushed for her to get a raise, she claims Whedon called her at home and said she was “never going to work for him, or 20th Century Fox, again.” Reading Gadot’s quote, she thought, “*Wow, he’s still using that line.*” (Whedon denied this too.)

Justice League premiered in the fall of 2017. It was a critical and commercial debacle. Snyder’s fans blamed Whedon for its failures, accusing him, as one tweet put it, of turning Snyder’s godlike heroes into clowns. The power of fandom, a force Whedon had done so much to cultivate at the start of his career, was now wielded against him. The fans launched an elaborate campaign pressuring Warner Bros. to release the version Snyder had originally planned, chartering a plane to fly a banner over Warner Studios. Just as Whedon had once used message boards to bond with *Buff*y obsessives, Snyder used the social-media platform Vero to rally his followers, sharing pictures of his morning workouts alongside images that appeared to be derived from his cut of the

film. Several months into the pandemic, the studio, desperate for content, announced that his cut would air on HBO Max. At an online fan event celebrating the upcoming release, Snyder declared he would set the movie on fire before using a single frame he had not filmed himself. “Our lord and savior Zack Snyder!!!” someone wrote in the comments below the livestream.

Around the same time, amid worldwide protests against racism, Fisher posted a series of tweets accusing Whedon of abusing his power and charging studio executives with “enabling” the director. In a *Forbes* interview, Fisher said he’d been told Whedon had used color correction to change an actor of color’s complexion because he didn’t like the actor’s skin tone. “Man, with everything 2020’s been, that was the tipping point for me,” Fisher said. (Fisher did not respond to multiple interview requests.)

Whedon was stunned. He had given the whole movie a lighter look, brightening everything in postproduction, including all the faces. He said the claim that he had disliked a character’s skin tone, which *Forbes* ultimately retracted, was false and unjust. Whedon says he cut down Cyborg’s role for two reasons. The story line “logically made no sense,” and he felt the acting was bad. According to a source familiar with the project, Whedon wasn’t alone in feeling that way; at test screenings, viewers deemed Cyborg “the worst of all the characters in the film.” Despite that, Whedon insists he spent hours discussing the changes with Fisher and that their conversations were friendly and respectful. None of the claims Fisher made in the media were “either true or merited discussing,” Whedon told me. He could think of only one way to explain Fisher’s motives. “We’re talking about a malevolent force,” he said. “We’re talking about a bad actor in both senses.”

Some of Whedon’s defenders proposed a theory: What if Fisher had been doing Snyder’s bidding? Without furnishing proof, they speculated that Snyder had tricked Fisher into thinking Whedon was racist. Or maybe Fisher knew perfectly well his allegations were bullshit. Either way, the actor and director had “manufactured a controversy” that made Snyder seem like a progressive ally while diverting attention from the fact that their early cut had been a disaster. Whedon’s advocates believed this campaign had poisoned Carpenter against Whedon, causing her to see the complicated story of their relationship as a simplistic narrative of abuse. “Once someone lights a fuse and people see there’s a flame, they run to it and throw stuff into it,” one person in Whedon’s circle said.

In our conversations, Whedon was some-

what more circumspect. “I don’t know who started it,” he told me. “I just know in whose name it was done.” Snyder superfans were attacking him online as a bad feminist and a bad husband. “They don’t give a fuck about feminism,” he said. “I was made a target by my ex-wife, and people exploited that cynically.” As he explained this theory, his voice sank into a hoarse whisper. “She put out a letter saying some bad things I’d done and saying some untrue things about me, but I had done the bad things and so people knew I was gettable.”

When Snyder’s four-hour cut was finally unveiled, it was critically acclaimed. His fans pored through both films to analyze the differences. Some seized on a belief, first put forth by Fisher, that Whedon had intentionally erased people of color from the film. A remarkable reversal had taken place. Fifteen years earlier, Snyder’s work was widely seen as the epitome of problematic cinema. His breakout effort, *300*, a sword-and-sandal epic about the Persian Wars, was “so overtly racist” in the view of the U.N. delegation from Iran that it threatened to incite “a clash of civilizations.” Now, the internet had recast Snyder as a progressive hero while branding Whedon, its progressive hero of yesterday, as a villain and bigot. “The beginning of the internet raised me up, and the modern internet pulled me down,” Whedon said. “The perfect symmetry is not lost on me.”

AT WHEDON’S HOUSE, his wife, Horton, would occasionally come into the living room bearing tea and dark chocolates. When I asked where they’d met, she said, “Right here.” A mutual friend introduced them in the winter of 2019, after learning Whedon had bought several of Horton’s paintings, including a self-portrait. She was greeted by an image of herself when she walked into his home.

By then, Whedon had begun seeking treatment for sex and love addiction, along with other addictive tendencies. James Franco, Kevin Spacey, and Harvey Weinstein have all taken similar paths. Was he using a page out of some crisis-management playbook? Whedon says he’s genuinely committed to the work. “I decided to take control of my life—or try,” he told me. “The first thing I did with Heather was tell her my patterns, which was not my M.O. I couldn’t shut up because I finally found somebody I found more important than me.”

Life was good and also bad. Having overcome the isolation and ridicule of his childhood, he found himself in the role of social outcast once more. He still had an agent, but it seemed like no one wanted to work with him. At Fisher’s urging, Warner had

conducted a series of investigations into the *Justice League* production. The studio won't disclose its findings, but in late 2020, it announced "remedial action" had been taken. A few weeks earlier, HBO had revealed Whedon would no longer serve as showrunner of *The Nevers*, his science-fiction series about women with supernatural powers. The network scrubbed his name from the show's marketing materials.

Over the last year, some of his fans have tried to scrub him out too, erasing him from their narratives about what made *Buffy* great. In posts and essays, they have downplayed his role in the show's development, pointing out that many people, including many women, were critically important to its success. It may be hard to accept that Whedon could have understood the pain of a character like Buffy, a woman who endures infidelity, attempted rape, and endless violence. But the belief that her story was something other than a projection of his psyche is ultimately just another fantasy. Whedon did understand pain—his own. Some of that pain, as he once put it to me, "spilled over" into the people around him. And some of it was channeled into his art.

Whedon once wrote a line that could have served as a warning to all of us. In *Firefly*, one of the crew members, Jayne, accidentally tosses the spoils of a botched robbery into the hands of the town's poor. Jayne is not a good man, but when he returns to the town years later, he sees its residents have erected a statue in his honor. When he confides to the crew's captain that he's unsettled by this development, the captain just stares into the distance. "It's my estimation that every man ever got a statue made of 'em was one kinda sombitch or another," he says. "Ain't about you, Jayne. It's about what they need."

"Nobody ever fell from a pedestal into anything but a pit," Whedon told me on a call one day. A few months had passed since our conversations at his house. In that time, he'd finally made peace with himself, he said. "Could I have done marriage better?" he asked. "Don't get me started. Could I have been a better showrunner? Absolutely. Should I have been nicer?" He considered the question. Perhaps he could have been calmer, more direct. But would that not have compromised the work? Maybe the problem was he'd been *too* nice, he said. He'd wanted people to love him, which meant when he *was* direct, people thought he was harsh. In any case, he'd decided he was done worrying about all that. People had been using "every weaponizable word of the modern era to make it seem like I was an abusive monster," he said. "I think I'm one of the nicer showrunners that's ever been." ■



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 27

Rulison says. The company disregarded state inquiries about whether it drug-tested its drivers, as required by law, and its out-of-service rate—how often inspectors deemed its vehicles unsafe to drive—was 80 percent, more than 13 times the industry average. "Why didn't they just take the stupid keys away or the plates? No one ever wanted to touch those guys," says Rulison.

"Things always seem to work in their favor," he adds. "They get a lot of mysterious breaks." In 2014, Nauman and Haris Hussain were pulled over on Interstate 787. According to the police, Haris, who was driving, had a revoked license with 28 suspensions. Both were brought to a station where officers learned that the brothers had been ticketed more than 70 times and that Haris had repeatedly used his brother's identity to avoid arrest. (Both Haris and Nauman go by multiple names. Nauman often uses "Arslan" and "Shawn.") This resulted in a first-degree felony charge of aggravated unlicensed operation of a motor vehicle, but it was eventually dropped. "The judge in the limo case said something like it was the longest driving record he'd ever seen," says Rulison. "It bothered him. It bothers everyone. I have to wrestle it off me. It's the specter of something higher up. I just wonder if the treatment of Shahed Hussain was because of his work with the government and if that contributed to the crash. I always come up against people who said he'd flaunt that he's FBI and would be like, 'Stay away from me. Don't hassle me. Don't you know who I am?'"

Rulison says he is sustained by calls from former state employees and other knowledgeable sources wanting to discuss the crash. "Everyone would say that this just doesn't make any sense," says Rulison. "These were over-the-top violations." As he pursued the Hussains, he began to feel worse and worse. In the summer of 2019, the then-48-year-old father of two checked into a hospital. His appendix had burst and sprayed a rare malignant cancer all over his abdomen. He took two months off for a procedure in which a surgeon used his fingers to peel tumors from Rulison's organs, then he resumed filing stories. Chemotherapy numbed his fingers and addled his brain,

but when he went to court, he found he could face the families of the crash victims a little easier. "I was like, 'My life sucks right now too,'" he says.

Many of the Schoharie families have spiraled. Rich Steenburg, who lost his two sons, Axel and Rich Jr., was so destroyed by the crash that his family didn't realize he had suffered a series of strokes. "Now he doesn't remember having children," says his former wife, Janet. "On the days he does remember, it's October 6, 2018, and he is just hearing of the boys' accident." Beth Muldoon lost her son Adam Jackson and his wife, Abby, and retired from her job to raise the couple's two daughters. Now 4 and 7 years old, the girls "lost their mom, their dad, four aunts, and two uncles," says Muldoon. "Also a godfather." Just before the crash, the Jacksons had moved into a house on the same block as Muldoon. For a year afterward, she says, she had to drive around the block in order not to pass her son's house "because one of the girls would freak out. She thought we were hiding her parents and wouldn't let her go see them. Or they'd see their cars in the driveway and say, 'Mommy's home! Daddy's home!' And then they would get really angry at us."

The NTSB published its full report on the crash in fall 2020. It remains the definitive statement on the disaster despite the difficulties agents had accessing the scene. Addressing the public at an online hearing, board members struggled to contain their fury. Much of it was directed at the Department of Transportation, which knew *Prestige* was a threat—the report counted 32 times the agency had interacted with the company—and failed to act. But the deepest outrage was reserved for the Hussains. "*Prestige*," vice-chairman Bruce Landsberg said, his face glowing red on the screen. "I can't say enough negative about their disregard for human life."

AS THE FAMILIES WAITED for the district attorney to prosecute Nauman Hussain criminally, they considered their options for a civil lawsuit. The NTSB concluded that the state's "ineffective oversight of *Prestige*" had been a probable cause of the deaths, but it is extremely hard to sue the government for a disaster like the one in Schoharie. In 2005, in a similar case just 60 miles away, a tour boat on Lake George capsized on a clear day, killing 20 out of 47 passengers, most of them senior citizens. The NTSB placed heavy blame on lax inspection requirements, but when victims' families sued, a court ruled that the state enjoyed governmental immunity. Essentially, no matter how badly the people entrusted with protecting the public screw up,

their failure has no consequences.

That left the dozen or so lawyers representing families of the Schoharie victims searching for someone else to blame. The Hussains had taken out an insurance policy on the Excursion, but it was for only \$500,000, or \$25,000 per death. The Crest Inn was worth perhaps \$1 million—again, not much when split 20 ways. There was, however, a tantalizing target in Malik Riaz, the billionaire relative. The *Times Union* helped reveal that he had purchased the Crest Inn in 2010. The Hussains mixed limo and hotel work by storing vehicles on the property and using its address for both businesses, which prompted the Schoharie litigants to name Riaz as a co-defendant in civil suits. The case is considered a long shot. “Malik didn’t know anything about the operations,” one of his lawyers says. In a deposition last year from Pakistan, where he lives, Riaz said he rarely spoke to his brother and hadn’t seen him since the limo crash.

Another deep pocket materialized as the Schoharie district attorney looked into Prestige’s records. Over the years, the Hussains often took the Excursion to Mavis Discount Tire, a national chain, for inspections and repairs. They shouldn’t have: The branch wasn’t authorized to inspect vehicles that large. According to the DA, a Mavis manager admitted to inaccurate billing practices, “where certain services were substituted on invoices for ones actually performed,” including for work done on the Excursion. Nauman Hussain had been billed for a brake repair that was not performed as invoiced. Although the NTSB and a forensic investigator hired by the state police separately concluded the limo had crashed because of Prestige’s “egregious disregard for safety” and “neglect of mandated commercial-vehicle inspections and maintenance,” the Mavis disclosure turned the company into a target, one with the resources to deliver substantial compensation to victims’ families. The chain was recently acquired by a private-equity group for \$6 billion. (Mavis maintains that it “bears no legal responsibility for this tragedy and the events that led up to it.”)

The revelation also gave the Hussains, who had recently hired Joe Tacopina, one of the most prominent defense lawyers in the U.S., a potential escape from prosecution. As Casey Seiler said, “Mavis blows a hole in the prosecution’s case.”

THE CRIMINAL CASE AGAINST Nauman Hussain concluded on a Thursday afternoon in early September. Anticipating an angry and overflowing crowd, court officials converted the Schoharie High School gym into a

makeshift courthouse. A bomb squad swept the locker rooms and the cafeteria, and police officers watched as 100 or so people filed in. The victims’ families, wearing sneakers, T-shirts, and hoodies, occupied a space near a podium. The Hussain entourage wheeled in smartly, shoes shined and cuts faded, escorted by a pair of bodyguards. Nauman took his seat at the defense table and stared at the parquet floor, flanked by Tacopina and his other lawyer, Lee Kindlon, both wearing massive gold watches. Nauman’s girlfriend, Melissa Bell, came in clutching a Louis Vuitton purse. Haris Hussain slouched so far back in his folding chair it groaned.

Judge George R. Bartlett III presided from a dais backed by championship banners for wrestling and volleyball. “We are all here today hoping for justice,” he told the courtroom. For almost three years, Bartlett had presided without urgency, allowing repeated delays and doing little to intercede in the dispute between local officials and the NTSB. Now he held his head in his hands, wept, and pleaded with the victims’ families to understand why he was allowing the district attorney to broker a plea deal in which Nauman Hussain would serve zero days in prison.

“I understand that many people, with good reason, feel the proposed sentence here is way too light. Twenty people are dead. How could the justice system even contemplate a sentence that does not impose decades of incarceration?” said Bartlett, reading haltingly from a statement in a tone that grew increasingly detached, as if the author were a mere observer in his own courtroom. “I have given it many hours of thought. It just does not seem right that 20 people are dead and the defendant receives a sentence of probation and community service.”

Bartlett turned to address the victims’ families directly, his voice coming over the gym’s tinny PA explaining why he had accepted the plea agreement the DA had brokered with the defense. Mavis had “weakened the district attorney’s case,” he said. “The evidence shows that Mr. Hussain paid Mavis for certain brake services, but such services were not described or reflected accurately on the Mavis invoices.” According to the agreement, Bartlett said, Hussain could not have foreseen the brake failure. He did not address the likelihood that the limousine had lost its stopping power because it was carrying so much passenger weight—much of it illegal because of the way the Hussains had falsely registered the vehicle. As for whether the Hussains bore any responsibility for the tragedy by taking the Excursion to an unqualified inspector, Bartlett said he simply deferred to the DA,

who believed the actions did not “constitute a gross deviation from the standard for care that a reasonable person would observe.”

As the judge read, the families, who had known a deal was brewing, did not visibly react. When it was time for them to read victim-impact statements, it was clear their tempers were boiling over. “You are still a mass murderer,” John Schnurr, the brother of victim James Schnurr, said to Nauman Hussain. “You’ve turned my life into a living hell, pure torture,” said Kim Marie Bursese, mother of Savannah Bursese. “My life has fallen apart, and I’m afraid I won’t be able to get it started again,” said Kyle Ashton, the stepfather of Michael Ukaj. The statements lasted three hours—a reminder of how many people had died.

Then an extraordinary thing happened. Continuing his efforts to convince the families that justice had been served, Bartlett told them what they were getting instead of the punishment many said they desperately wanted Nauman Hussain to receive. “By pleading guilty, the defendant will have admitted his criminal negligence under oath,” he said. “Such will allow this to be used in any civil action. Moreover, by pleading guilty, the defendant no longer has a Fifth Amendment right to remain silent. Thus, he can be compelled to testify in any civil actions.”

No one in the gym needed it to be fleshed out. Bartlett had teed up Mavis, which is now the focus of a number of lawsuits filed by the families. “It’s a way of saying, ‘There’s no justice coming out of this courtroom. If you want to get justice, go over there,’” says Kevin Luibrand, who added that “in 38 years of practicing law, I’ve never seen anything like that.”

Then the proceedings ended. The Hussains sped off in a black SUV. They had repeated the pattern again—acting in disregard for life and the law but suffering scant consequences.

While Tacopina expounded before TV cameras, I looked for Larry Rulison, who had locked himself out of his car and was wandering around. Chemo, I assumed. Rulison often said things like, “My brain isn’t right.” His body doesn’t work well either—he holds on to the railings when he climbs stairs—and I thought he might be struggling physically. But when I found him, he was alone in downtown Schoharie, walking away from the scene, distraught.

“I’m shattered,” he told me. “I guess I have no idea how painful this has been to those families. I thought I knew emotional pain. I thought cancer was tough.” I offered him a ride, but he said he was going to type up an account of the day on his phone, find someone to break into his car, and drive home. ■

A week-in-review newsletter

From the people
who make *New York*

MY

WEEK

IN

NEW YORK

SIGN UP
[NYMAG.COM/MYWEEK](https://nymag.com/myweek)



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 33

who had recently left his hedge fund after decades of pressuring companies to increase shareholder returns, saying he wanted to make investments that contributed to the greater good. (“I’m on a crusade,” Ubben said in 2020. “I’ve got five years to fix the harm I’ve done.”) Nikola raised more than \$500 million in venture capital from Ubben and others. Then, in 2020, it went public via a SPAC, merging with a publicly traded shell company that was run by a former top executive at GM. The deal created a huge wind-fall for everyone involved. Milton received a \$70 million cash payment and became the public company’s largest shareholder. The day he wrote his fateful tweet, he was worth more than \$8 billion on paper.

Anderson started to poke around on the internet, where Milton had left a long trail of self-promoting bread crumbs. One reason that SPAC mergers have become so popular is that they dodge SEC regulations that require companies to observe a “quiet period” around the time of their IPO. Milton tweeted 2,283 times, an average of eight or nine posts a day, during the first nine months of 2020. Internal communications cited by the government in subsequent legal proceedings show that he was focused intensely on influencing Robinhood investors via social media.

On YouTube, Anderson watched a video of a stagy industry event Milton had held at his Salt Lake City headquarters in 2016. The chief executive whizzed onstage in an electric off-road vehicle, emanating booyah energy. Wearing a pair of low-slung jeans, he spoke in front of a semi, the Nikola One, which was covered with a huge white sheet. “For every doubter out there who said, ‘There’s no way this is true; how could that be possible?’ we’ve done it,” Milton said. Often, prototypes presented at trade shows are dummies known as “pushers.” Milton invited the audience, which included the governor of Utah, to “see the truck, know it’s real, touch it, feel how sturdy it is. You’re going to see that this is a real truck. This is not a pusher.”

From the beginning, there had been skepticism about his claims within the automotive industry. “Trevor Milton Wants to Revolutionize Trucking, and He Doesn’t

Care If You Don’t Believe Him,” read the headline of a 2016 profile in the trade magazine *Commercial Carrier Journal*. Four years later, shortly after Nikola went public, Bloomberg News published an anonymously sourced story reporting that the Nikola One prototype at the 2016 unveiling was not actually a functioning vehicle. Milton responded on Twitter, calling the reporter, Edward Ludlow, a “deceiver” and a “jackjob” and saying he should be fired. Then he texted one of his board members: “Share value went up after my response.”

It was around this time that Anderson talked with Mark Pugsley, an attorney he knew in Utah who specializes in representing whistleblowers. Pugsley told Anderson that he represented three people who were preparing to file a whistleblowing complaint against Nikola with the SEC. Milton “had left a trail of people in his wake who he had just screwed over,” Pugsley says. He wouldn’t identify his clients to me by name, but he says they were familiar with Nikola and its technology. During the pandemic, one of them had hunkered down in a garage filled with documents and whiteboards in an obsessive quest to prove Milton was a phony.

“They were all experts in the area that Nikola purported to be in,” Pugsley says. “They were watching the ridiculous statements and thinking, *This is total bullshit.*”

Anderson evaluated the information the whistleblowers had compiled. Some claims were easy to fact-check. Milton had said that Nikola’s trucks were to be powered by batteries and hydrogen-fuel cells. A little research revealed that Nikola had filed a federal lawsuit against a battery manufacturer that it had agreed to acquire, claiming it had only recently discovered the company’s president, a former consultant to NASA, was under indictment for putting his visits to prostitutes on his government expense account. As for hydrogen, Anderson was able to confirm that Nikola’s director of hydrogen production was Milton’s brother, Travis. His job before joining Nikola? Paving driveways in Hawaii.

Despite Milton’s boasts that the Nikola One was “not a pusher,” it lacked basic components—including gears and motors—at the time of its unveiling. An inside source told Hindenburg that workers had scrambled to assemble it on the eve of the show with off-the-shelf parts from a hardware store. It had to be towed onto the stage for the event. Its electrical components, including systems in the cab that Milton demonstrated, were powered by an electrical cable running beneath the stage.

The pièce de résistance, though, was the video of the rolling truck. The company had shot the commercial in cooperation with

one of its parts suppliers, and it was Milton who had insisted that it show the Nikola One “in motion,” company executives later told a law firm that conducted an internal investigation. Some insiders insist this was a common automotive-industry practice. (Every automobile company in the world is a liar, Nikola’s head of manufacturing told the internal investigation, “if rolling a truck down a hill is a fabrication.”) But Anderson immediately recognized the potency of the anecdote. “The truck had zero horsepower,” he says.

Acting on information from a former employee, Pugsley’s clients managed to pinpoint the road, a deserted stretch of the Mormon Trail. As a test, one of Hindenburg’s informants drove to the top of the hill, put his Honda SUV in neutral, and let it roll. The SUV reached a maximum speed of 56 miles per hour.

Meanwhile, Milton was obliviously tweeting away. He had recently announced an ambitious pivot into making consumer vehicles, posting a CGI rendering of a hybrid pickup truck called the Badger. He claimed to have “literally built the most badass pickup truck the world had ever seen,” a “fully functioning” prototype that could “whoop a Ford F-150.” Shortly after Nikola went public, Milton tweeted out a new feature: Water produced as a by-product of the hydrogen-fuel cells would feed into a fountain in the cab, producing “cold, clean, pure drinking water.” (A few days later, Milton allegedly Googled a question: “Can you drink water from a fuel cell?”)

In fact, there was no working pickup prototype. But in September 2020, Nikola announced a deal with GM. In return for \$2 billion in Nikola stock, the Detroit automaker would engineer and manufacture the Badger using its own technology. Milton had faked it, and now GM was going to make it. Nikola’s share price shot up 30 percent after the deal was announced.

Two days later, Hindenburg published. Pugsley and his clients were waiting, tracking Nikola’s stock chart on their web browsers. They cheered as the line plunged. “It was a blast,” Pugsley says. “It was just a very rewarding experience to watch it come out and watch the stock tank.”

AFTERWARD, EVERYONE wanted to know how Hindenburg had done it. Anderson says that private investigators—hired by Milton, he assumed—went to elaborate lengths to identify his sources. A rumor went around the short-selling world that Musk, who also plans to make trucks, had somehow ordered up the Nikola hit.

Anderson laughs off the notion that he is a puppet and defends the motivations of his

sources. “I don’t think most whistleblowers and even short sellers, for that matter,” he says, “start with the idea that, like, *Wow, this can be a great business; all I need to do is pick fights with corporate sociopaths, and I can do really well.*” In the Nikola case, he says, “it started, I think, just as abject horror that something this egregious and wrong could continue to fail forward and upward.”

Shorts see themselves as a force of correction restoring balance to the marketplace. But for every bet they win, there is a loser, someone who believed the stock was headed up. Over the past year, the eternal conflict between bulls and bears has turned into a social-media battle. “It’s not that different than the tribal warfare we see in the political sphere,” says Carey. The dynamic played out most dramatically in last year’s frenzy over GameStop. Rabble-rousers on Reddit decided to coordinate what is known as a squeeze against traders who had shorted the beleaguered strip-mall retailer, driving up the price in order to force them to cover their positions at a loss. This was the first in a series of meme-stock rallies that seemed to be driven less by profit motives than by a mob mentality and a desire to strike a blow against predatory capitalism. After the GameStop squeeze, one of the best-known activists, who took heavy losses, announced he was giving up on publishing short research. It was just getting too dangerous to be a rationalist.

Anderson says it was a “bizarre period.” It was particularly agonizing because while he felt the anger was misdirected, he understood where it was coming from—it was the same thing that first drove him to become a whistleblower. “I think there was a very legitimate undercurrent of thinking that the elites or the wealthy had long manipulated the system to benefit themselves and disadvantage regular people,” he says. “And that’s something I strongly identify with because we spend most of our time trying to identify those people that manipulate the system.” The irony, in his view, was that “those guns were kind of trained on us, the short sellers.”

Lately, Anderson has been talking about taking Hindenburg in new directions that are not so clearly linked to stock speculation. He wants to turn its website into a platform for the kind of financial investigative journalism that the ailing news industry has largely abandoned. In recent months, he has kept me abreast of Hindenburg’s work on a forensic project involving an overseas conglomerate. “We just downloaded the entire Mauritius corporate registry,” he told me in late November. “It’s a pretty extensive web.” He was still figuring out how he would be able to profit from the investigation’s findings, when-

ever it ultimately came to completion.

Meanwhile, he has continued to watch Nikola’s stock, which remains one of his largest short positions. Milton resigned in the aftermath of Hindenburg’s report and an ensuing Me Too scandal—CNBC reported that two women had accused him of sexually abusing them as minors. GM scuttled the partnership deal, and the SEC began a fraud investigation of Nikola, which recently concluded with the company’s agreeing to pay a \$125 million settlement, of which the whistleblowers in Utah are expecting a significant cut. (Nikola’s management and board members, including Ubben, declined to comment for this article, as did Milton, who has pleaded not guilty to the fraud charges. He has also denied the abuse allegations.) Milton’s indictment produced further damaging revelations about the state of the company’s technology, such as the allegation that, contrary to his claims to have discovered a way to produce hydrogen fuel at a quarter of the market price, “Nikola had never obtained a permit for, let alone constructed, a hydrogen production station, nor had it produced any hydrogen.”

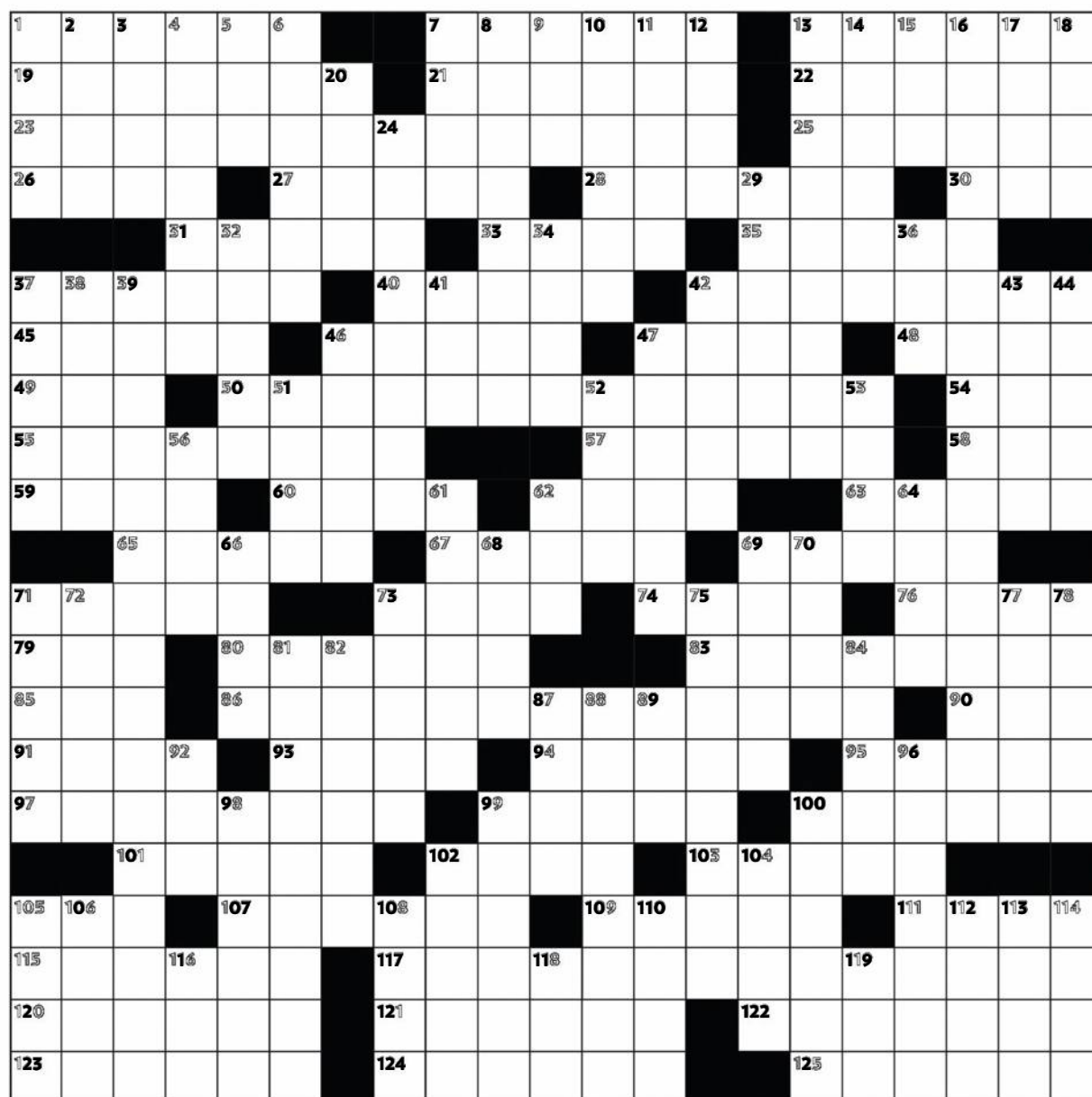
Still, despite all that, Nikola’s stock had not gone to zero. Instead, it’s been hovering at around \$10 a share, giving Nikola a capitalization of more than \$4 billion. Milton has cashed out millions’ worth of stock, but he still owns enough of the company that he remains a billionaire, or close to it, on paper.

“I view that more as a reflection of the complete market insanity that we’re in now,” Anderson says. “Where pictures of digital tulips are trading for hundreds of thousands of dollars.”

This past fall, the electric-vehicle companies Lucid and Rivian, neither of which has sold more than a handful of automobiles, went public and instantly vaulted past GM in market value. Over just 12 trading days, Tesla gained nearly \$400 billion in market capitalization in what *Fortune* declared to be the sharpest such jump in history. The S&P 500 has gained 40 percent since January 20, 2020, when the CDC identified the first case of COVID in the U.S. An average of three SPACs a day were going public in December, *The Wall Street Journal* reported, raising billions in capital from investors despite a dismal track record. (Three in four last year ended up trading below their initial offering price.) Donald Trump is getting in on the boom, naturally, striking a SPAC deal to raise money for his new media company, which was valued at roughly \$2 billion in December. On January 6, the SPAC’s stock rose another 20 percent following the announcement that it will launch an app, Truth Social, on Presidents’ Day. And the truck just keeps rolling. ■

Water You Laughing At?

New York Crossword by Matt Gaffney



Across

- 1 Split down the middle
7 Devo hit of 1980
13 What C/O means on packages
19 Foreboding
21 Element added to salt
22 Golden years
23 Total jackass who lives outside Boston?
25 Plural of "Mr."
26 Lovett from Houston
27 Actress Christensen
28 Smoked herring
30 Lunar New Year celebration
31 Cher's "Silkwood" co-star
33 Shoelace hassle
35 To be, in Bogotá
37 Interlaced hair
40 Cuddle
42 Bruschetta's little cousins
45 Poet Federico García ____
46 Malice
47 Batchoy or borscht, e.g.
48 Bourbon-maker Williams
49 Key often hit in a panic
50 Movie where Will Smith and Tommy Lee Jones swim off the Ukrainian coast?

- 54 LGA pickup info
55 Leaves the marina
57 "Story time's over"
58 Sprinted
59 Cutting sound
60 Pvt. superiors
62 Mars, to Greeks
63 Cupertino corporation
65 "____ do that?"
67 Classic carrier
69 Text at a bat mitzvah
71 Marketplace
73 Melville title character
74 Rebounding sound
76 Defeat
79 "____ or it didn't happen"
80 Union or Times, e.g.
83 December décor
85 "First off..."
86 Herb used by Hollywood legend Rock?
90 ____ Turn (road sign)
91 Jacob's twin
93 Oslo god
94 Gloss over, as a syllable
95 Famed Ford, for short
97 Element in lightbulbs
99 Color of some vin

- 100 Elaborate jokes
101 Complete and utter
102 Laugh so loud
103 Form ____ (connect)
105 Judge at home
107 ____ Light (Dutch beer)
109 Strains to be heard?
111 Ratio words
115 Mother with a Nobel Prize
117 With 122-Across, seeing what's on the telly in your London hotel room?
120 Captivate
121 Untroubled
122 See 117-Across
123 Green printing option
124 Divining decks
125 Ray beamed onto movie-theater screens

Down

- 1 Cap'n Crunch container
2 "That's a possibility"
3 Window part
4 Widespread within a population
5 Iowa college
6 Piano people

- 7 Be sly with one eye
8 She lives for "Today"?
9 Passports and such
10 Give a hard time
11 Traditional parka wearer
12 Short-term worker
13 Is now available, as a position
14 Red flags
15 Map lines (abbr.)
16 Mythical creature kayaking around Manhattan?
17 Shrek, e.g.
18 End of the party, often
20 Elderly and energetic
24 Slick move?
29 Page through
32 Mild cheeses
34 Liam Gallagher's brother
36 Staved off the munchies
37 Consecrate
38 Nevada senator Jacky
39 Fruit-juice brand that's served ice cold?
41 Wrestling win
42 They're mixed with rum
43 Birth-related
44 So silly it's sickening
46 Criticize pettily
47 Shady plan
51 Apiece
52 Classic razor brand
53 29-day month
56 Practice in the ring
61 Encourage
62 "So?"
64 Tropical tree
66 Poetic Ogden
68 Port near Djibouti
69 Blind-mice head count
70 Chaplin of "Game of Thrones"
71 "I'm ____ and I know it"
72 Knife brand
73 Laundry-room fixture
75 Hundred-dollar bills, e.g.
77 Bedmate waker
78 Simple earrings
81 Speech indicator
82 Milk holders
84 River praised by Robert Burns
87 Eerie Lugosi
88 One who cries wolf
89 Feminine side
92 "That's so disappointing"
96 It turns out not to be true
98 Improve the taste of
99 Scarecrow portrayer in "The Wizard of Oz"
100 Cuomo successor
102 Words that start many business names
104 Some lighters
105 They lost the Rose Bowl to the Buckeyes on January 1
106 "You leave ____ choice"
108 Kitten's milk source
110 Functions
112 Pouting fit
113 Shelter with a zipper
114 Nimble Korbut
116 Venerable record label
118 Language similar to Thai
119 Fleischer or Melber

MIAMI IS A PLAYGROUND. MEET ITS TOP PLAYERS.

PIVOT MIA

**For more information and to apply, visit
voxmediaevents.com/pivotmia**

**FEBRUARY 14-16
MIAMI**

Join us in person for
a new conference that
challenges convention.

THE APPROVAL MATRIX

Our deliberately oversimplified guide to who falls where on our taste hierarchies.

HIGHBROW

Mayor Adams shamelessly appoints his brother director of mayoral security ...



... And the landlord of that tragic Bronx apartment-building fire is on his transition team.



At-home COVID tests are still in short supply ...

... But at least insurance will cover the cost if you can find one (if you have insurance).



Unions continue to win, from Columbia grad students to Starbucks workers upstate.



Governor Hochul promises to bring back to-go cocktails ...

... And promises to fund the Interborough Express. Don't let us down, Kathy!



Cinga Samson at the Flag Art Foundation.



Hulu already ordered a pilot of Xochitl Gonzalez's great debut novel, *Olga Dies Dreaming*. But read it first!



Nathan Chen falls twice and still wins the U.S. Figure Skating Championship. Five quads!



Hundreds of NYC high-schoolers walk out in protest of being forced back to in-person classes.

Amy Schneider becomes first woman to win \$1 million on Jeopardy!



Some of America's richest colleges are accused of colluding to skimp on financial aid.



Film and theater festivals from Sundance to Brooklyn's Exponential are forced to go virtual.



Nobody much likes Frank Gehry's memorial to Ike.



Corbevax, the open-source, patent-free vaccine, got more funding from Tito's vodka than the government.



Tennis champ Novak Djokovic becomes an anti-vaxxer hero ...

... While suspended Yale Law prof Jed Rubenfeld is representing less-celebrated anti-vaxxers.



Vandals destroy 3,000-year-old rock art at Big Bend National Park.

DESPICABLE



The Golden Globes are just a weird Twitter account now ...



"I don't like to lie and I'm not a good liar," says Andrew Garfield after repeatedly lying.

... And the Oscars are bringing back the cursed hosting gig.



Apparently tired of covering John Lennon songs, Gal Gadot decides to remake Hitchcock's *To Catch a Thief*.

Nicole Scherzinger didn't tell her Pussycat Dolls bandmates before canceling their tour on IG.



Some cows in Turkey are wearing VR goggles to fool them into thinking they are in a meadow.



TikTok rediscovers 2010s twee. A style only Zooey Deschanel could ever pull off.



We were rooting for these crazy kids ...



The supply-chain crisis hits cat food. Try to explain that to Fluffy.

BRILLIANT



Yeezy x Gap x Balenciaga ...



... And Yeezy x Julia Fox (x Diesel).

The teens of *Euphoria* are back to make your high-school memories feel lame.



A movie's gay sex scene was shot at the Acropolis, upsetting officials who forget how gay ancient Greece was.



Newly opened Edith's aims to be the Zabar's for millennial Brooklynites.

The Wordle craze sweeps the nation, or at least Twitter.



Everywoman Ina Garten's New Year's resolutions: Drink more giant Cosmos, stay up late watching TV and playing Sudoku.



Encantok is a supremely charming section of the internet.



... But these two blood-drinking weirdos prove love isn't dead.



Georgia Bulldogs are the slightly smaller Goliath to Barna's regular-size Goliath.



Bob's Burgers hits the big screen.

LOWBROW

PHOTOGRAPHS: STUDENT WORKERS OF COLUMBIA; STARBUCKS (UNIONS); TEAM USA.ORG (NATHAN CHEN); MACMILLAN (XOCHITL GONZALEZ); METROPOLITAN TRANSIT AUTHORITY (INTERBOROUGH EXPRESS); CHRIS SMART/FILICKR (WALKOUT); JEOPARDY PRODUCTIONS (SCHNEIDER); HOLLYWOOD FOREIGN PRESS ASSOCIATION (GLOBES); HBO MAX (GADOT); ELHORMIGUERO (GARFIELD); PANPAGE./FLICKR (NICOLE SCHERZINGER); DAMIAN SHAW (COW); OCULUS (COW); PURINA (CAT FOOD); MARCO METZLER (ZOOEY DESCHANEL); PICTURELUX/ALAMY (MOMOA & BONET); GAP (YZY); RODRIGO FERRARI (KANYE); DULCE OSUNA (JULIA FOX); RAI19/FILICKR (ACROPOLIS); MARIO PEREZ/HBO (COOLIDGE); EDITH'S; WORDLE; HBO (EUPHORIA); GEORGIA BULLDOGS; 20TH CENTURY STUDIOS (BOB'S BURGERS); ENCANTO; BAREFOOT CONTESSA (INA GARTEN); TRILLIAN421979 (COSMO)

NEW
YORK
CITY
BALLET

21-22

WINTER 22

—
Opens January 27



TRAVELERS
GLOBAL SPONSOR



PHOTO BY JACOB SUTTON © 2020



LECOLE

School of
Jewelry Arts

Supported by
Van Cleef & Arpels



10! YEARS

Live conversations coming soon to the US

Sign-up on lecole.vancleefarpels.com to stay up to date