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May 12th 2025

- Goings On
- The Talk of the Town
- Reporting & Essays
- Takes
- Fiction
- The Critics
- Poems
- Cartoons
- Puzzles & Games
- The Mail

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Goings On

- Disco Balls and Roller Skates, at Xanadu
- Our Favorite “Only in New York” Spots
- The Caribbean Restaurant Reinventing the Momofuku Empire

Goings On

Disco Balls and Roller Skates, at Xanadu

Also: indie-rock legacy in “Pavements,” Jonathan Groff crooning Bobby Darin in “Just in Time,” the teeming embroideries of Madalena Santos Reinbolt, and more.

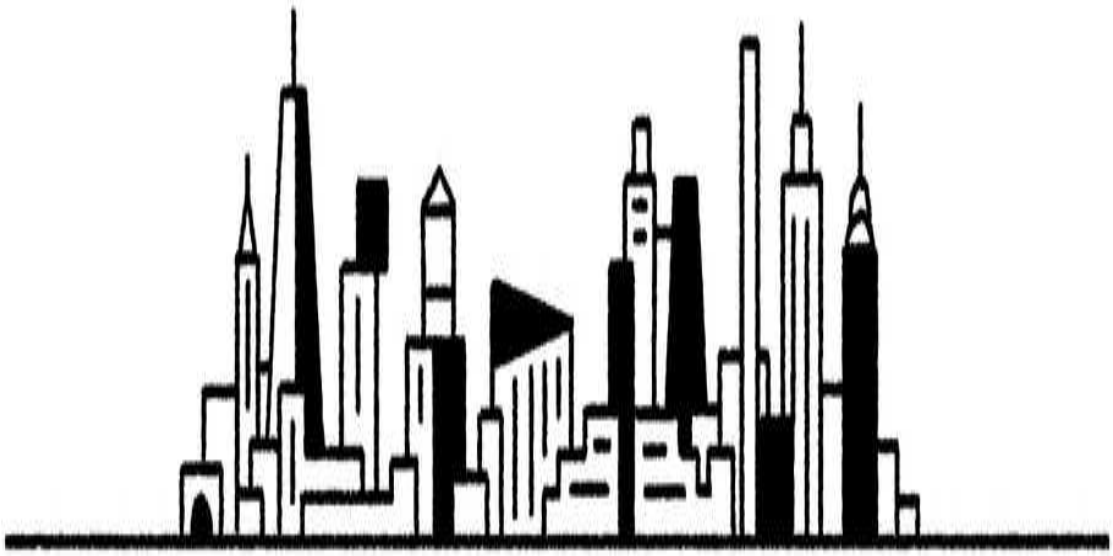
By Rachel Syme,Helen Shaw,Jane Bua,Jillian Steinhauer,Brian Seibert,Richard Brody,Hannah Goldfield

May 02, 2025

New York City and roller-skating go way back. In 1863, a part-time inventor named James Leonard Plimpton, who ran a furniture store in the East Village, filed the first American patent for quad skates. Plimpton, who struggled with weak ankles, loved to skate but hated to wobble; his newfangled creation featured four squat, spread-out wheels, an innovation that allowed even novice skaters to conquer balance. Plimpton’s skates were a sensation, and, as a result, he converted his store into one of the city’s first must-visit roller rinks. Many fashionable rinks have dotted the city since—

Empire Roller Skating Center in Brooklyn, the Roxy in Manhattan, Skate Key in the Bronx—but most are now closed.

And yet Plimpton's spirit lives on at **Xanadu**, a lively roller rink-slash-night club-slash-music venue that opened last summer in Bushwick. The spot has earned a cult following for its boisterous, disco-ball-illuminated, d.j.-spun skate nights, and also for its family-friendly emphasis on education: every Sunday and Wednesday, Xanadu hosts an all-levels beginner course called "Skaterobics." Get rolling.—*Rachel Syme*



About Town

Broadway

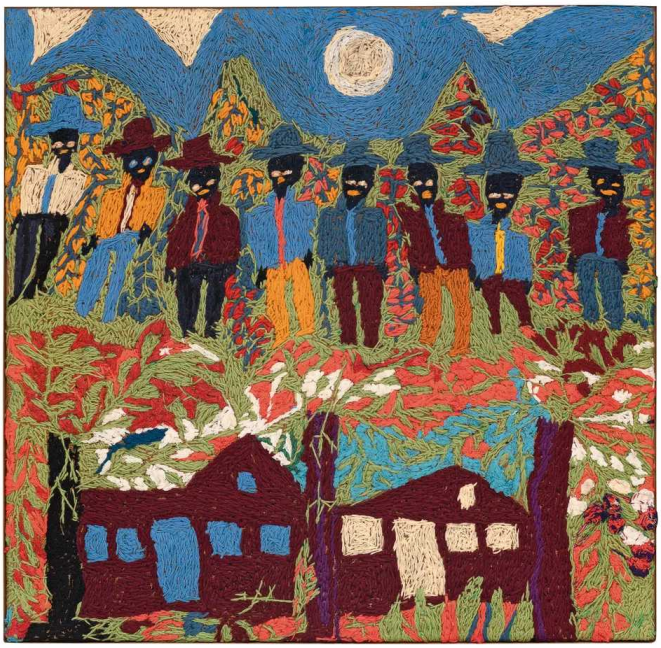
Dying in 1911 was only the start for Elmer McCurdy, the real-life protagonist of **"Dead Outlaw,"** the invigorating rockabilly musical by David Yazbek, Erik Della Penna, and book writer Itamar Moses. The violent McCurdy (Andrew Durand) stumbles from botched train-holdup career to coroner's table to posthumous gig as a corpse prop on an amusement-park ride, his long, weird tale told with palpable glee by Jeb Brown and a superb honky-tonk band. American entertainment unspools via McCurdy: shoot-'em-up Jesse James stories bewitch him as a boy, then B-horror flicks use his embalmed body as set dressing. The director David Cromer maintains a sense of carnival throughout, encouraging us to see life itself as a sideshow ride that rolls inevitably into the dark.—*Helen Shaw (Longacre; through July 27.)*

Classical

Ever since the **Brooklyn Symphony Orchestra's** fortieth-anniversary season, in 2013, the B.S.O. has consistently paired with the Brooklyn Museum to fill its halls with music as vibrant and diverse as the surrounding art. This spring, for a "pop-up performance" held in the museum's Beaux-Arts Court, the orchestra presents several vivid pieces, including a woodwind-quintet arrangement of the "Promenade" from Mussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition." Also on the program are works from Gershwin, as well as selections from another iconic New York pair: Bernstein and "West Side Story."—*Jane Bua (Brooklyn Museum; May 18.)*

For more: read Cynthia Zarin on the way "Bernstein was a Pied Piper who explained the world to us."

Art



Looking at the embroideries—or *quadros de lã* (wool paintings), as she called them—of the Brazilian artist **Madalena Santos Reinbolt** (1912–1976) can almost make you feel tipsy. Packed with people, animals, and plants rendered in long stitches, the compositions, which lack conventional perspective, are textural swirls of shapes and colors—as if the communal and the pastoral scenes they depict were in motion. Santos Reinbolt, who

was Black, grew up on a farm in Bahia and later worked as a housekeeper and a cook, mostly for white clients (including the American poet Elizabeth Bishop, whose racist remarks about her employee's creative practice are chronicled in the show). Santos Reinbolt's earlier, more muted oil paintings are interesting enough, but it's her abundant embroideries that convey the fullness of her imagination.—*Jillian Steinhauer (American Folk Art Museum; through May 25.)*

Dance

Bill T. Jones has always loved provocation, making dances about hot-button issues, and talking about himself. These interests coalesced in his solo show "Memory Piece: Mr. Ailey, Alvin . . . the un-Ailey?," made last year for the Whitney Museum's Alvin Ailey exhibition. In it, Jones, with his customary frankness and high articulation, addressed his career in relation to, and revolt against, the path Ailey cut for Black dancers. For his company's home season, he reprises the solo and débuts "Curriculum III: People, Places & Things," a questioningly nostalgic work for his sterling dancers in which he quotes Bob Dylan lyrics and considers freedom as a memory.—*Brian Seibert (New York Live Arts; May 15-24.)*

For more: read Joan Acocella on *the glory of Jones's "Fela!"*

Broadway

In the lushly pleasurable Bobby Darin bio-musical **"Just in Time,"** by Warren Leight and Isaac Oliver, the director Alex Timbers ensconces his sweet-voiced star Jonathan Groff in a gleaming night club, an eternally perfect Copacabana for poor, doomed Darin, the crooner who died in 1973, at only thirty-seven. Other phantoms visit, including Darin's early girlfriend Connie Francis (Gracie Lawrence), but all lovers fade in the face of larger losses. Groff dazzles us with joyful firework bursts: "Splish Splash," "Mack the Knife," and, most plaintively, the chanson "Beyond the Sea." Groff has waited to play Darin, and, it appears, we've been waiting, too—in several beautiful moments, the two singers seem to call to each other across a very wide sea indeed.—*H.S. (Circle in the Square; open run.)*

Movies

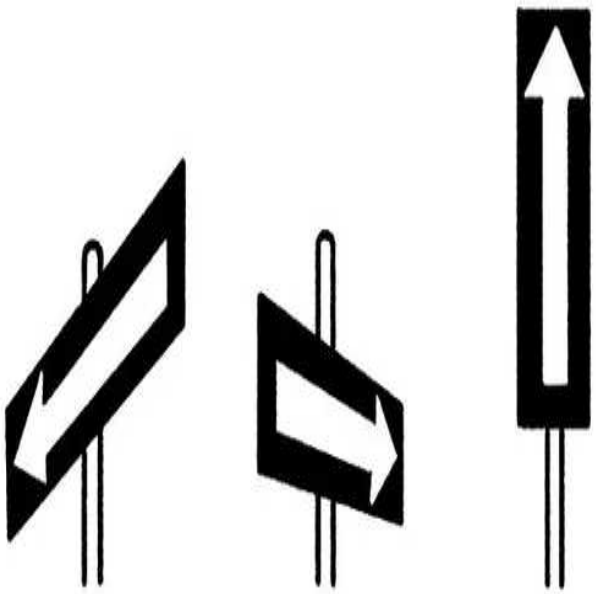
The band Pavement, which had a powerful run in the nineteen-nineties, is the subject of **"Pavements,"** a delightfully bewildering cinematic jambalaya, directed by Alex Ross Perry, that both satisfies and mocks the conventions of rock movies. It's partially a documentary that ransacks archival footage and adds new interviews to recount the band's career, breakup, and recent reunion. It's also a riotous trilogy of Pavement-centered art projects created for the movie—a jukebox musical called "Slanted!

Enchanted!," a museum show of memorabilia, and a tongue-in-cheek bio-pic, "Range Life." As edited by Robert Greene, the multiple strands overlap and intertwine in a hectic variety of split-screen effects; the giddy mosaic nonetheless teems with the band's music, which is, of course, the point.—*Richard Brody (Film Forum; opens May 2.)*

For more: read Holden Seidlitz on spending time with Perry as he workshopped the "Slanted! Enchanted!" musical.

Indie Pop

In the twenty-tens, having already sung backup for artists such as Harry Styles, Sheryl Crow, and Joni Mitchell, the indie-pop group **Lucius** emerged as its own rapturous creative force. A four-piece band featuring dual lead vocalists, the bass-synth player Jess Wolfe and the keyboardist Holly Laessig, its charms were self-evident across the breakthrough record "Good Grief," from 2016—the music is prickly and luminous, with a funk-forward energy. The 2022 LP "Second Nature," created after shelving a conceptual record in the shadow of *COVID*, leaned into euphoric, disco-laced grooves in search of sanctuary. The band's new self-titled album reaches the pinnacle of a vibrant, harmonic enterprise.—*Sheldon Pearce (Irving Plaza; May 15.)*



Pick Three

Hannah Goldfield on New York City-born cookbooks.

1. The explosively creative Cantonese-American menu at Bonnie's, in Williamsburg, put Calvin Eng on the map as a chef with a powerful point of view. His début cookbook, **"Salt Sugar MSG,"** co-written with his partner, Phoebe Melnick, makes it clear that he has a lot more to say. A lovely, lyrical essay about weekends at his grandparents' apartment, in Manhattan's Chinatown, introduces thrilling recipes for the home cook: an astonishingly satisfying Cantonese minestrone with ginger, fish sauce, and cilantro in addition to parmesan and cannellini beans; buttery oyster-sauce noodles; crispy five-spice chicken thighs strewn with Pringles, the way he remembers eating banquet-style squab as a kid.

2. Way uptown, in the Bronx, another New York City kid, Paola Velez, found her "happy place" in her local bodega, connecting with her Afro-Latina heritage through Dominican and Puerto Rican pastries. Her first book, **"Bodega Bakes,"** showcases her playful, personal, and often tantalizingly tropical spins on traditional recipes. She packs sugar cookies with diced guava and queso fresco, and turns the classic black-and-white cookie into passion-fruit half-moons. Why *wouldn't* you make a tarte tatin with plantains, or put tamarind in your pecan pie?

3. The chef Jeremy Salamon grew up in Florida, but Brooklyn is where he opened his restaurant Agi's Counter, named for his Hungarian-Jewish grandmother, who fled Budapest for New York in 1956. His cookbook **"Second Generation"** is a tribute to both Agi and his Nana Arlene, who was born and raised in the Bronx. It features deeply researched interpretations of historical Hungarian dishes, such as *meggyleves* (sour-cherry soup) and chicken paprikash, and spins on Jewish-American classics, like his confit-tuna melt on caraway Pullman.

P.S. Good stuff on the internet:

- The dark art of literary takedowns

- An obituary for millennial culture
- *Something for the moms*

Goings On

Our Favorite “Only in New York” Spots

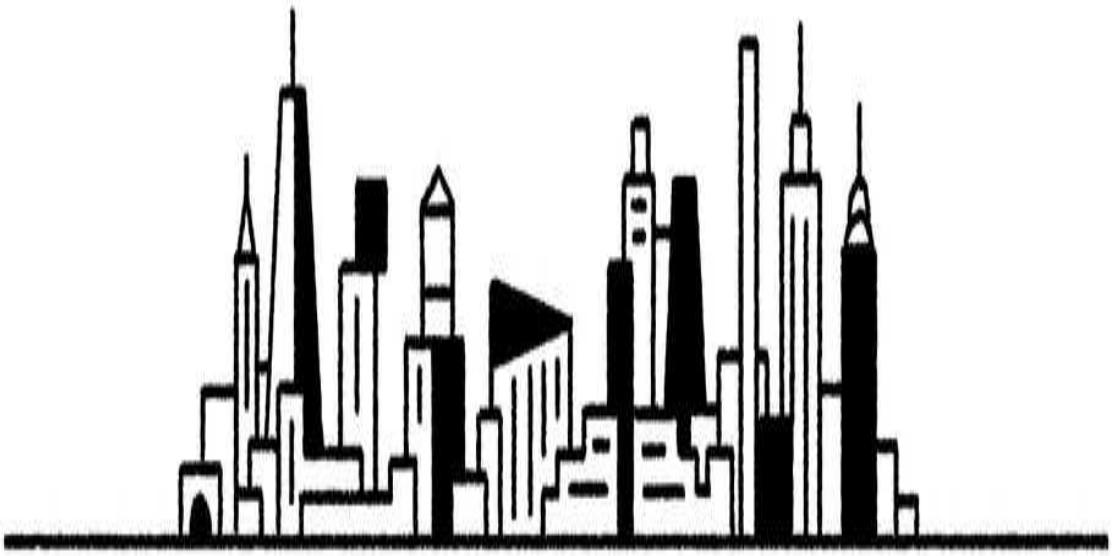
New Yorker writers muse on sui-generis spots around New York City.

By Shauna Lyon,Richard Brody,Jennifer Wilson,Hua Hsu,Kelefa Sanneh,Rachel Syme,Michael Schulman,Jia Tolentino

May 09, 2025

“Only in New York” may be a cliché, but only because it’s so true. For Goings On, in our New York-themed centenary issue, we asked staff writers to share some of their favorite spots that can be found . . . only in New York. These are places that are indelibly charming in their specificity—places that you never knew you needed but once you discover you’d be sad if they were gone—often thanks, especially, to the fascinating characters who created them and to the dedicated people who keep them running. Many of these spots are decades in the making, vestiges of another time, insistent on bringing history into the present day; all represent a sense of community that wouldn’t exist without them.

This issue is full of New York City characters; you will find them in pieces from Julian Lucas, on the artist Lorna Simpson, whose latest works were inspired by a meteorite she bought from “some guy upstate”; Ian Frazier, on the toll our city takes on the feet of its iconic pigeons; Lena Dunham, on being an uneasy native; and Molly Fischer, on Keith McNally’s new memoir, detailing the Balthazar restaurateur’s obsession with good lighting, getting the perfect wall color, and dishing on Instagram. In a gorgeous portfolio, Gillian Laub captures New York City power players in their living rooms; as Naomi Fry writes, “even the more modest parlors teem with meaning.”—*Shauna Lyon*



Local Gems

New York City is a ghost town of my favorite places, of treasured spots that no longer exist. But next best is a vestige, a vital one, of a community nearly vanished from the neighborhood that it once defined. The charcuterie and

specialty shop **Schaller & Weber** has, since 1937, occupied a storefront on Second Avenue near Eighty-sixth Street, in a part of town that had been predominantly German since the nineteenth century. When I moved there, in 1985, its main streets were still packed with German businesses—restaurants, bakeries, a marzipan shop, even a department store. Since then, the area has become a homogenized part of the Upper East Side, but Schaller & Weber, one of the neighborhood's few surviving German places, remains a bustling outpost of traditional delicacies. An elder butcher, noting my academic pronunciation of such enticing wares as *Lachsschinken* and *Krakauer Wurst*, used to heartily greet me as "*junger Mann*" whenever I entered the store, and nudged my college German to colloquial speed. He's long retired, but his colleagues still serve up those treats and others (tongue in aspic, headcheese, double-smoked bacon) along with packaged goods (zwieback, marzipan, jarred fruits) that blend reminiscences of European travels with the gemütlichkeit of home.—*Richard Brody*

When I told some friends that I wanted to brush up on my French, one of them suggested a church on the Upper East Side. Church? Had my accent lapsed so much that divine intervention was required? *Peut-être*. Miraculously, **Église Française du Saint-Esprit,** an Episcopal church founded by Huguenots, has been offering free French classes since 1884. On a recent Sunday morning, I crawled out of bed and made my way to East Sixtieth Street to atone for forgetting the subjunctive tense. The church describes itself as "for Francophones and Francophiles," and also hosts a book club for language learners. (They last discussed "Amérique," by Jean Baudrillard, and next will turn to "Les Impatients," by the Cameroonian author Djaïli Amadou Amal.) My class—led by the church rector, Nigel Massey, a boyish-looking Brit who studied theology at Oxford—was focussed on the subjunctive as used to express uncertainty. Massey provided a timely Easter example: "I will be holding communion until Christ *returns* to Earth," he said, with a devilish grin.—*Jennifer Wilson*

Red Hook keeps its secrets well. The neighborhood is home to Brooklyn's largest public-housing complex, a Tesla dealership, the only *IKEA* in the five boroughs, and modern brutalist condos alongside weathered cottages, remnants of the nineteenth-century maritime trade. It's not easy to get there,

which gives the neighborhood a tight-knit, provincial feel. Bene Coopersmith opened **Record Shop** in 2015. The Google-hostile name makes it a hard place to find, but Coopersmith has attracted a crowd drawn to great music and even better ambience. Old-timers from the neighborhood sit around reading or gossiping, clapping along to whatever music is playing on the system, often at volumes so loud that Coopersmith and his guys have to shout to each other while pricing records. There are two pianos; salvaged art about Robert F. Kennedy; a small, eclectic collection of books curated by Coopersmith's wife, the writer Sousan Hammad. On some nights, the records are pushed out of the way for raucous improv jazz or noise shows. A set of speakers is always angled toward the street, an invitation to come join the party. In the middle of it all is the playfully gruff Coopersmith, greeting customers with hugs and handshakes, maybe an invitation for some leftover birthday cake. Suddenly, the name makes sense. It's just a record shop—but it's the people Coopersmith collects who turn it into a refuge, a community center, a collective dream state, a makeshift town square. A condo went up next door, but the skylight still gets a lot of sun. No matter what, it's always bright inside.—*Hua Hsu*

The most carefully caffeinated part of the city is the area where East Williamsburg meets Bushwick. The **coffee corridor** is ludicrously oversupplied with great java. Start at SEY, a serious but friendly café and roaster that specializes in coffee often described as "bright," "floral," or "acidic"—three adjectives that may help explain why this light roasting style remains an acquired taste, and one that is probably best appreciated in a plain cup of drip coffee. (If you prefer milky drinks, you may be happier with the darker, more chocolatey styles that predominate just about everywhere else.) A few blocks across Flushing Avenue lies Dayglow, which is both a café and a retailer, with an unmatched selection of bagged coffee from around the world; the shelves often include fresh offerings from Tanat (in Paris) and Dak (in Amsterdam), adventurous roasters known for delicious and strange coffees, sometimes processed to accentuate intense fruit flavors. Choose wisely, then head northeast, through Maria Hernandez Park, to the local roasting facility of La Cabra, an exacting Danish coffee company that also has a couple of outposts in downtown Manhattan. There is only so much coffee a person can drink in one outing, which is why it's a

good idea to pack a small thermos; fill it with whatever they're brewing and drink it at home, whenever you feel the jitters subsiding, and the old lethargy returning.—*Kelefa Sanneh*

I have an intense fondness for New York City shops that have managed, somehow, to endure the real-estate churn and remain open for business as the last of their kind. I like to call them "dino-stores." Perhaps my most beloved of the tenacious local longtimers is the **Fountain Pen Hospital,** in Tribeca—in business since 1946. Its modest storefront opens into a deceptively cavernous space, where you can get your fountain-pen fix, up front, or fixed, lovingly, in back. Owned by two brothers who took it over from their father, who inherited it from *his* father, the highly perusable store is part pen emporium, part tinkerer's workshop—all incredibly charming. The goods inside are exactly as advertised: fine fountain pens of all prices (you can find starter models like the Pilot Metropolitan, which costs around $25, and also ornate Viscontis that retail for thousands). Sure, they sell other writing implements—ballpoints, rollerballs, mechanical pencils—but you can get those elsewhere. Jimmy, the longtime head salesman, administers the front desk with an expert, affable approach. I recently explained that I was on the hunt for a wet-writing flexible nib; Jimmy considered the request for all of two minutes before saying he had just the thing. From the back repair room he produced a glossy black Parker Lucky 2½ from the nineteen-twenties that was, magically, in my limited price range. "This, *this*, is the pen for you," he said. He was right.—*Rachel Syme*

Philip Mortillaro grew up on Elizabeth Street, and learned how to be a locksmith at age fourteen. In 1980, he bought a tiny triangular building in the West Village for twenty thousand dollars, from a guy who'd been renting it to a fortune-teller, and **Greenwich Locksmiths** was born. Back then, the block was mostly gas stations. Now his shop is next to a chic griddle-cake restaurant, where twentysomethings line up on weekends. Like his kiosk—the smallest freestanding building in New York—Mortillaro, who is seventy-four, with a gray Rasputin beard, has become a grungy neighborhood staple. Fifteen years ago, he festooned the Seventh Avenue façade with "Starry Night"-like swirls made of keys. Mortillaro's son, Phil, Jr., is his sole employee. He's made keys for celebrities—Shel Silverstein, Bette Midler, Frank Stella—and for locals going through all kinds of troubles, from robberies to divorces. (He's also helped landlords get into apartments when someone has died.) He said recently, "I had a good boss who told me, 'Listen, Phil, when you do a job—somebody's locked out, or somebody's changing the locks because they're throwing somebody out—they're not going to be happy, so give 'em a lot of leeway.' "—*Michael Schulman*

If you follow Brighton Second Street south, under the rusted overpass, you'll reach the boardwalk—and a **public bathroom** that feels like a homemade cathedral. The steel-blue walls are draped with tinsel, adorned

with red curtains. Laminated posters offer encouragement ("Sorrow keeps you human"); cocktail-napkin humor ("Of course women don't work as hard as men, they get it right the first time"); tributes (Michael Jackson, Harambe); glimpses of the sublime (a photo of starlings flocking at sunset). All this is the painstaking work of Hazel Chatman, now in her late seventies, who's been a public employee for forty-seven years and a caretaker of the city's beach bathrooms for thirty. She buys the supplies and prints the posters herself. One recent morning, she appeared with the authority of an oracle, wearing a camouflage parka, gold earrings, and a forest-green baseball cap cut open at the back to make room for her braids. She does this work for God, she told me, though the bathroom, which had Passover decorations above the sinks, is creed-agnostic: "We all bleed the same," Chatman said. A woman once told her that she'd been planning on jumping off the Verrazzano-Narrows Bridge that day, but had just decided not to, because of what she'd read on one of the posters. The words on the walls, like the bathroom itself, urge us to make something beautiful out of nothing. "We're in the world, but we're not of the world," Chatman told me. "We're just passing through."—*Jia Tolentino*

P.S. Good stuff on the internet:

- Radio Around the World
- Best friends make the best podcasts
- Is there such a thing as too much pickle?

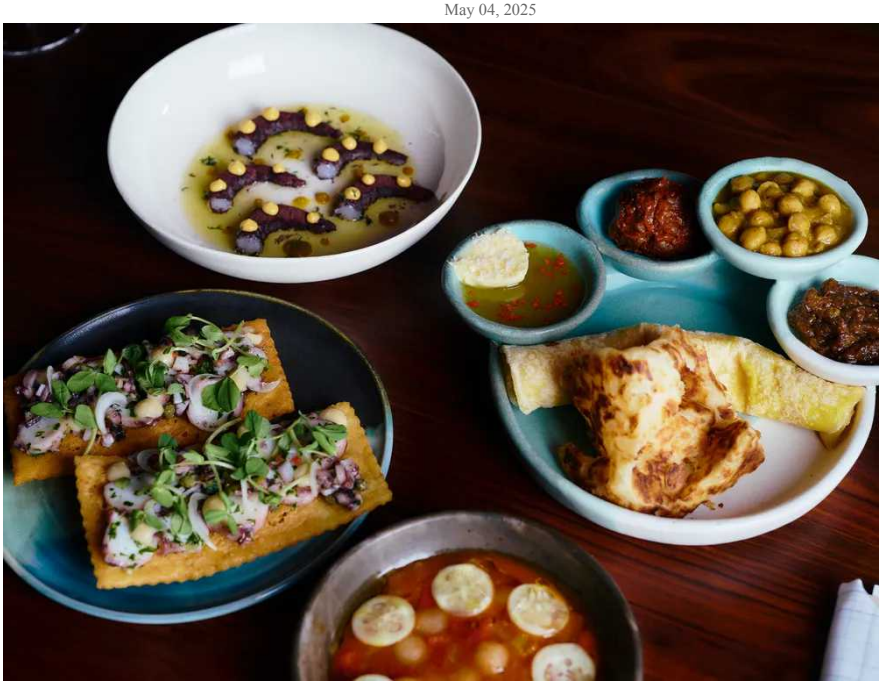
The Food Scene

The Caribbean Restaurant Reinventing the Momofuku Empire

At Kabawa, the chef Paul Carmichael gets scholarly without sacrificing the fun.

By Helen Rosner

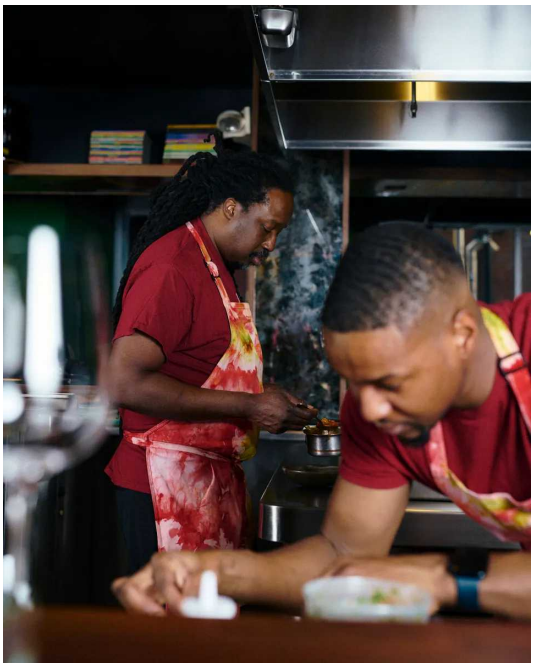
May 04, 2025



If you ever had the pleasure of eating at Momofuku Ko, the wonderful, ambitious, and sometimes sort of compellingly bizarre tasting-menu restaurant that closed in 2023, it can be a little disorienting to visit Kabawa, a new fine-dining Caribbean spot occupying Ko's former space in the East Village. The room, once decorated in severe tones of black and gray, has received a warm makeover, with bright paint and tropical mosaics. But the large open kitchen that takes up most of the room is the same—with cooks' stations encircling a central vent that's dramatically cantilevered, like the funnel of a cruise ship—as is the seating, much of it arranged around a sweeping U-shaped counter. One of the things I remember most clearly from Ko was the peculiar way that certain smells rolled around the boxy space

like billiard balls—a cloud of sweet lychee in the air by a few window tables, or a whiff of Searzall butane hovering over the dead center of the dining counter. At Kabawa, the tumbling kittens of aroma include fresh yeast, green cucumber, and a perpetual bouquet of toasty curry leaves.

Little exists to inform you that you're in a Momofuku joint—not a mote of branding nor a trace of David Chang, the company's überfamous chef and founder. For kremlinologists of the Momofuku empire (and there are more of us out there than you might think), this is both notable and unsurprising: Chang has always seemed to have a deeply ambivalent relationship with his own success. (In "Eat a Peach," his memoir, published in 2020, he writes rawly about irresistible tendencies toward self- and other kinds of destruction, including bouts of rage directed at his employees and loved ones.) Over the past few years, Chang has stepped back from day-to-day operations at Momofuku; the company, which now includes an ever-growing portfolio of grocery products, is run by its C.E.O., Marguerite Zabar Mariscal. Kabawa's chef, Paul Carmichael, is a longtime veteran of Momofuku, and was recently announced as overseeing all of the group's restaurants—a signal, perhaps, that the company (which has contracted over the past half decade to some half-dozen spots) is interested in anchoring its identity on something more than the stature of its founder. At Kabawa, one of the only signs of the place's connection to Chang is a stack of old issues of *Lucky Peach*, the brilliant, defunct food magazine he co-founded, resting on a high-up kitchen shelf.



Carmichael, a native of Barbados, cooked under blue-chip chefs such as Marcus Samuelsson and Wylie Dufresne before being hired by Chang, in 2010, at the now closed midtown Momofuku restaurant Má Pêche. After five years there, he moved to the other side of the world to take over at Momofuku Seiobo, in Sydney, Australia, where he evolved the menu's European-Asian-Whatever palate to reflect his particular passion for the food of the Caribbean. Seiobo raked in awards before closing during the pandemic. Chang told me recently that in Australia Carmichael became "like David Hasselhoff": a mega-celeb and a national treasure, recognized everywhere he went (not to mention one of a relatively tiny number of prominent Black people in Aussie public life).

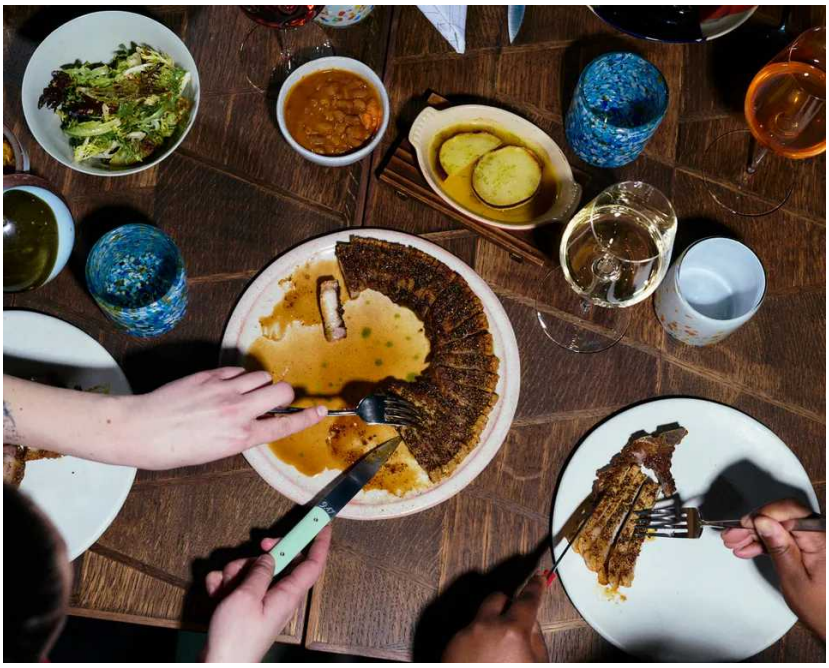
In the U.S., Carmichael's profile remains considerably lower-key, even among food people, but Kabawa—and Bar Kabawa, a more casual companion spot next door with a killer lineup of tiki drinks and a dizzying variety of Caribbean patties—makes clear that he possesses both formidable creativity and a fairly luminous charisma. Whether presiding in the kitchen or joking easily with customers, he is the restaurant's gravitational center: wearing the staff uniform of a tie-dye apron, his long locs secured with a bandanna, he exudes the quiet affability of someone who knows he's showing you a good time. At Bar Kabawa, when regulars walk in the door—

or someone orders a particularly exciting cocktail, or he's just kind of in a spirited mood—he rings a shiny brass bell.

The menu at Kabawa is, likewise, fun and attractive in an unassuming way. There are a handful of other high-end restaurants in New York currently serving island food—Omar's Kitchen, on the Lower East Side, is sceney and vivacious, and you can spend a pleasant evening over ackee-and-salt-fish eggrolls at Mango Bay, a new spot in Fort Greene—though none speak in quite the same aesthetically rigorous vernacular as Kabawa. Its level of finesse invites certain comparisons to Tatiana, the glittering Lincoln Center restaurant run by Kwame Onwuachi, another chef asserting the haute-cuisine artistry of food born of Black cultures. But whereas Tatiana provides a survey of Black gastronomic experiences in New York, from braised oxtail to a bodega-inspired Cosmic Brownie with ice cream, Kabawa tells a story of the Caribbean itself, rather than its diaspora.

Carmichael's approach to Kabawa's menu—a three-course prix fixe, with fairly substantial extras thrown in here and there—feels both evangelistic and sneakily scholarly about Caribbean food. (As a student at the Culinary Institue of America, Carmichael wrote a senior thesis focussed on Caribbean ingredients and the Atlantic slave trade.) You'll encounter "dog sauce," a parsley-green hot sauce from the French Antilles, dressing silken circles of

octopus atop a nutty breadfruit *tostón*. When the chef drops a plate bearing five soft arcs of royal red shrimp, served raw, with a coating of burgundy sorrel powder and fiery dots of a scotch-bonnet emulsion, he might not mention that the crustaceans were caught just hours earlier, off the coast of Montauk, but he *will* refer to Jamaica's winding coastal highways, where roadside venders sell plastic baggies of cooked shell-on shrimp dyed neon-red with pepper and food coloring, to which this precisely plated dish is an homage.



During one of my visits, after I asked about the provenance of the kitchen's jewel-like tropical fruits, Carmichael mentioned that it took him a while to earn the trust of Big Mac, the owner of Labay Market, in Brooklyn, one of the city's finest sources for Caribbean imports, including produce from a sixty-acre farm in Grenada owned by Big Mac's family. "I had to prove that I was for real," Carmichael said, with a smile. Later on in the same meal, emboldened by rum, I asked him why Kabawa didn't serve any jerk. (The menu's boudin-like "jerk" duck sausage is styled with scare quotes.) He explained that he hasn't been able to get his hands on pimento wood, whose sweet, herbaceous smoke gives the dish its characteristic flavor. Then he added, growing serious, that the famous Jamaican cooking style gets enough attention already. "I love jerk; I'm writing a book about jerk," he said. "But

everyone knows jerk. I put it on the menu, everyone's going to order it, and I won't get to show you everything else from all the other islands."

For all its thoughtful flourishes, a meal at Kabawa feels easygoing and joyous. The kitchenside seating lacks the prayer-rail worshipfulness of many chef's counters; the evening unfolds at a considered pace, providing time enough to savor the details, but not so long as to leave you antsy. To begin, there's an Indo-Caribbean "bread course" of a chewy paratha and a thick, chickpea-flour-dusted roti, alongside an array of dips and spreads including an eggplant chutney cooked with tamarind, curried chickpeas reminiscent of Trinidad's famous doubles, and a snow-white wodge of cultured butter in a pool of piquant yellow-pepper jelly. The main courses include black bass with rich coconut curry, the fish's skin chicharron-crisp; an elegant brick of shredded goat meat in a fiery-hot sauce Creole; and a terrifyingly enormous *chuletas can can,* a cudgel-like Puerto Rican cut of pork that encompasses belly, rib, and loin, with scored skin flaring out like the skirt of a dancer mid-twirl. (It serves two, and carries a seventy-five-dollar supplemental charge; I haven't yet worked up the nerve to try it.) The entrées are served with family-style sides including a bowl of silken beans and another of chewy long-grain rice, plus a tangle of frilly salad greens and a slice of starchy Japanese sweet potato swimming in pineapple vinegar. Between the savory courses and dessert, a cook might come by to present a palate-cleansing bite of fruit, such as whole sweet tamarinds in their pods, or sticky white trapezoids of soursop.

Helen, Help Me!
E-mail your questions about dining, eating, and anything food-related, and Helen may respond in a future newsletter.

Though there's no shortage of high points at Kabawa—among them a rainbow-sprinkle-studded baton of flan so dense it verges on cheesecake—the restaurant's success lies less in the strength of any individual dish than in the ebullient sum of its parts. (Still, I must adamantly recommend a scotch-bonnet fried chicken that was on offer during one of my visits, and hopefully will return soon.) The over-all electricity of the restaurant—its confidence, its clarity, its idiosyncrasy—feels true to the early years of Momofuku, and makes Kabawa a tropical bulwark against New York's recent retreat into the anesthetizing comforts of French food and steak houses. The kitchen is still

working some things out: a coconut turnover, an ultra-sweet Barbadian dessert listed on the menu for two, is bread-loaf-sized and more properly feeds four or five; a green-banana pastel covered in a variety of sautéed mushrooms is just sort of boring. But for me, at least, an almost euphoric pleasure comes from simply being there, pumped full of life by the colors and the smells, by watching Carmichael and his chef de cuisine, Max Guillaume, intently plate a dish of cassava dumplings in spicy red gravy, by conspiring with a server to get one of the terrific off-menu piña coladas sent over from Bar Kabawa next door. They might ferry over some patties, too, if you ask nicely, but it's worth going over there yourself, some different night, when you're in the mood for impeccable daiquiris and beguilingly punchy snacks. If you seem to be especially enjoying yourself—and I can't see how you wouldn't be—Carmichael might even ring the bell. ♦

The Talk of the Town

- The Promise of New York
- Kathy Hochul's Turf War with a Reality-TV Star
- Ed Helms Dives Into Disaster
- The Man to Call When You Need a Cimbalom. (A What?)
- Great Moments in the Papacy

Comment

The Promise of New York

Other cities have better infrastructure, fewer rats, cleaner streets, plentiful public toilets, more elbow room. Yet people continue to flock here.

By Alexandra Schwartz

May 05, 2025

April in Paris has nothing on May in New York. Spring happens to the city as everything happens here: not at all, then all at once. The forsythia skims the crosstown buses as they swerve through Central Park, and the daffodils dare dogs, from every tree bed, to do their worst. Magnolias unfurl their petals to flaunt their fancy two-toned manicures. Cherry trees blush all over town. On Park Avenue, the tulips are out, orderly and abundant, as they are at corner delis and bodegas, cooling their stems behind heavy plastic curtains. Long strands of pollen drift down from sidewalk oaks, dusting parked cars greenish gold. Birdsong, jackhammers, and sneezes, the sounds of the season.

Now the fauna stirs and molts. From Wakefield to Tottenville, members of the native population emerge from hibernation to sun themselves on stoops

and benches. Winter coats are stuffed deep into too-small closets. Construction crews rumble every neighborhood. Playgrounds shriek to life; teen-agers bump backpacks and kiss on street corners. The city, forever in a rush, adjusts its pace, remembers how to stroll, to saunter. Would you believe that the Yankees started the month first in their division, and the Mets in theirs? The Frick is open and resplendent again. Audra McDonald is on Broadway, singing Mama Rose. This is the optimistic time, when New York's too-muchness and its not-enoughness hold in the briefest balance—the cup-filling weeks, when those of us wedded to this city for richer or poorer, by choice or by chance, renew our vows.

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A hundred years ago, when this magazine was founded, the Chrysler Building had not yet been built. The old Waldorf-Astoria still stood on the stretch of Fifth Avenue that is now home to the Empire State Building. Greenwich Village was thick with activists, artists, and anarchists; Harlem was having its Renaissance. So, really, was the whole town. Between the turn of the century and the start of the Great Depression, the population doubled, making New York the largest city in the world. A four-room

apartment in Chelsea rented for forty dollars a month, which, if you do the math, works out to less than eight hundred dollars today. Don't do the math.

New York had its own gravitational pull then. It still does, whatever the rent. Other cities have better infrastructure, fewer rats, cleaner streets, plentiful public toilets, more elbow room. Yet people continue to flock here. They come to make art, money, trouble, love, a name. They stay because they can imagine being nowhere else. This is the mythos of the city, the Frank Sinatra version that plays at the stadium after the ninth-inning walk-off home run. But, because it's true—because New York's "essential fever," as E. B. White called it, burns on, through bankruptcies, terrorist attacks, epidemics and pandemics, boom times and busts—it endures.

New York abides by its own set of Newtonian laws. For every complaint that someone makes about the city, someone else has an equal and opposite complaint. New York is too fast. (Spare a thought for the mother struck down with her children on Ocean Parkway by a reckless speeder on a sunny Saturday afternoon in March.) It is too slow. (The next train is coming in eighteen minutes.) It is too empty. Up in the sky, the apartments in the gleaming towers of Billionaires' Row sit idle while their owners decamp to one of their other homes, thousands of miles away. It is too full. In the past three years, more than two hundred thousand migrants have sought refuge here. Far underground, women who have come from the only homes they knew, thousands of miles away, walk from subway car to subway car, selling chewing gum and candy bars, babies strapped to their backs. Eric Adams, who last year made New York history in the competitive category of executive corruption by becoming the first sitting mayor to be indicted on federal charges, claimed that they will "destroy" the city, yet the city still stands.

Remember What Used to Be Here? is the New Yorker's favorite game. We hate to see our private maps overwritten. Shed a tear for the lost favorite bar, the all-night bagel shop that became a cellphone store. Stasis is not in the character of the place. The city in motion stays in motion. Sometimes the change is even for the better. Paid family leave and 3-K, compost bins and congestion pricing: at last, and amen!

Other changes merely baffle. The other day, passengers taking the F train from Brooklyn into Manhattan discovered that it had metamorphosed, like something out of Ovid, into a G train to Queens, without so much as an incomprehensible crackle of speaker static. The passengers, breaking the pact of benign disregard that passes here for privacy, turned to one another. Fate and the Metropolitan Transportation Authority were cursed. Ubers were called. Then, finally, Manhattan rose across the East River, all chrome and haze from the smoke drifting in from the wildfires choking New Jersey, and the whole crazy place was forgiven again.

There's no greater pleasure in this town than observation, and you can do that for free. A group of high-school girls identified by their red softball jerseys as the Kennedy Lady Knights, from the Bronx, ate slices of pizza while they waited to cross Delancey Street. On Rivington, a poster called Andrew Cuomo a crook. A gray-haired woman marched alone the wrong way down a Christopher Street bike lane, brandishing a sign that read "*hope over fear*."

That's the right motto, isn't it, for these times? "The intimation of mortality is part of New York now," White noted, in 1948. He was referring to the new danger of nuclear war. Forty-five years after the city's first known *aids* death, twenty-three years after the World Trade Center fell, five years after the all-night sirens and mobile morgues that came with the coronavirus, it is painful, and infuriating, to think that the greatest threat the city currently faces originates from one of its own. The President has Columbia University in his sights, and he won't stop there. New York's status as a sanctuary city is under attack. Immigrants are the very heart of this town; if this spring is more silent than it should be, it is from the fear that has kept people indoors. No city is more celebratory of the individual. No city depends more, for its soul, and its survival, on the collective. "No one should come to New York to live unless he is willing to be lucky," White wrote. He was right. But, together, we make our own luck. ♦

Wind On Capitol Hill

Kathy Hochul's Turf War with a Reality-TV Star

When he was on "The Real World," Trump's Transportation Secretary, Sean Duffy, joked about a roommate's "crusty undies." What can New York's governor learn by watching reruns of her congestion-pricing opponent?

By Zach Helfand

May 05, 2025

Kathy Hochul, New York's awkward and publicity-shy governor, has recently found herself in a public beef with Sean Duffy, Donald Trump's new Transportation Secretary. Duffy has been grandstanding over New York's congestion-pricing program, which Trump has threatened to kill. In March, he showed up to call the subway a "shithole." He announced that he was taking over the reconstruction of Penn Station. He has been making the rounds on the local morning shows to insist that, before congestion pricing, New Jerseyans could find a "roundabout way" into the city that avoided tolls, which would involve a five-hour detour through Albany. He also rode the B train two stops with Eric Adams and then taunted Hochul in the *Post*,

saying, “She doesn’t ride the subway.” Hochul’s comeback, through a spokesperson: “Secretary Duffy has literally no idea what he’s talking about.”

How can Hochul learn to live with a stranger who moves in, stops being polite, and starts getting real? One instructive work could be MTV’s “The Real World: Boston,” from 1997. Duffy was a gregarious, party-happy cast member who, even then, showed a passion for transportation. In Episode 4, he calls his roommate Kameelah a “bitch” in a dispute about bus and train routes.

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Maybe the Governor could pick up some negotiating tips (disregarding the times when Duffy propositions his roommate Genesis to “feel my noodle” and jokes about another roommate, Elka, having “crusty undies”). For example, Duffy has given New York a deadline of May 21st to eliminate congestion pricing, after which he has threatened to withhold federal funding from the state. Hochul has already ignored two earlier deadlines and suffered no consequences. When Duffy justified his threat by citing

Hochul's "open disrespect towards the federal government," did she sniff out a bluff? Perhaps she was thinking of "The Real World: Boston" 's Episode 18, when Duffy helps chaperon a group of youths to a summit on community service held by Bill Clinton, Jimmy Carter, and George H. W. Bush and falls asleep mid-speech.

One of Duffy's fellow Boston cast members, who preferred to remain anonymous, offered some advice on how Hochul can get along with her adversary. First, establish common ground. While taping the show, Duffy enjoyed talking about his time on the competitive lumberjack circuit. "There were pictures of him in his local supermarket because of his log rolling and his axe throwing," the cast member said. "Do you know what the female groupies that follow the lumberjack shows are called? Timbersluts."

Another tack: try to appeal to Duffy's playful side. The cast member believed that Kameelah beefed with Duffy because he never took anything seriously: "I remember she made a comment that it was like he was always on a field trip. He does have that attitude that it's always a day off from school. Kameelah didn't appreciate that." (This may have been what Hochul's spokesperson had in mind when, after Duffy's B-train excursion, he remarked, "We hope the Secretary enjoyed his field trip to Manhattan.")

One area where Hochul should take Duffy seriously is his hatred of diversity initiatives. In Episode 7, he tells Syrus, a Black roommate, “Because my grandpa enslaved your grandpa doesn’t mean that I should be punished for that.”

The cast member had the impression that Duffy was considering a career in politics even before his reality-show fame. But the skills he learned on “The Real World”—how to win attention, hold a camera, and instigate substance-free drama—have served him well in the Administration of the first reality-star President. After Boston, Duffy appeared on two more shows in the “Real World” family. The cast member speculated that his stint on “Road Rules,” which included such transportation-related experiences as driving a Winnebago, riding on a fan-propelled rocket, and rolling down a hill in a giant hamster ball, may have helped him land the Cabinet job: “I think they were, like, ‘Road Rules’? He knows the road. He knows the rules. Boom! Transportation Secretary.”

The cast member went on, “I think we’re all estranged from him at this point.” His antics used to be silly. Now they’re harmful. “I’m not sad about it,” the cast member said. “I’m a little bit surprised. He was a doofus then, and he’s a doofus now. We used to work at an after-school program together, and he couldn’t even keep track of all the beads for the bracelets we were making. How’s he going to keep the airplanes in the air?” ♦

Henny Penny Dept.

Ed Helms Dives Into Disaster

In a new book, the boundlessly curious "Hangover" star probes history's greatest blunders—like how the C.I.A. tried to make Castro's beard fall out—as a way to face the present.

By Henry Alford

May 05, 2025

Meet up with the actor Ed Helms for a stroll through Central Park on a cloudless spring day, and he might let loose with some slightly dire news. "Walking over here, I was dripped on," he said, deadpan but with a hint of burgeoning hysteria. "I *hope* it was from an air-conditioner."

"Random Things Falling from the Sky" wouldn't be a terrible alternative title for Helms's new book, "*Snafu*"—based on his podcast of the same name—which recounts the biggest screwups of the past seventy years, like Biosphere 2, or our government's efforts to weaponize the weather in Vietnam or to turn cats into spies. At least one Helms fan, on hearing the title "*Snafu*," has reflexively responded, "God bless you." In Central Park, Helms, dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, explained that the word was

popularized during the Second World War and is an acronym for “Situation normal: all fucked up.” He added, “I grew up in the South with a lot of similar adjectives—wapper-jawed, cattywampus. Those and *fubar*, they’re all sort of in the same family.”

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You wouldn’t necessarily peg Helms as a historian. After all, he’s an actor (“The Office,” the “Hangover” movies), and actors are usually allowed to write only memoirs that are thinly veiled attempts to make us pity and adore them. In the past, Helms has confessed to being “time blind”; during the walk, he said that his frequent inability to put events into chronological order is a symptom of A.D.H.D., a diagnosis he received several years ago, after he read the book “Driven to Distraction” and found himself weeping: “I was, like, ‘I identify with so much of this book!’ ” But Helms has many attributes associated with historical wonkishness: he has worn glasses since second grade, he is uninterested in sports, he plays a mean banjo, he loved *National Geographic* so much as a kid that he wanted to be Indiana Jones (“I got pretty good with a whip in the back yard,” he said), he performed a baton-twirling routine at his brother’s tenth-birthday party to the song “Eye

of the Tiger" ("The drum hits are perfectly timed for big baton maneuvers"), and he was in an a-cappella group at Oberlin called the Obertones.

Near the Sixth Avenue entrance to the Park, Helms became excited by a large boulder ("This is bedrock!") and sat on it. The previous day, he'd flown in from Los Angeles, where he lives with his wife and their two daughters; on the flight, he played the audio version of his book, listening to it at two and a half times the normal speed, an ability he ascribes to his A.D.H.D. While on the boulder, he talked about the section in his book concerning the C.I.A.'s numerous schemes to assassinate Fidel Castro, and also the agency's plan, in 1960, to put thallium salts in Castro's shoes if he left them outside his hotel room during a trip out of Cuba. Sometimes referred to as "the poisoner's poison," thallium salts can make one's hair fall out; when Castro's beard fell out, the plan assumed, he would look weak and powerless in the eyes of the Cuban public.

"It almost seems like the C.I.A. had a writers' room filled with comedy writers," Helms said. "The thallium-salts thing is so 'Looney Tunes.'" (Castro cancelled the trip at the last minute, so he was never pedi-salted.)

On the way out of the Park, Helms noted that, twelve years after "The Office" went off the air, he is still in a group text with other cast members from the show. "It will light up every so often," he said. "Someone will chime in with a picture of their kids, or they'll say, 'My friend is in the hospital and is a big fan of the show—can you guys send some videos?' We have such an incredible shared experience."

If contemplating fiascoes from the past is a nice way to contextualize, and possibly even defang, fiascoes of the present, it may also have lingering effects. "I've started listening to Bloomberg News, which is weird because I know virtually nothing about finance," Helms said. "Other news sources were feeling a little shrill to me. Sometimes I want the cadence of news, but not the terror of news." He went on, "There's that beautiful Simon & Garfunkel rendition of 'Silent Night' that's just piano and their two beautiful voices singing 'Silent Night,' with a newscaster reading the news underneath it. I grew up with NPR playing during my car pools—the 'All Things Considered' jingle is a deep groove in my neurological map." ♦

New Kid Dept.

The Man to Call When You Need a Cimbalom. (A What?)

Chester Englander is a big name in a small world: he is playing the cimbalom, a jumbo hammered dulcimer that resembles an inside-out piano, in John Adams's "Antony and Cleopatra" at the Met.

By Jane Bua

May 05, 2025

The rehearsal space for the Metropolitan Opera's orchestra is three levels below a parking garage, amid a labyrinth of dingy hallways and exposed ceiling pipes. The room has the air of a high-school gym: scuffed wood floor, unyielding lights, and a big analog clock. One recent afternoon, something new and peculiar showed up there. Behind the bassoons and in front of the trumpets was an odd trapezoidal object, reminiscent of a baccarat table, its surface strung with strings like the innards of a piano laid bare.

“I don’t know that the cimbalom has ever been used here before,” Chester Englander, the instrument’s owner and player, said, as musicians filed into the room. They were about to rehearse “Antony and Cleopatra,” the opera composed by John Adams, which is making its Met début. A trombone burped; trumpets sputtered; violins squawked.

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Englander, in a light-blue plaid shirt and thick-framed glasses, picked up two skinny wooden sticks with white ends like pussy willows—hammers that he uses to hit the cimbalom’s hundred and thirty-three strings. “I wrap the cotton tips myself,” he said. (He uses medical tape and sewing thread.) Two additional pairs sat at the ready on a dish towel to his left. The cimbalom, which weighs a hundred and eighty pounds, had been shipped by a freight company to New York from Englander’s home in Nashville. It is one of three that he owns.

Englander, who is forty-eight years old, is a big name in a small world. It is estimated that there are fewer than twenty professional cimbalom players in the United States; Englander could think of only five (including himself)

who play in orchestras. The modern cimbalom, which is basically a jumbo hammered dulcimer, was created in 1874, in Budapest, which is where the world's best cimbaloms are still made. No conservatory in America offers formal study; either you learn from a Hungarian or you teach yourself.

Englander took the latter path—a herculean feat. The cimbalom is no tambourine; operating it is anything but intuitive. Its layout doesn't follow a regular chromatic scale, so a half step between notes can necessitate a giant leap across the instrument. Unlike with a piano, notes can increase in pitch from right to left. Some strings even have three different notes each. (Englander does all the tuning himself.) There's a single foot pedal, which controls two damper bars. At the Met rehearsal, Englander worked the pedal with his right foot, which was shod in a running sneaker and a sock imprinted with a U.F.O. abducting a cow.

Adams, the composer, came over to take a look at the instrument. "The way it's organized is absolutely insane," he said. "It must've been made by Dracula."

The cimbalom is, in fact, often the instrument of choice to accompany sinister characters—its tinny flourishes can be heard, for example, in Howard Shore's soundtrack for the "Lord of the Rings" movies when Gollum pops up onscreen. "I've played the whole cycle at least twice in concert," Englander said. "That's three movies each."

Trained as a percussionist, Englander came to the instrument by happenstance. In 2009, Adams needed someone on both the vibraphone and the cimbalom for an L.A. Philharmonic performance of "The Yellow Shark," by Frank Zappa. "There was nobody in greater Los Angeles who could play the cimbalom *and* count rests," he said. Englander already knew the vibraphone, and Adams asked if he would take on the cimbalom, too. He'd never tried it before, but he was game. After spending a few weeks teaching himself the basics, Englander made his cimbalom début, starting a partnership with Adams that has continued for more than fifteen years.

"I love the sound," Adams said. "It's like adding a certain kind of spice to a dish."

Adams conducts the orchestra for “Antony and Cleopatra” himself. Seated at a red velvet podium, he told the rehearsal room’s occupants to turn to Act II, Scene 4—a particularly dramatic moment for Cleopatra. (As Englander put it, “You can tell things are evolving badly for her.”) On cue, bright, metallic outbursts rang from the cimbalom, winning the approving nod of a nearby French-horn player. Englander came to a series of rests and turned the page of his score to see what was next: more rests. He held the hammers in his left hand like ill-placed chopsticks.

Adams called on the orchestra to jump to Act I, Scene 1. No cimbalom there, so Englander cooled his heels, occasionally scrolling on his phone to pass the time. A half hour went by, then forty minutes.

Finally, Adams instructed the players to switch to another scene. Englander spun his pages. The section started with several bars of cimbalom, in prominent fortissimo. Englander locked in with focus, hitting the strings as if he were playing Whac-A-Mole. His mouth was tightly closed, quivering as he attacked the notes. Then—eleven measures of rest.

The orchestra would soon be rehearsing upstairs in the opera house, bringing Englander into the Met pit for the first time. “This is definitely one of the pantheon ensembles I’ve ever played with,” he said. “Once you get to the top, there’s only a few.” ♦

Sketchpad

Great Moments in the Papacy

Who can ever forget Wyatt VII, the Cowboy Pope, or Gary III, the Secular Pope?

By Barry Blitt

May 05, 2025

REMEMBERING
A FEW OF
THE GREATS
WYATT VII
(The Cowboy Pope)
PIOUS IV
(The Painfully
Shy Pope)
FAUNTLEROY XI
(The Child Pope)
GARY III
(The Secular Pope)
LEO V
(The Perpetually
Backlit Pontiff)

Reporting & Essays

- Pity the Barefoot Pigeon
- Why Can’t New York Have Nice Mayors?
- If the Mets Are No Longer Underdogs, Are They Still the Mets?
- How Lorna Simpson Broke the Frame
- My New York City Tour of Tours
- Why I Broke Up with New York
- Twelve Migrants Sharing a Queens Apartment
- No-Parking Zone: The Perils of Finding a Spot in N.Y.C.
- Power Houses

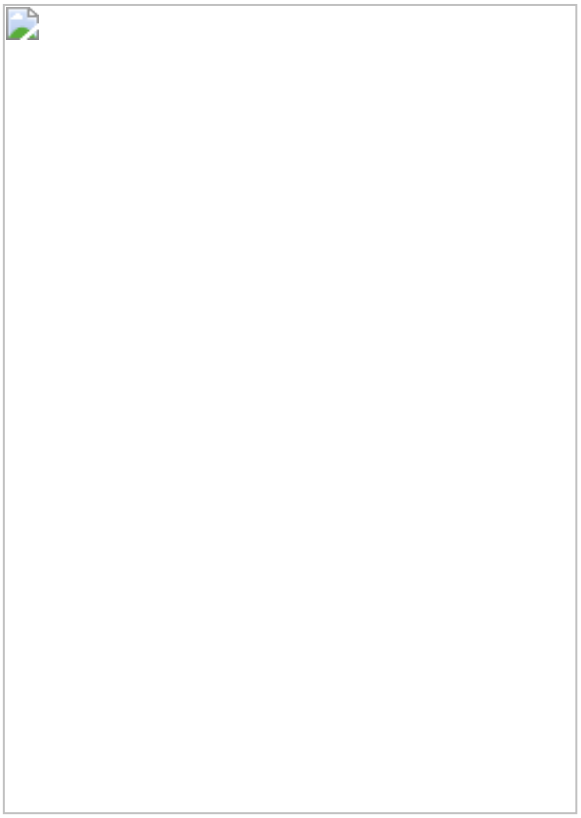
Our Local Correspondents

Pity the Barefoot Pigeon

Bumblefoot, string-foot, and falcons are just a few of the hazards that New York's birds have to brave.

By Ian Frazier

May 05, 2025



I hate how pigeons get stuff stuck on their feet. I see this problem in New York all the time, and it exists in cities around the world. It does not obsess me—I don't believe that people should become obsessed by things, in general—but, whenever I see it, it pains me. City pigeons have other foot problems, too. They get burns from landing on hot lighted signs, and injuries from close calls with vehicles and predators, and abrasions from jagged concrete, and diseases like bumblefoot, a bacterial infection that can cause their toes to curl up and fall off. Humans wear shoes, dogs sometimes sport booties on salt-covered winter sidewalks, N.Y.P.D. farriers replace the police horses' shoes every four to six weeks, some pet stores even sell foot coverings for cats (which cats despise), but pigeons deal with the feet-unfriendly city barefoot.

The law intersects with pigeons at the legs. Officially, street pigeons are not vermin, like rats, another species of barefoot city dweller, with which they are often unfairly lumped. You can do anything you want to New York's rats, but you need a license to trap pigeons. If a pigeon belongs to somebody, the owner puts a band on the pigeon's tarsus (the lower leg, just above the foot) to claim and identify it. Stricter laws dictate what is lawful and unlawful to do to a banded pigeon; it falls under society's extra protections, like any banded bird, or like a dog with a collar. But I have never seen a banded pigeon on the street. The pigeons standing in public spaces and flying around in transit terminals and other wide-open structures are like wild creatures living outside the law.

I came by my non-obsession years ago, when I was taking plastic bags out of trees with my friends Bill and Tim McClelland. Tim and I had invented a device we called the bag snagger (U.S. Patent No. 5,566,538), which consists of three short spokelike metal posts on a central axis made of a larger metal piece ending in a sicklelike cutting blade. By inveigling the plastic bag with the spokes in a twisting motion, we could hold it for the curved blade to cut free when pulled downward. The snagger fit into the end of an eight-foot-long fibreglass window-washing pole, which fit into a six-foot pole, which fit into another six-foot pole, and so on, making a wobbly arm that could reach thirty feet or more.

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One afternoon, we were taking bags out of trees in Collect Pond Park, which is on Centre Street, in the downtown complex of court buildings. Collect Pond was where many city residents used to get their water before 1842, when the original Croton Aqueduct started bringing upstate water to the city. The pond's seepage was a source of cholera outbreaks, and a certain unidentifiable gloom still hangs around the park that is on the site now.

In one of the trees, high up, wings outspread, hung a pigeon. Squinting up at it, we saw that its feet were ensnared in debris, possibly a piece of ribbon from a party balloon. The debris was also entangled with the branch. Evidently, the pigeon had got its feet stuck there and starved to death. The scene looked grisly, and we set about to cut the pigeon down and give it a requiescat in a nearby trash barrel. As soon as the pole and snagger got within ten feet of the corpse, the whole park came alive. Pigeons that had been perched in trees or walking on the pavement suddenly swooped high into the air and wheeled and banked and swerved around their dead companion with the unanimity of synchronized swimmers. They made their understated cries mournfully, insistently. Operating the pole that high up is hard enough without birds flying all around it, so we brought it down. I had

never thought that pigeons cared about other pigeons. Male and female pigeons pair up for life, so maybe one of the wheeling birds was the dead one's mate. Seeing how upset the birds were, I grasped how hard watching their companion's slow death must have been.

Like us, and like most birds, pigeons have one right foot and one left foot. Each pigeon foot has three toes in front and one behind, in a configuration like that of the straight lines in the peace sign—fittingly, because the pigeon has been used as a symbol of peace. The pigeon's hind toe, also called the hallux, has two bones, or phalanges. The second toe (the first of the three front toes) has three phalanges; the third, or middle, toe has four phalanges; and the fourth, or outer, toe has five phalanges. Each toe ends in a claw that can bend upward if you gently lift it. All four toes are on the same plane and form a solid base for the leg. Individuals with foot problems often pull the disabled foot up next to their bodies and stand securely on the healthy foot.

Pigeons can fly at speeds of fifty miles an hour or more, as can be observed on city streets when they fly faster than the traffic. When you're in an elevated subway, you might see them flying next to the windows briefly before they pass the train. In flight, they hold their feet close to the tail or under the belly. Pigeons are also good runners and walkers. Homing pigeons, which are trained to return to their roosts from great distances, sometimes get injured, and, if they can't fly, have been known to spend days or weeks walking home.

A pigeon is basically the same as a dove. The two types of bird are "too similar in structure and behavior to provide a scientific foundation for their separation," according to one expert. The pigeons in the park and the white doves released during outdoor ceremonies are two species of the family Columbidae. Street pigeons are a variety of the species *Columba livia*, the rock pigeon—so called because in the true wild it lives on sea cliffs and canyon walls. As a word, "dove" sounds better than "pigeon." Doves, pigeons, and other varieties of Columbidae are able to fly straight up from a standing start, and to volplane, or dive straight down. That may be why the dove became a symbol for the Holy Spirit. John the Baptist, describing how he first knew that Jesus was the Messiah, said, "I saw the Spirit descending from Heaven like a dove, and it abode upon him." That sentence sounds different if you substitute "pigeon" for "dove."

C. livia's brisk reproductive cycle is ideal for producing new strains. For hundreds of years, people have been breeding varieties with special qualities or abilities. (A breed called Tumblers do somersaults in flight and sometimes on the ground; Pouters can inflate a pouch on their throat to about twice its original size; Cumulets are high fliers whose flocks resemble cumulus clouds; Nuns are black-and-white; Runts, weirdly, are huge; Fantails display their multi-feathered tails like turkeys or peacocks.) Exotic varieties will die off or will revert to ordinary street pigeons in several generations if humans get bored with them and stop rebreeding them.

Charles Darwin was a pigeon fancier, and his experiences with breeding and raising them helped inspire the theories in "On the Origin of Species." He paid close attention to their feet. The reptilelike skin on a pigeon's lower legs and feet is formed into scales, which he called scutellae. These are not like fish scales but resemble medium-sized beads on a string. Darwin examined the feet of different species and breeds, scutella by scutella. (The word derives from *scutum*, Latin for "shield.") He found that one breed had only eight scutellae on the hind toe but sixteen on the middle toe, and another had twelve scutellae on the middle toe and five on the hind toe. Certain breeds with feathered feet had slightly webbed toes. Details like these encouraged him in his speculations about evolution within species.

Most varieties of *C. livia* have feet that are coral-reddish, shading to pink. The color makes the feet look possibly sore even when there's nothing wrong with them. Scientists do not tell us that after the flood, when the ark had come to rest atop Ararat, Noah sent out a dove, and it returned with red mud on its feet, indicating to Noah that the waters had receded, so Noah asked God to make the feet of these birds red from that day on, and God did. This is a traditional prescientific explanation for the color of pigeon feet.

Pat McCarthy, a rangy, affable young visual artist who lives near the Halsey Avenue stop on the J train, in Bushwick, Brooklyn, keeps about a hundred pigeons on the roof of his building during the winter. (In warmer weather, he moves them to the Catskills, where he has a farm.) One afternoon, he led me up a steel ladder from the building's fire escape and over a patch of ice to the coop, where the birds were kind of burbling, like gently percolating coffee. He opened the door and took out an adult pigeon and showed it to me. It sat peaceably in his hand as he spread its feet between his fingers. The foot felt

soft, like my grandmother's hands when I was seven. McCarthy and I had been talking about "string-foot"—the common problem of pigeons getting string, threads, human hair, etc., wrapped around their feet and legs. "I think this is the key to it, right here," McCarthy said, running a fingernail along the thin lines between the scales. "The thread, or whatever, gets itself into these little indentations, and then it catches and winds tight and won't come out."

McCarthy's pigeons don't get string-foot, because, like other domesticated pigeons, they don't live on the street and don't have to build nests. When street pigeons build nests, which the males and females do together, sometimes they use string, hair, wires, and other found items that are then constantly at the feet of the mated pair as they take turns sitting on the eggs. The nests are the source of some cases of string-foot. People who keep pigeons tend to have disdain for street pigeons. McCarthy likes both kinds, though he loves his own birds best. A long pole with a large black trash bag for a flag at one end lies next to the coop. McCarthy uses it to signal his birds when he flies them—a thrilling pastime, watching the birds soar high above the rooftops and water tanks of Brooklyn.

A major hazard is peregrine falcons, which sometimes appear out of nowhere and rocket into the flocks from below, killing birds and making off with them. The largest urban concentration of peregrine falcons in North America lives in New York City. The falcons nest on ledges and in the superstructure of bridges, and they seem to prefer preying on pigeons flown by hobbyists like McCarthy to chasing street pigeons (though falcons, as well as hawks, feed on those, too). Sometimes when McCarthy flies his birds they come close to flocks belonging to other pigeon fliers, and birds peel off and join McCarthy's pigeons and come home with them. He checks out the bands on the birds' legs, but, like most pigeoneers who capture birds, he keeps them. This happens wherever people fly pigeons. A pigeon flier in Cairo used to kill the captured birds and hang up their feet as trophies.

Just off the entry hall of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in the displays of ancient Greek sculpture, is a marble memorial marker, or stela, about three feet high. According to the label, it shows a girl saying farewell to her pet doves. The bird in her right hand is raising its bill to her lips; she holds the other bird in her left. The stela was carved between 450 and 440 B.C. and

comes from the marble-rich Cycladic Islands. Its sculptor could have been among those who decorated the Parthenon later in that century, the label says. The doves in the poignant, almost twenty-five-hundred-year-old sculpture look very much like the pigeons walking and flapping around the museum's plaza along Fifth Avenue, out front.

When I'm in the neighborhood, I stop to talk to a woman who feeds the pigeons by the East Seventy-ninth Street end of the plaza. She is there at all hours. A maintenance guy in an electric John Deere mini-pickup told me that he has seen her feeding them at 5 *a.m.* in the summer. She has a folding table; an ironing board; a cart with handles at both ends that contains a dozen or more orange-and-green Fresh Direct shopping bags; a broom; some pet-size water bowls; a pair of hockey sticks; and various bread knives. She has told me that she comes from Poland and now lives in her car, which is parked nearby. Her conversation can devolve into a kind of radio-static recitation of terrible things that happened in Poland in the previous century. On the ironing board, which is set at a convenient height, she cuts up old loaves that she gets for free from a nearby bakery, and then she tosses the bread cubes onto the granite paving blocks of the plaza. Pigeons appear almost instantly, pecking so avidly that dozens of individual bread cubes go flying into the air above the mass of birds like popping popcorn. Sometimes she looks over her shoulder for hawks and falcons. Once, when the pigeons all left simultaneously before the food was consumed, she said a hawk had come. I looked up in the trees but couldn't see it. On occasion, she points out a limping bird, whose leg she says was broken by a hawk.

Helen Lukievics, a retired litigator who lives in Brooklyn Heights, has taken string and other entanglements off the feet of pigeons in New York, Amsterdam, Paris, Takamatsu (on Shikoku Island, in Japan), and Chiang Mai, Thailand. In her youth, she went alone to far-flung destinations for the sake of adventure, but now she travels less riskily with her husband and keeps a lookout for string-foot pigeons. First, she has to catch them, which she learned was possible by watching an Egyptian vender at a coffee wagon near her law office, on Wall Street. She finds a place to sit where she can reach the ground with her right hand, takes care that the sun is not behind her (moving shadows spook pigeons), wears pants tight enough that wind won't flap them, and does not make eye contact with the string-foot she is trying for. Then she starts sprinkling birdseed to lure all the pigeons closer.

When the targeted one is under her hand, she presses it to the ground, brings it up to her chest with her other hand, and wraps it in a cut-up T-shirt and takes it to her apartment or hotel room for de-stringing.

Sometimes the police get suspicious, thinking that Lukievics wants to eat the pigeon, and onlookers tell her to leave the birds alone—but everybody understands when she shows the feet. A few months ago, when she was in Chiang Mai, she sent me e-mails about a pigeon she had come across on her visit. It had a weird, complicated foot entanglement that included a circle of bamboo. The bird was very thin and appeared to have been abandoned by its flock. She caught the pigeon and removed the bamboo and other complications from its feet. As she did, the bird rested in the T-shirt fabric, and its bill never let go of the piece of croissant she had used as bait.

The Wild Bird Fund, a wildlife rehab facility in a storefront near the corner of West Eighty-seventh Street and Columbus Avenue, treats more than twelve thousand animals a year, from tiny songbirds to kestrels, seagulls, hawks, vultures, and wild turkeys. Of the total, about half are pigeons, and between five hundred and six hundred of them have foot tangles. At certain times of year, the Wild Bird Fund might see two or three string-foot birds in a day.

One afternoon, Rita McMahon, the W.B.F.'s executive director, gave me a tour. She is a retired market researcher—youthful-looking, with short dark hair, blue eyes, and lavender-tinted glasses. She wore a black pullover and black jeans and carried a light-gray cellphone in her right back pants pocket. Someone had just brought in a seagull that had been hit by a car. Two of the W.B.F. staff were testing it for avian flu, using kits that look almost exactly like *Covid* test kits. The seagull was kept in a vestibule in case it tested positive. It turned out to be negative, but it would have to be euthanized anyway, because it was so badly injured. The W.B.F. tests vulnerable birds, like waterfowl, at intake to keep track of the disease, and thereby provides the city with an early-alert resource for avian flu. For some reason, pigeons are highly resistant to it. Scientists have injected pigeons with the avian-flu virus, and even then they mostly didn't come down with it.

On the first floor of the center are a reception area, an exam room the size of a large closet, an incubator for baby birds, a waterfowl room with a little pool, and a high-tech machine that can test blood samples for the presence of lead. Pigeons stick to their neighborhood, and if their blood has a high lead content it's possible that the children of that neighborhood have lead in their blood, too. During the city's past, in the decades of leaded gasoline and paint, lead accumulated in the city's fabric, and became a randomly distributed ingredient of its dust and soil.

In the W.B.F.'s basement, recovering pigeons sat in pet-carrier cages stacked atop one another, or socialized at liberty on high ledges. Convalescence did not stop a few of the males from strutting in courtship behavior. All the birds seemed happy to be with their fellow-birds, and with the gentle, attentive staff. McMahon showed me a pigeon that was being treated for trichomoniasis, a microscopic parasite that can get in the throat and essentially suffocates the bird. Trichomoniasis, or something like it, existed in the time of the dinosaurs, and McMahon said that it had afflicted Sue, the *T. Rex* in the Field Museum, in Chicago. In fact, it probably hadn't, as I learned later; but I liked to think of horrid parasites like trichomoniasis going back that far. Today, there are medicines that kill it.

The best catcher of string-foot pigeons in the city (the W.B.F. says) is Lori Lapatin, a seventy-year-old woman who lives near West Fortieth Street and Ninth Avenue. She learned the art a dozen years ago, from watching a

woman who was a clerk at Macy's and caught distressed pigeons in and around Herald Square on her lunch hour. Today, Lapatin frequents the same area. I have spoken to her only on the phone, though I look for her whenever I'm passing through Herald Square, or anywhere on the west side of midtown. She has a kindly voice. The local pigeons know her, she says, and even land on her shopping cart. She thinks some of the pigeons' suffering is caused by psychopaths who tie their feet together deliberately or net them so they can be used as targets at pigeon shoots in Pennsylvania.

One Saturday morning, Lapatin dropped off at the W.B.F. a string-foot with a severe entanglement. I came by soon after. Looking at the intake form, I admired her distinctive handwriting, a bold upright printing that the W.B.F.'s staff can identify at a glance. She had caught the bird in a busy place—Forty-second Street and Eighth Avenue. Rachel Frank, a W.B.F. clinician, was getting ready to doctor the pigeon in the exam room. Frank is in her early forties, comes from Kentucky, and has curly blonde hair and blue eyes (everyone at the W.B.F. wore a mask). When not working at the W.B.F., she makes sculpture, and she teaches one art class a week at Hunter College.

Frank took the pigeon out of its intake pet carrier. The bird seemed unresistant, but it watched her closely with one eye and then the other, something pigeons do to improve their depth perception. "This one is what we call B.A.R.," Frank said. "That means it's bright, alert, and responsive. Impaired birds are Q.A.R.—quiet, alert, and responsive. Except for the feet, it's in good shape. The ones Lori brings in are usually B.A.R., because they don't have to be impaired for her to catch them." After testing the bird's flapping ability by holding it at its midsection and raising it up (flapping normal), and listening to its heartbeat (also normal) with a stethoscope, she gave it an injection of sterile fluid to keep it hydrated, and then an intramuscular injection of pain medication. She put a clear conical mask over its head and bill and began a flow of oxygen, combined with isoflurane gas to knock it out. Then she carefully laid it on a spread-out towel, with its head on a rolled-up towel for a pillow. The de-stringing was likely to hurt, and she thought the bird would be safer if it was unconscious. In a few seconds, its eyes had glazed over.__

The pigeon lay with its feet spread, like a K.O.'d boxer. Frank started on the left foot, using scissors, tweezers, and other sanitized instruments she took

from plastic packages. The work requires a watchmaker's focus. She cut through brown packing twine and dark pieces of thread and unwound them with the tweezers. The right foot was even worse than the left—a fright-wig mass of string, feathers, human hair, and some pale, waxy, tightly wrapped stuff that turned out to be dental floss. She unpicked the layers carefully, one at a time. When both feet were done, she put an antibiotic cream on the lesions with a Q-tip, and bandaged them with thin pieces of gauze and strips of vet wrap to hold it.

Frank turned off the isoflurane but left the oxygen on, and the pigeon began to regain consciousness. I wondered what consciousness it was regaining. What is the consciousness of a pigeon? I watched it move its bill as it took deeper breaths. Then an eye kind of clicked on. It looked around with it, and then with the other eye. Pigeons' eyes take up most of their skulls, with just a membrane of bone between them, and pigeons see with more clarity than we do, especially close up. I've watched them peck at food invisible to me—maybe tiny seeds, or crumbs of crumbs. What was this pigeon seeing now? Pigeons are clever and can be trained to perform complex tasks. Their memory for places and for their home roost is unshakable, as homing pigeons have demonstrated. If released from here, on the Upper West Side, this bird would no doubt be able to make its way back to Forty-second Street and Eighth Avenue.

It did not seem particularly surprised to find itself on an uptown operating table with bandaged feet. Soon it was its bright, alert, and responsive self again. Frank picked it up, checked it out, listened to its heart again, and put it in a black plastic takeout-food container filled with birdseed which would provide full-length body support while it waited for its feet to heal. Plus, the bird wouldn't need to stand up or walk anyplace for food. Frank set container and bird in the pet carrier to be moved to a recovery room. W.B.F. staff would monitor the pigeon and change its bandages every few days. None of its toes would have to be amputated, nor would either foot need the pigeon-foot-shaped splint that Frank had designed herself and printed on a 3-D printer.

What do pigeons think? Do they have character, good or bad? One afternoon, I drove down to Fort Monmouth, New Jersey, to see some taxidermied homing pigeons that had lost legs and feet in the First World

War. Fort Monmouth, a former military base, used to be a headquarters for training homing pigeons and their handlers. After that war, several notable pigeons lived out their lives at Fort Monmouth—one of them died in 1937, at the advanced (for a pigeon) age of twenty. For various reasons, including the fact that the Army had closed the fort in 2011, I did not find these pigeons. But at a nearby museum, to which I thought they might have been moved, I got some leads; these brought me eventually to Frank Blazich, a curator of modern military history at the Smithsonian Institution, where he specializes in homing pigeons.

"I love my pigeons!" Blazich said, when I reached him on the phone. He listed some of the famous homing pigeons in the Smithsonian's collection: Kaiser, a captured German pigeon; Global Girl, who carried messages around the Mediterranean Theatre in the Second World War; and Cher Ami, the one I'd most hoped to find at Fort Monmouth, to whom the French had awarded the Croix de Guerre. Blazich said that Cher Ami was supposedly the homing pigeon who saved the encircled unit of more than six hundred men later known as the Lost Battalion, who were part of the 77th Division of the U.S. Army, during the fighting in the Meuse-Argonne.

Immigrants who lived in New York City made up most of the original 77th Division. Today, there are several memorials to this unit in the city, including the U.S. Army 77th Infantry Division Expressway (I-295), which runs south from the Throgs Neck Bridge, in Queens. In October of 1918, men of the 77th fought their way through the Argonne Forest and pushed the German line so far back that it closed in behind some of them. Trapped in a ravine, they were being shelled by Allied artillery. Their commander, Major Charles W. Whittlesey, a thirty-four-year-old Williams College graduate, tried to get a message through to the artillery, but his couriers ran into Germans. The story goes that Major Whittlesey, down to his last pigeon, wrote a message on ultra-light paper and put it in an aluminum tube clipped to Cher Ami's leg. The major described his location and the bombardment he and his men were under, and ended the message "For heaven's sake stop it."

When released, the pigeon flew up into a tree. After a while, with some coaxing, he took off, but a piece of flying metal knocked him from the air and he fell to the ground. In a few minutes, he took off again and continued

on to his destination, about thirty kilometres away. He arrived wounded through the breast, and with his right foot nearly severed but the tube still attached. The message was read, the artillery corrected, and the shells stopped hitting the men of the 77th and started hitting the Germans. Allied forces soon moved up on either side of Whittlesey, and together they drove the enemy out of the forest. Reporters praised the courage, tenacity, and endurance of what they called the Lost Battalion. It became the most famous American unit in the war.

Given the confusion of battle, Cher Ami may not have actually saved the Lost Battalion, but the press said he did, and he definitely had been wounded carrying a message for one Allied unit or another. His Croix de Guerre is in the National Museum of the United States Army, in Fort Belvoir, Virginia. The public loved hearing about him. Cher Ami was as well known, in his day, as Sergeant York or any other human war hero. Brought to the U.S. to live out his life in comfort, the pigeon died of his wounds in 1919. He had been hatched in March or April of 1918, and flew his heroic mission when he was less than a year old.

Do pigeons have character? Sometimes when I'm waiting for a train at Penn Station I go out one of the back entrances and cross Eighth Avenue to watch the pigeons that are always on the wide, broad steps of the former General Post Office (now Moynihan Train Hall). They are of various personalities and dispositions. Some still think that I might have bread crumbs for them; some remember that I don't. There are a few that fight the seagulls when the gulls try to steal a pizza crust that all the pigeons have been worrying, and there are a few that hang back and wait until the gulls are driven off. Some pigeons seem brave, some don't, and most are in between.

When I said this to Blazich, he said, "I lead school groups on tours sometimes, and at the pigeon display I describe what Cher Ami and other homing pigeons did in the war. I tell the kids that after both the First and Second World Wars the Army sold off thousands of birds, including some who had carried messages on the battlefield. The new owners may have flown their pigeons recreationally, and birds sometimes go astray. We can be sure that some of the homing pigeons would have disappeared, one way or another, and entered the general pigeon population, and some of the strayed birds would have reproduced and passed along their genes. I always tell the

kids, ‘So when you see pigeons on the sidewalk, or in a playground, remember that some of these birds have the blood of heroes in their veins.’ ” ♦

Around City Hall

Why Can't New York Have Nice Mayors?

As the Trump Administration encroaches on the city, Andrew Cuomo and Eric Adams try to salvage their political careers.

By Eric Lach

May 05, 2025

On Easter Sunday, the choir at Calvary Baptist Church, in South Jamaica, Queens, was finishing warmups when Cara, Mariah, and Michaela Kennedy-Cuomo—the daughters of Andrew Cuomo, the former New York governor—walked into the sanctuary. The three young women, dressed in white, nodded serenely at the congregants, exchanging good-mornings with Black men and women in their Easter best. A few minutes later, Cuomo himself appeared, looking smaller and grayer than he did when he was in office. He was quickly enveloped in a swarm of church hats. For the next half hour, the ex-Governor clapped, sang along to hymns, and swayed his shoulders, framed by a banner that proclaimed, "*HE IS RISEN INDEED*."

The public hasn't seen much of Cuomo since the summer of 2021, when a report from the state attorney general's office revealed that nearly a dozen women had accused him of sexual harassment, and he resigned the governorship in disgrace. Cuomo had subjected New York's political class to a decade of vicious bullying—he once screamed "I will destroy you!" on a phone call to an assemblyman who was drawing a bath for his daughters—and faced impeachment if he didn't leave by choice. After his resignation, "it felt like a pall had been lifted from the capitol building," one state senator recalled. Yet somehow, not four years later, Cuomo is the front-runner to be the next mayor of New York City.

At Calvary Baptist, the pastor, Victor Hall, revisited the high point of Cuomo's career: the early weeks of the pandemic, when he became a national figure by holding daily press conferences that distinguished him as a stern, fatherly foil to the conspiracy-addled President. His lilting Queens accent and snug polo shirts inspired the term "Cuomosexual." Less than a year before he was ousted, some Democrats called for Cuomo to replace Joe Biden on the Presidential ticket. "My family in Texas, during *COVID*, watched Andrew Cuomo every day," Hall told the congregation. When Cuomo got up to speak, he offered a bit of fan service, beginning his remarks with an extended ribbing of his son-in-law, who was known as "the Boyfriend" during the pandemic pressers. "We got off to a little rocky start early on," the former Governor said, to knowing laughter in the crowd.

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Eventually, Cuomo got to the day's main theme, which was comeback stories. He read dutifully from Bible passages that evoked humanity's need for salvation, the creases in his forehead scrunching like an accordion when he was especially animated. "They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated, they will renew the ruined cities," he said, quoting briskly from the Book of Isaiah. New York City, in his telling, was itself a devastated place—too unaffordable, too crime-ridden, too prone to division. "To be honest, this city needs work," Cuomo said. "Today, we celebrate the power of resurrection." On those last two points, at least, everyone could say amen.

When Cuomo stepped down, he was technically homeless; in his third term, the governor's mansion was his only permanent address. He crashed with his sister Maria at her estate in Westchester, and filled his days with extracurriculars that evinced a desire to return to public life: private legal work, a straight-talking political podcast, and the emphatically named nonprofit Never Again, NOW!, which was meant to combat antisemitism. Three decades ago, his father, Mario Cuomo, earned the nickname Hamlet on the Hudson for his tortured deliberations about whether to run for President. The younger Cuomo's style has always been more Richard III.

Cuomo found his opening last September, when Eric Adams, the Mayor of New York City, was indicted on federal corruption charges. To establish residency in the city, he commandeered a midtown apartment where his thirty-year-old daughter, Cara, had been living. (He may have cribbed the move from Adams, who, in the last election, was suspected of trying to pass off his son's Brooklyn apartment as his own.) His old allies from Albany formed a super *PAC* and swiftly began collecting checks from New York's élite. Cuomo made overtures to Black clergy, to the city's most influential unions, to staunchly pro-Israel Jewish voters. Political figures such as Representative Ritchie Torres, of the Bronx, endorsed Cuomo before he officially announced that he was running, as if moved by the Spirit. "We need a Mr. Tough Guy," Torres said.

For most of the campaign, Cuomo has scrupulously avoided his opponents, the press, and open-air public events, an approach that's been described as a "Rose Garden" strategy. "He's a terrible campaigner," a former aide told me. "We saw this in the polling—when people saw Andrew, they didn't like him." Still, an aura of inevitability has hardened around Cuomo, whose opponents include Zohran Mamdani, a thirty-three-year-old democratic-socialist state assemblyman; a handful of progressives mired in the single digits in polls; and Adams, who has lately courted the favor of Donald Trump to avoid possible jail time.

Perhaps the city's current crises—crumbling public infrastructure, intractable civic strife, the President's attempts to strangle his home town—have reminded New Yorkers of a different period of chaos, when Cuomo seemed a beacon of sanity. After being cheered off the stage at Calvary Baptist, the ex-Governor herded his daughters into the back seat of his black Dodge Charger. As he ducked behind the wheel, he cracked the smallest of smiles.

For every Fiorello La Guardia or Michael Bloomberg, there are dozens of forgettable and ignominious characters in New York's mayoral lineage. Nicholas Bayard, the city's sixteenth mayor, had ties to the slave trade and was an associate of the pirate Captain Kidd. David Mathews, who served from 1776 to 1783, was an anti-Revolutionary loyalist who was implicated in a plot to kidnap George Washington. Jimmy Walker, the charismatic, crooked "Night Mayor," who took office in the Roaring Twenties, came

closer than any before him to being removed from office by a governor, and evaded criminal corruption charges by taking a steamer to Europe. Rudy Giuliani, who was once considered a national hero for his leadership during 9/11, and who went down in a spray of legal and financial troubles after tying himself to Trump, arguably represents a third category, of mayors who are both ignoble and indelible. Eric Adams seems destined to join him there.

At the start of his tenure, Adams declared that he would be a mayor with "swagger." He became a fixture of exclusive night clubs and doled out cushy positions to old friends from the N.Y.P.D. and the Brooklyn Democratic Party. "Mayors usually have one guy or two," a former senior official in the Adams administration told me recently. "Adams had twelve guys. There were so many of them, they were bumping into each other." When the federal corruption charges against him were unsealed, they seemed so inevitable as to be underwhelming. The case focussed on campaign donations, discounted air travel, and other freebies accepted from representatives of the Turkish government, allegedly in exchange for favors like fast-tracking the opening of a new Turkish consulate building—the kind of petty dealmaking that Tammany Hall bosses once approvingly called "honest graft." But the indictment gave way to something much worse: the Mayor's cozying up to Trump.

The courtship spilled into public view in October, at the Al Smith dinner, an annual white-tie fund-raiser for Catholic charities. During Trump's remarks, he made an overture to Adams, a fellow criminal defendant: "I was persecuted, and so are you, Eric." An awkward flirtation ensued. Adams, who during Trump's first term called the President an "idiot," hired the celebrity lawyer Alex Spiro, who has represented Elon Musk, for his defense. After Trump won the Presidential election, the Mayor called to congratulate him; later, at a meeting, he told the city's senior agency heads to refrain from criticizing the President-elect. ("Surreal," one attendee said.) When Trump was asked if he would consider giving Adams a pardon, he appeared to consider the question for two seconds before saying, "Yeah, I would."

In January, Frank Carone, an ex-marine and a longtime Brooklyn power broker who had served as Adams's City Hall chief of staff, coördinated with Eric Trump, the President's second son, to arrange a meeting between the

Mayor and the soon to be reinstalled President. Over lunch at Trump International Golf Club, in West Palm Beach, the two men found what Carone, who joined them at the table, described to me as "pleasant surprises of commonality." But Carone vigorously dispelled any notion of an arrangement between Adams and Trump. "I'll give you the facts—reality," he said. "There was no discussion with President Trump about his case, or about immigration, or any deal whatsoever."

Maybe there didn't need to be a discussion. Three days later, on Martin Luther King, Jr., Day, Adams ditched local civil-rights commemorations to attend Trump's Inauguration, in Washington. Just a few weeks after that, Emil Bove, a senior official in Trump's Justice Department, asked the U.S. Attorney's office in Manhattan to put Adams's case on hold, arguing that the charges were interfering with the Mayor's ability to help enforce White House immigration policies.

The move looked to many like a quid pro quo: legal favors in return for Adams's coöperation with Trump's crackdown on immigrants. The impression was reinforced by a disastrous joint appearance between Adams and Tom Homan, Trump's thumb-faced border czar, on a Fox News morning show. "If he doesn't come through, I'll be back in New York City," Homan said of Adams, in his best approximation of a joke. "I'll be in his office, up his butt, saying, 'Where the hell is the agreement we came to?' " Adams grimaced, with the good humor of a hostage. The federal judge who eventually dismissed the case, Dale Ho, did so begrudgingly. It was untenable to keep the case hanging over the Mayor's head, he wrote in his ruling, but added, "Everything here smacks of a bargain."

For months, as this saga played out, New York City politics was paralyzed. Would the Mayor step down? Or go to jail? Or somehow get reëlected? Adams himself liked to point out that he had been surviving allegations of corruption throughout his entire career. But his new relationship with Trump was different: he was making a city with more than three million immigrants vulnerable to a virulently anti-immigrant Administration. Half of Adams's deputy mayors quit. His fund-raising dried up, his poll numbers sank below freezing, and Governor Kathy Hochul took meetings with civic leaders, including Adams's longtime ally Al Sharpton, to discuss whether she should exercise her power to remove him. "He was the front-runner until he went

on ‘Fox & Friends’ and blew up his career,” an Adams adviser told me, incredulous. “This is very difficult,” Norman Siegel, a former New York Civil Liberties Union head, told me. Siegel represented Adams for years, when he was a cop fighting discrimination in the N.Y.P.D. “I thought Eric would be a transformative mayor,” he said. One current City Hall official told me, “I can’t fathom how this guy is going to govern in August. There’s going to be five people left in this building.”

The Mayor, who has denied any wrongdoing in office, sees his alignment with Trump as a lifeline, not a leash. The day his case was dropped, Adams, toting a copy of “Government Gangsters,” by Trump’s F.B.I. director, Kash Patel, gleefully announced that he was indeed running for reëlection—but he would skip the Democratic primary and appear on the ballot in November as an independent. It was a gambit that would strip Adams of party infrastructure, fund-raising networks, and staff, in exchange for six months to rebrand himself. (He is now collecting signatures for two ballot lines of his own invention, called Safe&Affordable and EndAntiSemitism—the latter clearly a dig at Cuomo, who has called antisemitism the “most important issue” in the race.) At his first City Hall press conference after the dismissal of the charges, Adams strode in victoriously to his usual walk-on song—Jay-Z’s “Empire State of Mind,” spliced with a loop of himself intoning the words “Stay focussed, no distractions, and grind.” He was wearing a tight T-shirt emblazoned with an American flag and the words “In God We Trust.” It was a reference, he explained, to his Orphean political journey to Hell and back.

The dream of a comeback has led some mayoral hopefuls astray. In 2013, Anthony Weiner, a former New York congressman who had resigned after sending lewd photographs to women online, sought a second act in City Hall, and spent several weeks that summer as a front-runner. (Polls showed that he performed especially well with women.) His campaign tanked when it emerged that he had never dropped the sexting; he had merely adopted the pseudonym Carlos Danger. He placed fifth in the primary. In 2017, he pleaded guilty to one count of sending obscene material to a minor and went on to serve eighteen months in prison.

Weiner’s downfall allowed Bill de Blasio, then the city’s public advocate, to storm to victory. De Blasio, who won with a rare coalition of Black voters

and white progressives, initially seemed poised to be a transformative force in city politics. He established universal pre-K and presided over historically low crime rates. But New Yorkers soured on him, too. He managed to incense both the N.Y.P.D. and people who wanted to defund the police. He dropped a groundhog on Groundhog Day. (The groundhog later died.) He made a wayward Presidential run. In 2022, de Blasio briefly tried to run for Congress in the Tenth District, which covered his neighborhood of Park Slope, Brooklyn, but he barely registered in polls. "Time for me to leave electoral politics," he tweeted. Unlike many unloved politicians, he had heard the message.

One morning a few weeks ago, I met de Blasio at his regular coffee shop in Park Slope. He had just come from the gym—the same one that he'd insisted on commuting to every morning from Gracie Mansion, no matter how much grief the press gave him for it—and was wearing sweats. He held forth among his fellow-patrons with a spirit of magnanimous, possibly unreciprocated camaraderie, greeting a startled man by the door with a familiar "How you doing, brother?" and ordering his breakfast (scrambled egg whites, cheddar, ham, and tomato on multigrain toast) as "*mi sandwich especial*." These days, de Blasio most often makes the news for his love life or for such momentous moves as dyeing his salt-and-pepper crewcut. But he's sensed a bit of de Blasio nostalgia creeping into town. "Since I left office, the No. 1 thing that people come up to me on the street and talk about is pre-K," he told me, lacing his iced espresso with a heavy pour of simple syrup. "The No. 2 thing that people talk about is that *Onion* headline." He quoted it for me, savoring every word: "Well, well, well, not so easy to find a mayor that doesn't suck shit, huh?"

The headline ran in June, 2021, shortly before Adams was declared the winner of the Democratic primary, and before a Cuomo mayoral run was even a distant possibility. De Blasio has little love for Cuomo, who was once a close friend, but who relentlessly undercut him from the governor's mansion. Their break began in 2014, when Cuomo rejected de Blasio's attempt to tax the wealthy to pay for universal pre-K. The following year, ahead of a blizzard, Cuomo gave de Blasio only a fifteen-minute heads-up before ordering a general shutdown of the subways, the first snow closure since the system opened, in 1904. Despite what de Blasio sees as Cuomo's callousness toward the city, he wasn't surprised that his old foe was

dominating the race. “When you have an incumbent mayor in crisis and lots of candidates, it’s like a perfect storm that has opened the door wide for someone with a lot of name recognition,” he said. “It’s a sad state of affairs. But it’s not mysterious.”

Perhaps the nostalgia is not for de Blasio but for his political moment, when loathed political figures seemed to stay gone. “I think we are in a post-shame era of politics,” Lis Smith, a veteran Democratic strategist who counselled Cuomo through his sexual-harassment scandal, and later regretted it, told me. “I don’t know that without Donald Trump you have an Eric Adams comeback, or an Andrew Cuomo comeback.” Eliot Spitzer, the former New York governor who resigned after he was caught patronizing a prostitution ring, told me that he recently offered advice to a mayoral candidate who was struggling to compete with Cuomo’s name recognition. “I said, ‘There are three ways to get into the public consciousness: be around for a very long time, have a ton of your own money, or have a scandal,’ ” Spitzer said. “You know, I did all three at one point.” In this environment, even Weiner has got the idea that New Yorkers might give him another shot. He’s running for City Council in Manhattan. “I collected petitions the last few weeks, and it might have been four out of a hundred people who refused to sign because of my scandal,” he told me in March. “But there might have been five people that didn’t sign because I’m a Zionist.”

Cuomo’s competitors are hoping that voters aren’t quite so ready to forgive and forget. In March, nine mayoral candidates appeared together at a memorial service for elderly New Yorkers who died after Cuomo ordered nursing homes to readmit *COVID* patients from hospitals—a jab at the former Governor, who sold a five-million-dollar memoir commemorating his pandemic leadership before there was even a vaccine. That same month, the former city comptroller Scott Stringer, one of the mayoral candidates, invited reporters to join him on what one adviser described as “a bus tour of places in the city Andrew Cuomo fucked up.” The stops included One57, a tower on Billionaires’ Row, intended to symbolize the city’s housing crisis, which worsened under Cuomo’s governorship, and the Fifty-ninth Street–Columbus Circle subway station, representing his neglect of mass transit.

The tour started outside the Oriana, the dreary midtown rental tower that serves as Cuomo’s city address. Just before Stringer arrived, Cuomo himself

strolled out of the lobby, then hurried back inside at the sight of reporters. “I have nothing to say,” he said tersely. Stringer showed up a few minutes later, carrying a dozen bagels, which he’d picked up to welcome Cuomo into the race—a local’s dig at a carpetbagger from Albany. “You just missed him!” someone shouted.

In this campaign, Cuomo has touted his biggest wins as governor, which include legalizing same-sex marriage and instituting a fifteen-dollar minimum wage, guaranteed paid family leave, and gun-control measures. His accomplishments, however, were often achieved by tormenting both his opponents and his subordinates. Andy Byford, the renowned transit expert whom Cuomo hired to fix the city’s beleaguered subways, quit two years into the job, saying that the Governor’s undermining had made his work “intolerable.” In early 2020, Michael Evans, the official in charge of the renovation of Moynihan Train Hall, died by suicide, having spent the final weeks of his life fretting over a looming deadline to complete the project. In a since-deleted tweet, his partner wrote that Evans had killed himself “after being terrorized by Gov. Andrew Cuomo.” (“A lot of us are still saddened by this loss,” a spokesperson for Cuomo said, adding, “As was reported at the time: Evans rarely spoke to the governor.”)

During the pandemic, Cuomo’s feud with de Blasio reached dangerous levels of dysfunction, as the two jostled for control of shutdown orders, vaccination sites, and distribution of personal protective equipment. “He went out of his way to make it harder for us,” a de Blasio administration official recalled. “If we were going to do something, Cuomo would rush to do it before us—just to cut us off at the knees.” And some of those who brought Cuomo down have continued to feel his wrath: Lindsey Boylan, a former state official who was the first woman to publicly accuse him of harassment, said that she has spent nearly two million dollars on legal fees, fending off the aggressive tactics of Cuomo’s taxpayer-funded lawyers. “He will go to all lengths to destroy people who have not been quote-unquote loyal to him,” Karen Hinton, a former press aide of Cuomo’s, said.

Cuomo declined numerous requests for an interview. But he did answer one question I sent him, over text message. Two years ago, as the rumors of a Cuomo comeback persisted, I wrote an article arguing that few people in New York wanted Cuomo or his style of politics back. When he resigned,

his approval ratings were below forty per cent, and he had few remaining friends in public life. I asked Cuomo, who had read the article, what I'd missed. "Either the world changed or you were wrong," he wrote, promptly. "You pick it." He declined to answer further questions.

In late April, a few hundred Brooklyn Democrats gathered at Medgar Evers College, in Crown Heights, to meet the candidates. The number of dry, issue-oriented forums that mayoral contenders are made to endure is a subject of dark jokes among the candidates and their staff, but this one had special pull. It was hosted by Black leaders in the Brooklyn Democratic Party, including the Party boss, Rodneyse Bichotte Hermelyn—a longtime Adams ally who had recently thrown her support behind Cuomo. It was also one of few occasions in which Cuomo, breaking his Rose Garden strategy, deigned to appear in a lineup with his competitors.

The night began with an interruption from Paperboy Prince, the activist and perennial gadfly candidate, who hijacked the stage wearing clown makeup and white gloves. Stalking back and forth, Prince, who'd qualified for the primary ballot, denounced the organizers for excluding him from the forum. He declared the entire proceeding, and maybe the entire city, a farce. "Take him down, please!" one organizer shouted at some N.Y.P.D. community-affairs officers. "Leave him alone! Let him speak!" a woman in the crowd shouted back.

Then the candidates appeared, one by one, making short speeches and taking questions from Ayana Harry, a reporter for NY1. Zellnor Myrie, a progressive state senator wearing a suit and neon-yellow Nikes, talked about his plan to build a million more homes in the city. Adrienne Adams, the sober, well-liked speaker of the City Council, spoke about racism and maternal-mortality rates. Stringer did his Borscht Belt-comedian-with-an-M.B.A. shtick, referring to Trump as "that schmuck." Brad Lander, the city's comptroller, rattled off racial disparities in net worth for New York families, sounding like a companionable guest on an economics podcast.

Mamdani, the leftist assemblyman, smiling, handsome, and bearded, called for freezing rent on rent-stabilized apartments, establishing government-run grocery stores, and making buses free. "I think New Yorkers are hungry for a different kind of politics," he said, speaking with the polished sincerity of a

socialist who went to Bowdoin. A guy sitting next to me remarked, “He’s got a guru factor.” An older woman in the row ahead of me wrote his name in a notebook that she’d brought with her, then looked him up on her phone. She crossed out what she’d written and spelled his name again, correctly.

Mr. Tough Guy spoke last, at around 9 *P.M.* As Cuomo strode across the stage, people took out their phones, straining their wrists to preserve a glimpse of the man. About a dozen people in the audience, members of groups called Planet Over Profit and Climate Defiance, came down the aisles and assembled on the stage. “Fuck you, Cuomo!” several protesters yelled. “Cuomo lies, New Yorkers die!” Cuomo, who was already seated, warily arched his eyebrows. Cops jostled with the demonstrators for several minutes, trying to force them from the stage before they could unfurl their banners.

“Get them out, please,” Henry Butler, the vice-chair of the Brooklyn Democratic Party, a former Brooklyn N.A.A.C.P. committee chairman, and a Cuomo endorser, pleaded to the police. Addressing the audience, he announced, “The clown show is over. I’m going to say this: One of the issues and problems with the Democratic Party—we claim to be a big-tent party—is that if you don’t have a certain view, then they try to shout you down. And I think it’s a disgrace when I see a bunch of young, white progressives trying to tell Black people who we should vote for.” Not everyone in the protest group was white, but this last line prompted the event’s biggest applause anyway.

Cuomo got on with the interview, unfazed. Unlike his opponents, he felt little need to dwell on the specifics of policy. (A few days earlier, it had emerged that his housing plan was written with help from ChatGPT.) When he was asked about the disconnect between falling crime statistics and persistent fears about crime in the city, the former Governor made it personal. “Don’t tell me that my feeling is wrong,” he said of his perception that the city has become unsafe. “My feeling is legitimate because that’s what I feel.” The statement was a notable contrast with how Cuomo has discussed the women who accused him of sexual harassment—a subject that he wasn’t once asked to speak about that night.

Most of the Democrats running for mayor are not scandal-tarred political titans of yore but, rather, wonkish reformers with polished résumés. In other words, they would rather talk about nearly anything other than the foibles of Adams and Cuomo. “Celebrity is flashier than competence,” Lander, a stalwart of municipal government, said. Adrienne Adams told me that she meant to pick up where Kamala Harris’s campaign had left off, offering voters a chance to elect a Black female leader. She has suffered from what consultants call a “name-I.D. problem,” not least because she shares a last name with the embattled incumbent.

Mamdani, the only non-Cuomo candidate to consistently breach double digits in polling, has done so because he’s the most ideologically distinct and social-media savvy. He began his campaign for State Assembly in 2019, as young leftist politicians in the mold of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez were being elected around New York. He still retains the idealism of those days, though his platform reflects more modest ambitions: free buses, not free health care. “Ideas are only as good as our ability to implement them,” he told me, over adeni chai at a Yemeni coffee shop on the Upper West Side. Outlets such as the *Post* have defined Mamdani by his opposition to Israel’s war in Gaza and his support for the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement, calling him “preposterous” and “dangerous”—a framing that Cuomo and his allies have happily embraced. Though Mamdani has yet to surpass twenty-five-per-cent support in any poll, he believes that he can appeal to voters beyond his leftist base. “I’ve had a lot of uncles at mosques across the city come up to me, take a selfie, and show me a selfie of them with Eric Adams at the same mosque four years ago,” he told me. “They’re saying, ‘I voted for him, and now I’m voting for you.’ ”

Why can’t New York have a nice mayor? Some say that the city’s current predicament is just a Queens thing. “We all have this gritty outer-borough attitude,” Frank Carone, the Adams ally who arranged the fateful lunch with Trump, said. “We have that little chip on our shoulder. We have that bond.” Trump grew up in a mansion in Jamaica Estates, the son of a millionaire housing developer. Adams, whose mother was a domestic worker, was one of six siblings raised in an eight-hundred-square-foot house in nearby South Jamaica. To Carone, a shared code of power and grievance overrides such differences. “We had to come up through the school of hard knocks,” he said.

Cuomo grew up in Queens, too—in Holliswood, about a mile from Trump's childhood home. Three years ago, when the ex-Governor was still politically radioactive, Adams extended a friendly hand to him, publicly dining with him at Osteria La Baia, a midtown Italian restaurant where the avowedly vegan Mayor was known to order the fish. Now Cuomo is trying to capitalize on his moment of weakness. Adams has responded with astonishment. "I was here already," he told reporters a couple of weeks ago at City Hall, sounding genuinely upset. "Why are you in my race? It's like almost when you have a house somewhere and someone is trying to move in—it's, like, go find your own house." Still, one gets the sense that Adams is excited to spend the summer sparring with Cuomo, even if he's likely to lose. "You can't campaign through tweets and videos," he said in March, seeming to taunt the ex-Governor. "Come out here and [answer] tough questions."

It's been nearly fifty years since Cuomo was last involved in a mayoral race. In 1977, at the age of twenty, he helped manage his father's doomed run against Ed Koch. Koch, who never married, held a decades-long grudge against the Cuomo campaign, and particularly Andrew, for the "Vote for Cuomo, Not the Homo" signs that reportedly appeared in Queens that summer. Since entering the race this year, Cuomo has made claims of having changed. In a seventeen-minute video that he used to launch his campaign, he admitted to having made mistakes, though he didn't specify which mistakes, or what lessons he has drawn from them. But, as Trump tries to impose his will on New York City, such gestures might be beside the point. "That's part of the pitch—that we need this, like, superhero-strongman-asshole, and that's Andrew Cuomo," Lis Smith, the Democratic strategist, said. Several people who have fallen out with Cuomo made the same comparison. "He's the Democratic Party's Donald Trump, without question," Karen Hinton, the former press aide, said. "So, if that's who New Yorkers want to vote for, Andrew Cuomo is their man."

What would Mayor Cuomo's posture be toward President Trump? Cuomo has appeared to be of two minds on the subject. In an interview with ESPN's Stephen A. Smith, Cuomo expressed a neighborly view of the President. "Donald Trump is from New York City, and he knows our problems here," he said. During a private event in Washington Heights at around the same time, he assured a roomful of people that he would fight Trump on their

behalf: “We’re going to be able to handle President Trump—don’t you worry about it.” One former aide to Cuomo told me that the two seem to understand each other. “When he talks to Trump, he calls him ‘boss,’ ” the former Cuomo aide said. “I’ve never heard him call anyone else ‘boss.’ ” (The Cuomo campaign denies this.) The former aide continued, “I think he and Trump get along very well—he kind of admires him.” ♦

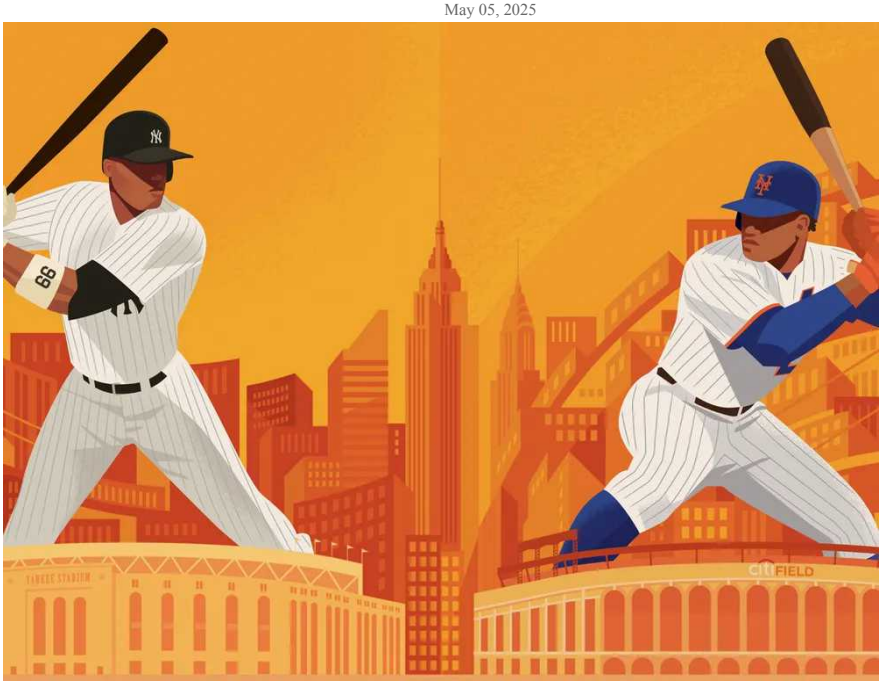
The Sporting Scene

If the Mets Are No Longer Underdogs, Are They Still the Mets?

New York's other baseball team has the league's richest owner and just poached one of the game's best hitters from the Yankees. They may never be the same.

By Louisa Thomas

May 05, 2025



On a sunny day in late March, Michael Matteo, Jr., lounged on a grassy berm beyond the right-field fence at Clover Park, a minor-league stadium set amid the sprawling strip malls of Port St. Lucie, Florida, about an hour up the interstate from the tony confines of Palm Beach. On the field, a New York Mets split squad was comfortably beating the St. Louis Cardinals in a spring-training matchup. The temperature was in the low seventies, cool for South Florida; that morning, the stadium's elevator attendant took comfort in knowing that at least the cold weather wouldn't frizz her hair. Back in Brooklyn, where Matteo lives, it was "thirty-five degrees and raining," he said, sounding pleased. In the bright Florida sky, a few contrails fluffed into

clouds. Matteo, who wore shorts and a commemorative ’86 Mets jersey, had taken off his shoes.

Matteo is a plumber by trade who also works as a garbage collector for the New York City Department of Sanitation. He was ten years old in 1986, when the Mets won the World Series for the second—and, to date, the last—time. It remains one of the great moments of his life. He goes to at least twenty games a year at Citi Field, in Queens, where the Mets play, and buys a season package when he can. He began bringing his son to Port St. Lucie three years ago. His son, who is now eight, was pressed up against the fence, baseball glove in hand. A few feet away, a young kid asked his mother whether a lazy fly ball was a home run.

Optimism is running high this year among those who cheer for the Mets. Usually, this is a bad sign: the Mets have a long history of disappointing their fans, not to mention their friends, their mothers, local authorities, themselves. The team lost a hundred and twenty games in its first season, in 1962, a record that held until last year, when it was bested, or worsted, by the Chicago White Sox. And yet the Mets have also maintained an almost continuous capacity to surprise. “It is safe to assume that the Mets are going to lose, but dangerous to assume that they won’t startle you in the process,” Roger Angell wrote, in this magazine, during that first season. By now, the losing is more of a spiritual condition than a description of the team’s overall performance in its sixty-three years of existence. There have been just enough moments of wild, inexplicable joy to keep hope alive. “I simultaneously expect everything is going to go perfectly *and* I expect some unimaginable calamity to befall us,” the writer Devin Gordon, a diehard Mets fan, told me. Gordon is the author of a book about the team, “So Many Ways to Lose.”

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“I just learned the rules of baseball, like, a year ago,” another fan, Kyle Gorjanc, standing near Matteo on the berm, told me. She wore a Mets hat studded with palm trees over her pink-streaked hair. Last season, the Mets lost thirty-three of their first fifty-five games, and looked terrible. Then they went on a run that lasted through the summer and into the fall, ending only in the National League Championship Series, where they faced the juggernaut Los Angeles Dodgers. The turnaround began on a day that Grimace, the McDonald’s character, threw out the ceremonial first pitch. The shaggy purple blob became a mainstay at games. “The Mets were very meme-heavy last year,” Gorjanc said. “It’s what got me interested.” She’d become envious when her partner, Nick O’Brien, who was with her at spring training, attended a playoff game, and afterward texted her a picture of two Grimaces and a Hamburglar break-dancing in the parking lot.

The high expectations for the team this year seem more grounded in something like reality. During the off-season, the Mets signed one of baseball’s best hitters, Juan Soto, a Dominican player who turned pro at sixteen and won a World Series, with the Washington Nationals, at twenty-one. He’s now twenty-six and a terror to pitchers everywhere. A disciplined, versatile hitter, Soto drew more walks before turning twenty-six than any player in major-league history—while also ranking among the league leaders in slugging. He is slotted second in the Mets’ batting order, behind Francisco

Lindor, the team's shortstop and clubhouse leader, and ahead of Pete Alonso, a popular slugger with a barrel chest and a small head—fans call him the Polar Bear. It's a top-of-the-lineup that rivals any squad this side of the Dodgers.

A few hours before the next day's game, I watched Soto up close, taking batting practice. Almost alone among big-league hitters, Soto steps into the batter's box to face opposing pitchers with the air of a man who has the upper hand. He doesn't look at a pitch so much as calculate it, and when he has solved the equation he lets you know, either by swinging perfectly and making solid contact, or by letting it go by, almost certainly out of the strike zone—in which case he will then sweep his leg back and forth or shimmy his big, muscular hips, bringing them ostentatiously close to the ground. These movements are referred to as the Soto Shuffle, but there is nothing hesitant or dancelike about them. "It's like I always told him—when you get into the batter's box to hit, you own that space," Soto's father, Juan Soto, Sr., a salesman from Santo Domingo who used to pitch bottle caps to his toddler son, told ESPN a few years ago. By all accounts, Soto, Jr., is almost unfailingly polite, but in the box he puts on a show of dominance. (When asked recently to name the best hitter of all time, he answered, "Myself. Until you prove me I'm wrong.") He sometimes grabbed his crotch as part of his routine back when he was a kid, which was not very long ago.

At batting practice, neither his DayGlo-orange long-sleeved undershirt nor his construction-cone-colored hat could distract from the sight of his massive quads. In nearly all his physical particulars—chest, jaw, hindquarters—he resembles a cartoon bull. Much attention is paid to his keen eye and intelligence at the plate, but the violent energy he sends back into the ball, from his cocked foot through the torque of his body, is at least as impressive. In the cage, he took swings with a steady rhythm, his backswing moving smoothly into his ready stance, the cocking of his foot like the click of the metronome. When he straightens out his leg into his stride, the rotation of his body has already begun. I watched as ball after ball exploded off his bat, a lone firecracker trailing into the hazy blue sky.

Mets fans are thrilled by how Soto might juice the team's offense, but they are also elated about where he is coming from: last year, Soto played for the New York Yankees. He made the World Series with the Yankees and was reportedly offered seven hundred and sixty million dollars to continue playing for the Yankees. And yet he chose the Mets, rejecting the team whose pin-striped professionalism and unparalleled success have served as taunts in the direction of Mets fans since 1962. Baseball insiders saw the Mets as a likely destination, but, to fans of the team, the whole scenario seemed so improbable that many didn't believe it was possible. Matteo had said to his friends, "Who would leave the Bronx to come to Queens?"

"New York likes winners, right?" the sports-talk host John Jastremski told me. Jastremski is a Yankees fan. "I think whether you are coming from the glitzy high-rise Tribeca penthouse or you live in wherever, you like winners in New York." (When Soto's choice was reported, Jastremski said, on his podcast, "Seeing Juan Soto in that Met uniform is going to make me want to vomit!") Truthfully, though, the Mets have always reflected a different sort of New York ethos: even during the good years, the team's fans have held on to the underdog identity that was inscribed at the beginning. "It is the team for every guy who has to get out of bed in the morning and go to work for short money on a job he does not like," Jimmy Breslin wrote, after that woeful inaugural season. "And it is the team for every woman who looks up ten years later and sees her husband eating dinner in a T-shirt and wonders how the hell she ever let this guy talk her into getting married. The Yankees? Who does well enough to root for them, Laurence Rockefeller?"

Soto probably does well enough to root for the Yankees. The Mets have agreed to pay him even more than the Yankees offered—seven hundred and sixty-five million, plus various signing bonuses, perks, incentives, and possible escalators. It is, by a significant margin, the largest contract in American sports history. The Mets could make that offer because the team is now owned by one of the richest men in the country, Steve Cohen, a hedge-fund billionaire with a reputation on Wall Street for being reclusive and rapacious. The feds investigated his hedge fund, S.A.C. Capital, for securities fraud; Cohen was never charged with wrongdoing, but the firm had to pay a penalty of $1.8 billion, and some of the top traders went to prison for insider trading. (In 2014, Cohen opened a new fund, Point72.) As the Mets' owner, though, he has been forthright and sensible. Many players openly love him, and Mets fans do, too. They sometimes call him Uncle Steve.

"As much as it's hard to root for a billionaire, Uncle Steve is so much cooler than the Wilpons," Nick O'Brien said, in the sunshine of Port St. Lucie. He was referring to the real-estate developers—and Bernie Madoff investors—who owned the team for decades before selling it to Cohen, in 2020. "He's invested heavily in psychedelics," O'Brien explained, when I asked him what made Cohen cool. (A couple of years ago, Point72 bought nineteen million shares of a company that specializes in psychedelic therapies.) So,

O’Brien wasn’t bothered that Cohen made his money from the kind of Wall Street speculation that has benefitted a few New Yorkers at the cost of so many others? “Not bothered feels too binary,” O’Brien said. “Slightly bothered.”

O’Brien wore a Mets Hawaiian shirt and, like Matteo, was barefoot. “I like being a fan of the underdog,” he said. “If Yankee fans win, they’re, like, ‘Oh yeah, we expected this.’ So they’re just going to be sort of fundamentally unhappy.” I asked him whether he worried about becoming fundamentally unhappy if he started expecting the Mets to win. “I’m not really a worrier,” he said.

Like nearly all the other Mets fans I talked to, O’Brien and Matteo seemed to feel that a scrappy identity is nice and all, but really they just want to see their guys on top. The players feel similarly. “Even growing up in Wyoming, I knew the Yankees,” Brandon Nimmo, a lanky outfielder and the Mets’ longest-tenured player, told me. “The Mets were just kind of known as that ‘other’ team.” He and his teammates had a bit of a chip on their shoulder when they faced the Yankees, he said. But, since Cohen had bought the Mets, there was less of a sense of inferiority. It’s no longer a “David-versus-Goliath story,” Nimmo said. “It’s now a Goliath-versus-Goliath. We’re on even ground, which is the way I think it should be in New York.”

There is no local ordinance that says New York has to be a Yankees town, and in fact it wasn’t always: for the first few decades of big-league baseball, the city’s allegiance lay mostly with the Giants, who were perennial contenders at the start of the twentieth century. The Yankees were the junior team until a brewer’s son, Jacob Ruppert, bought them, in 1915, and they became flush with cash. Then they pilfered a slugger in his mid-twenties from a rival club: Babe Ruth, who’d begun his career with the Boston Red Sox. Ruppert and his co-owner built Yankee Stadium a few years later. It was much larger than other ballparks and, some said, had the sterile feeling of a bank. The Yankees seemed “to be thoroughly imbued with the New York idea that money can buy anything,” a columnist wrote in *The Sporting News*. And maybe it could, because during the next hundred years the Yankees won twenty-seven championships.

They'd just won their nineteenth when the Mets arrived, on a wave of nostalgia. The Giants had left the city for San Francisco five years earlier. Only one person voted against the move: the stockbroker for Mrs. Joan Whitney Payson, who owned a small share in the team and loved Willie Mays. (She was also fond of horse racing and the Impressionists.) When a lawyer named William Shea put together a plan to form a new league to compete with Major League Baseball, he tapped her to own its New York team. She could afford it—she was a Whitney, after all, as in the museum. To head off Shea's plan, the American League and the National League each agreed to add two new teams, including a National League team in New York City which would be principally owned by Payson. She understood the assignment. The Mets weren't going to win a World Series right away. They needed to draw former fans of the Giants and of the other team that had left for California, the Brooklyn Dodgers. And they needed to entertain them.

Nothing about the Mets, except possibly their name, the Metropolitans, was particularly subtle. (Payson, for her part, had preferred Meadowlarks.) The team's insignia was the same orange intertwined "NY" that had been used by the Giants, and the blue was borrowed from the Dodgers. The first roster featured once great players who were recognizable to the spurned fan bases, even if the quality of their play no longer was. To manage the team, Payson called on Casey Stengel, a gifted coach who was an even more gifted

gabber. He'd recently been fired from the Yankees for the sin of aging. "I'll never make the mistake of being seventy again," he said.

Just reading the names on the early Mets rosters is a laugh: Choo-Choo Coleman, Vinegar Bend Mizell, Hobie Landrith, the coach Cookie Lavagetto. There was Bob Miller (Lefty) and Bob Miller (Righty), who shared a hotel room on the road. Jay Hook had a degree in engineering and was the rare pitcher who could explain how a curveball curves. ("If Hook could only do what he knows," Stengel said.) Above all, there was Marvelous Marv Throneberry, the team's poor patron saint. It was frequently pointed out that Throneberry's initials spelled *MET*, though his fan club, which was legion, wore shirts emblazoned with the word *VRAM*: Marv backward.

The Mets have always been vaguely embarrassing; it's part of their charm. In 1964, a man with a giant baseball for a head, who'd been appearing in cartoon form on team publications, started attending games at Shea Stadium: it was Mr. Met, the major leagues' first in-person mascot. Soon, Lady Met appeared. (They married in the mid-seventies.) When the Mets somehow won the World Series in 1969, people called it a miracle. It was just a good team, really, led in part by a brilliant young pitcher named Tom Seaver. But the Mets were already too deeply associated with the bizarre for it to be understood any other way.

When free agency came to baseball, in the late seventies, the team didn't pursue any of the newly available stars or pay its own stars the new market rates. This angered Seaver, who eventually asked to be traded. Payson had died in 1975; her heirs sold the team in 1980, to Doubleday, the publishing house, and Fred Wilpon, a shareholder, became the team president. (Wilpon and his brother-in-law Saul Katz later bought out Doubleday.) The Mets outshone the Yankees for a period in the eighties, and won their second World Series. That team was as garish and chaotic as any other Mets squad, albeit much more talented than most. But Metsiness, it turned out, had a dark side. There was drug abuse and accusations of domestic violence; some of the team's best players were pushed past their breaking points by the pressure of the season. Others didn't seem to need any pushing. It was the go-go eighties in New York. Drugs fuelled the night clubs, and the stories out of Wall Street included even more malfeasance than usual. Players groped stewardesses and snorted coke in airplane bathrooms, and that was just the stuff they admitted to. The go-to book about the '86 Mets is called "The Bad Guys Won."

That team ultimately imploded in scandal and recrimination, and the Mets returned to more low-key modes of self-defeat. There was the time that Robin Ventura hit a walk-off grand slam in Game Five of the 1999 National League Championship Series, against the Atlanta Braves—officially

downgraded to a single because Ventura was mobbed by his teammates before he could finish rounding the bases—only for a Mets reliever to walk in the Braves' winning run a game later, ending the Mets' season. In 2006, the team's best player, Carlos Beltrán, struck out on three straight pitches to end Game Seven of the N.L.C.S., with the last pitch a curve that passed right over the middle of the plate as he stood there, frozen, the tying run on second base. The next season, the team blew a seven-and-a-half-game lead in the standings, with just seventeen games to go. In one low moment, Mr. Met was caught on camera flipping off fans; in another, a player sprayed bleach at reporters. Beltrán was hired as the team's manager, then was discovered to have helped engineer a cheating scheme while with his previous team, the Houston Astros. Several promising young aces blew out their elbows. One All-Star pitcher ended up missing games because he held in his pee too long. Very Mets.

On an afternoon in April, I met the team's general manager, David Stearns, in a windowless conference room down a hallway or two from the locker room at Citi Field. Stearns is among the brightest of the whiz kids to arrive during the "Moneyball" era—young men who speak sabermetrics with native fluency and project the confidence of people who could succeed at any number of white-collar jobs. Raised on the Upper East Side, Stearns went to Columbia Grammar, then Harvard, where he majored in political science. A lifelong Mets fan, he spent a summer interning for the Brooklyn Cyclones, the Mets' minor-league affiliate in Coney Island, where his many responsibilities included running races in a giant hot-dog costume and power-washing the bathrooms. After college, he worked his way up the baseball food chain through a series of more conventional internships and positions, spending more time inside spreadsheets than novelty costumes. He made his name by turning around losing, small-market teams, mostly through savvy trades and bargain contracts. At forty, he's no longer a phenom, exactly, but he can still give that impression. Although he was not the first person Cohen hired for the job, he is the clearest embodiment of the team's direction in this new era. When we met, he wore a gray three-quarter-zip pullover with a Mets insignia subtly embroidered on the chest, the crisp collar of a blue-checked button-down peeking out of the open neck.

When Cohen bought the team, he said, somewhat notoriously, "If I don't win a World Series in the next three to five years—I'd like to make it sooner—

then obviously I would consider that slightly disappointing." He then signalled his seriousness by approving a trade for Lindor and giving him what was, at the time, the largest contract in team history. He also splurged on starting pitchers. The Mets won more than a hundred games in 2022 but lost in the Wild Card Series, and basically fell apart the following year. The team traded the pitchers for prospects, and Cohen called Stearns, who had recently stepped down from a job running the Milwaukee Brewers, exhausted by the long hours away from home, and taken an advisory role instead. But he couldn't resist the chance to turn things around for his childhood team. His goal, and Cohen's, isn't just to win the World Series but to make the Mets competitive in a predictable, sustainable way. In the conference room, Stearns, slipping into business bromides, told me that this was a matter of controlling what they could control and attending to the "synergies between the front office and field staff." He mentioned "core principles that we talk about behind closed doors." There are three of them, he said, but he refused, with a smile, to tell me what they are.

"David is a remarkably smart, patient, opportunistic head of state," Gary Cohen, the Mets' longtime play-by-play announcer, told me. The job does entail a degree of ruthlessness. This past off-season, the front office didn't re-sign the infielder Jose Iglesias, who had been so popular in the clubhouse and among fans that his musician alter ego, Candelita, was practically

another mascot. And Stearns was hardnosed in negotiations with Alonso, bringing him back on a smaller contract than some fans thought he deserved. But it wouldn't be fair to say that everything is numbers now for the Mets. After Cohen took over, he and his wife, Alex, a diehard Mets fan, invited the players and their wives to dinner at a mansion they own in Greenwich, Connecticut, which sits on eighteen acres. Nimmo and his wife bonded with the Cohens on the property's pickleball courts. Citi Field had never had an especially nice place where players' partners and kids could take refuge during games; within a year, the Mets had the best "family room" in the league, with full-time child care on game days. It was "eye-opening," Nimmo told me: before Cohen, he said, "if we were going to do some improvement, it was usually four or five years out." Lindor described to me a team culture in which people were held accountable, but with the expectation that everyone was in it for the long haul. "People don't walk around on glass," he said.

Soto remains close with his parents, who still live in Santo Domingo, and he cited Cohen's emphasis on family as part of why he signed with the Mets. He was reportedly moved that Cohen's father-in-law, a Mets fan who grew up in Puerto Rico, also attended their meetings, which were held at two of Cohen's other mansions, in Boca Raton and Beverly Hills. (Cohen, the third of eight children, grew up in Great Neck, Long Island, where his father worked in the garment industry and his mother taught piano lessons.) In truth, though, Soto's decision still seems somewhat mysterious. He has said that the Yankees were originally his first choice—his father, last year, described the club as "the home of baseball"—and he has denied rumors that Yankee Stadium security accidentally mistreated a member of his family. Cohen, for his part, thought that his first meeting with Soto was a disaster, because Soto kept pointing to weaknesses in the Mets' lineup. Cohen is an art collector, most noted for having purchased not one but two hundred-million-dollar Giacomettis. (He has since sold one of them.) Soto's agent, Scott Boras, has suggested that Cohen was "adept at dealmaking because he dealt with the art world, where your market is nobody else's market, because you want the art."

Cohen has described the Mets as an "unpolished gem." He told *Sports Illustrated*, "I love the fact that I can change how the Mets are perceived, how the Mets fans perceive themselves." Stearns said something similar to

me, though he put it differently: “You historically have gotten knocked down a lot as a Mets fan, and you have to be able to still relish and create excitement for yourself about what comes next, even though what has just happened may not have been the most enjoyable experience.” This was a pattern that he and his colleagues were trying to change, he said. “The goal is that future generations of Mets fans, or specifically this generation of Mets fan, doesn’t need to live that way.”

Was he worried that some of the fun and the delight of being a Mets fan might drain away if the pattern changed? He’d thought about this, he said, but last season showed him that the team could have “tremendous success on the field” and still be the Mets. “We’re not the New York Yankees,” he said. It was true—the team’s ride to the N.L.C.S. had seemed like a giant party. The Yankees, meanwhile, had made it a step further than the Mets, all the way to the World Series. But they ultimately lost, just barely avoiding a sweep, and their fans seemed humiliated.

Perhaps it’s a bit romantic to think that the ups and downs of the Mets mean more than whether or not the team plays in October. And yet most sports fans recognize that how they understand the world is shaped by what happens to their favorite teams, and by the identities that fans form when they come together. Cities see themselves in the players that represent them.

There was a chance, Devin Gordon, the writer, conceded, that the Mets would turn into “a garden-variety pro-sports franchise” and that something would be lost, something funny or even just fallible, a certain kind of humanity. It’s hard not to connect this with broader changes under way in New York City—the arrival of freshly minted billionaires and the departure of more modest institutions, the replacement of public goods with private amenities, the never-ending rise in rent. Is there a place for people who don’t always come out on top? Or do you need a hedge-fund manager’s fortune to get by? Are there no more Davids, only Goliaths?

The Mets opened their season on the road, against the Astros. The game came down to the last out of the ninth, with the Mets down two, the tying run on, and Soto at the plate. One of baseball’s best closers, Josh Hader, was on the mound. Hader threw three straight balls. Soto sees a fair share of hittable pitches, partly because pitchers sometimes give up on trying to find an edge. He had already got the better of Hader in a few key moments during their careers. But Hader followed the three balls with two strikes. Soto sat fastball, then whiffed at a slider way off the plate to end the game.

The season is long; one at-bat, one series, even one month says very little. Soto had the next fifteen years to redeem himself. Still, it was a disappointing start, and although the Mets began the season against two lesser teams, they split their first six games. The offense was sputtering; only Alonso was hitting well. The Yankees, meanwhile, were bashing home run after home run. Aaron Judge, the team’s Paul Bunyan, did not seem to miss the presence of Soto in the lineup at all. But the Mets’ pitching had been better than expected, and no one was panicking when the team arrived at Citi Field for the home opener, on April 4th, against the Toronto Blue Jays. Matteo surprised his son at school that day, showing up in his Mets gear and taking him to the game. “Everything was just electric,” Matteo told me. The Mets won, 5–0. Then they won again, and again, and again.

On a cold Tuesday in April, with the team on a five-game winning streak, I went to Citi Field. Frigid air blew in at gale-force speeds; the game was moved from an evening start to 4:10 *p.m.*, to make the most of the still-wintry light. Beforehand, there was a press conference to celebrate the anniversary of a hoax: in an issue dated April 1, 1985, *Sports Illustrated* published a piece by George Plimpton purporting to be a profile of Sidd

Finch, a fictional French-horn-playing Harvard-dropout yogi who could throw a pitch a hundred and sixty-eight miles per hour. Naturally, Plimpton had made him a Met.

Citi Field has an appealing openness: from the concourse and the stands, there are views of Flushing Bay and the Whitestone Expressway, the distant Manhattan skyline and nearby auto-body shops. The food is decent, too, and reflects much of the ethnic makeup of the surrounding area. On game days, kids play catch in the parking lot, where Cohen would like to put a big casino. (He'll need approval from the New York State Legislature.)

On account of the updated start time—and, no doubt, the threat of frostbite—fans didn't begin arriving until about thirty minutes before the game. Attendance was announced at nearly twenty-nine thousand, but no more than a couple thousand people actually showed up. Many seized the chance to huddle close to the field, regardless of what their ticket stubs said, presumably—the ushers did not appear to be checking seat assignments. Others gathered out of the wind, in the seats under the overhang. When the Miami Marlins' lead-off batter popped up, the ball was buffeted so much by the wind that it fell for a hit. It was hard to imagine how a batter could stand the sting of his hands in that cold, or how a pitcher could grip a ball, let alone throw strikes. But then Lindor led off with a home run, his first of the

year. The Mets' starter, Clay Holmes, struck out ten batters in five and a third innings—including, at one point, five in a row. Nimmo broke a tie in the fifth with a two-run double; in the sixth, Soto was intentionally walked to load the bases, and Alonso cleared them with a double. Energy coursed through the stadium.

The score was 9–5, Mets. Temperatures had dropped into the thirties, and the wind continued to blow. But the crowd seemed to be getting bigger and louder. There were gasps to spare for a dramatic play by the Marlins' center fielder, who sprinted toward a long fly ball into the left-center gap and dove, snagging the ball midair and holding onto it as he skidded across the dirt, saving three runs and some modicum of the Marlins' respectability. Neon-orange hats still studded the stands; few people headed for the aisles. Perhaps this was easy to explain—only diehards would show up in this weather. And the Mets did have a winning streak going. There was something almost carnivalesque about playing baseball in such miserable conditions.

Before the game, I had spoken to Lindor. He has a gentleness about him, particularly when he talks; in person, he was both smaller and more muscular than he seemed on TV. He struggled when he first got to the Mets—for a while, fans thought that his acquisition was a bust. At one point, after long hearing it from the fans, he celebrated a big hit with a thumbs-down in their direction, unleashing a torrent of criticism. Now he's the anchor of the Mets' defense; last season, he was one of the league's best hitters. (If a single thing turned around the Mets' fortunes last year, it was probably—with apologies to Grimace—a team meeting that Lindor called, at the end of May, in which he insisted that they hold one another accountable.) I asked him about a glove I saw him wearing during spring training, which featured the emblems of various city workers: the N.Y.P.D., the Department of Sanitation, the Fire Department. "My first year, it took me a little bit to understand the culture and understand how things work," Lindor said, of New York. "It's all about working and trying to make it, you know? It's all about hustling." He said that the way New Yorkers are protective of their people reminded him of Puerto Rico, where he was raised.

The Mets' early-April winning streak ended at six, but they continued to play well enough to reach the top of their division. (The Yankees reached the

top of theirs, too.) Soto, like Lindor, got off to a bumpy beginning as a Met—during one stretch, he went a dismal two for twenty-four. Then, in the bottom of the fifth in a game against St. Louis, he came to bat with the Mets down one and a runner on third. The noise of the crowd grew louder, and the fans at Citi Field rose out of their seats: a standing ovation, urging on the new star. He hit a game-tying single, as if in response. Later, he said that he was "a hundred per cent" surprised by the crowd. "I really appreciate what they did," he said. "I feel like they don't know how meaningful that is." His numbers were not yet up to his previous standards; even so, as April drew to a close, the Mets were off to their best home start ever. They looked comfortable in first. ♦

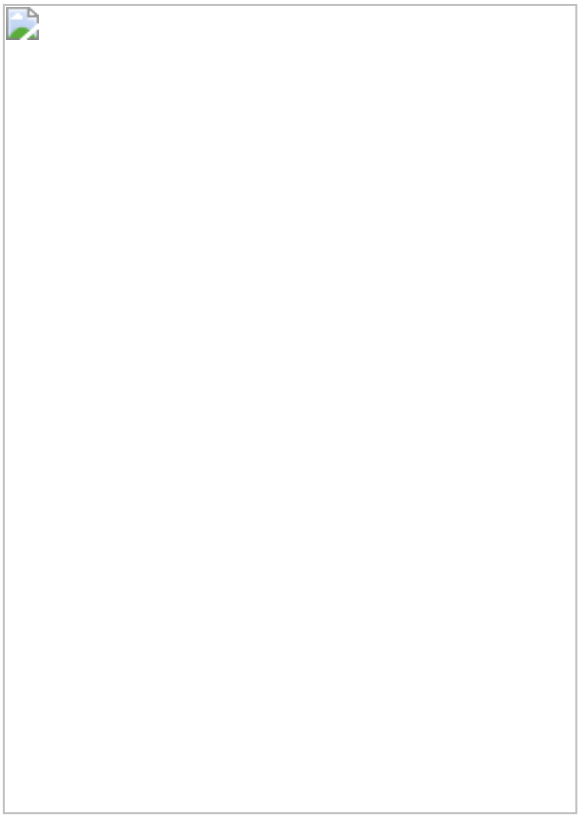
Profiles

How Lorna Simpson Broke the Frame

Simpson’s wryly evasive photos, films, collages—and now paintings—peel back the layers of our looking.

By Julian Lucas

May 05, 2025



Lorna Simpson found the meteorite on eBay. “It was for a great price,” she told me, declining to give the exact figure, though she later admitted that it had cost about six thousand dollars. The seller was “some guy upstate” who’d never listed anything comparable and provided no proof of its celestial provenance. But when it was finally delivered—to her airy studio in the Brooklyn Navy Yard, where I’d come to see her on a February afternoon—magnets clung to its dimpled surface. “I’ve got this idea—it’s *meteorites!* ” she mimed telling her gallery, Hauser & Wirth, affecting the voice of an exuberant naïf. Simpson knit her eyebrows: “They were, like, ‘O.K.’ ” She began screen-printing photos of meteorites onto fibreglass panels, then painted over them in silvery hues. Last November, she exhibited the results in a show called “Earth & Sky,” placing the meteorite itself in a corner of the gallery.

Simpson is contemporary art’s astronomer of the archives, always searching for the dark matter that “documentary” images conceal. This most recent suite was inspired by a photo of a meteorite in an antique geology textbook, whose caption described its near-collision with an unnamed sharecropper in nineteen-twenties Mississippi. His strange destiny—chosen by the heavens, erased by Jim Crow—obsessed her. Now a work from the series has been acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and will feature in its retrospective of Simpson’s paintings later this month.

“I look for an image that’s already crazy, and then just do a little bit more,” she said over pastries, handing me a *Jet* pinup calendar from 1972. Like Mitt Romney, Simpson keeps binders full of women. Some of her paintings begin as digital collages sourced from vintage Black magazines; this calendar’s smiling, topless cover model had accessorized her lingerie with a bandolier of bullets, as though in preparation for the revolution.

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We were seated on a couch surrounded by old books and mineral specimens, an island of clutter and coziness in a sparse, white-columned expanse. Paintings leaned against the wall to one side. On the other, beneath a wide window with a view of the Manhattan skyline, a collaging table was heaped with paper scraps. Miss Black America, in a fur stole, advertised sparkling wine; near a clipping of an African sculpture, wig models beamed. With scissors and glue, any one of these might become a sky goddess or a chimera, acquiring that aura of mysterious privacy which has been Simpson's trademark since the nineteen-eighties, when she broke out with a series of photo-texts depicting Black women whose faces never appear.

They were clean, placeless silver-gelatin-print portraits, taken from behind or from the neck down, or substituting isolated body parts for absent figures. Their fragmentary captions undercut reflexive assumptions; in the words of the artist and writer Coco Fusco, they "came to stand for a generation's mode of looking and questioning photographic representation." Perhaps the most celebrated is "Waterbearer" (1986). A young woman in a sleeveless white dress, her back turned to the camera, empties a silver pitcher with one hand and a plastic jug with the other. "*She saw him disappear by the river, they asked her to tell what happened, only to discount her memory*," the caption reads. The image has become an icon of Black feminist self-reclamation. Refusing to accede the viewer's curiosity while inviting speculation, it is also emblematic of Simpson's singular slyness, which sets her apart from the contemporary efflorescence of Black portraiture that her work helped to inspire. "People are comforted by a rendering of a figure," she said. "Nothing wrong with that. It satisfies a particular kind of desire around presence. For me? I like to complicate."

Simpson is a slender, dark-skinned woman with angular cheekbones and heavy-lidded eyes, frequently narrowed in contemplation or amusement. She has a halo of springy black curls, touched with gray at the roots, worn in a bun at the studio. Glamorous yet chicly casual, she was dressed in silky sage trousers embroidered with dragons and indigo-stained Uggs. She speaks

unhurriedly in a delicate, sweetly thickened voice, as if she's just swallowed a spoonful of honey. But her hearty laugh drops into a lower register—as when she confessed to accidentally skipping an appearance at a commencement ceremony headlined by Michelle Obama, which she forgot about amid a divorce-related ordeal. Her right arm is inked with sinuous tattoos from Tahiti, where she vacationed after the separation; one constant of her practice is a readiness to move on.

"I try to be very open, as though someone else is coming to me with an idea and I have suggestions," she told me, describing the sleight of mind that she uses to go beyond what "Lorna Simpson" would or wouldn't do. Her themes have remained consistent—memory and its erosion, photographic artifice, and the construction of identity by linguistic and visual codes. But she's explored them across a formidable range of media: video, screen printing, installation, collage, found photography, and, more recently, painting, which she took up in 2014.

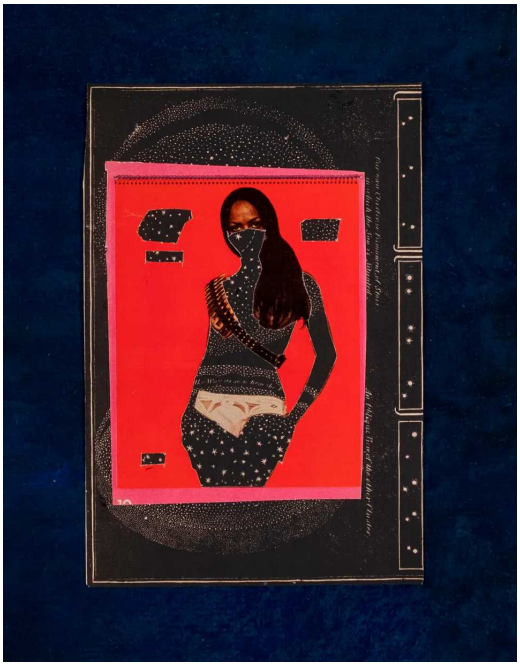
She showed me a few of her newer works: women's faces and Arctic landscapes, executed in a palette of pearls and cool blues. An enormous lapis-lazuli glacier was streaked with columns of newsprint. Beside it leaned a portrait that stitched together disparate models from *Ebony* magazine.

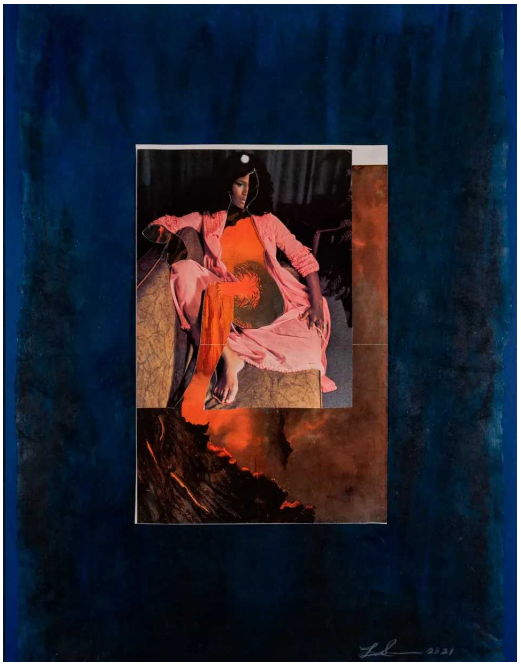
I asked about a piece, at least eight feet in height, that was facing a wall. Simpson swivelled it around with ease—her favored surface, fibreglass, is lighter than wood or linen and takes screen-printed images without warping. "It's my masterpiece, which I'm not ready to reveal!" she said, raising a hand to her brow. "No, it needs to be covered over with gesso."

Painting was, initially, humbling. The discipline intimidated her in art school, and even more so when she returned to it as a mature artist. A few early experiments started "weeping" at an exhibition, because some of her water-based inks wouldn't cure on fibreglass. Yet Simpson shed no tears. She's turned painting into a summation of her practice, creating monumental compositions that counterpose individuals with the frames imposed by nature, culture, and the cosmos. "There's a circling back," she said of the medium. "It's also collage, it's also silk screening. It's a combination of all of these other things that I've done."

Simpson hadn't painted for a month when I visited. She'd been busy with preparations for the retrospective, and with checking on her house in the Los Feliz neighborhood of Los Angeles, where her daughter, Zora—an actor, model, and editor at the art magazine *November*—lives full time. ("She drives me everywhere," Simpson told me. "I don't know where anything is.") She said that I might be able to watch once she returned to the easel, though it could easily become "a total nightmare." For now, the sun was going down, and there was still time for a drink before dinner. Simpson tossed her things into a bag and made for the exit, pausing to glance at the meteorite caption, which she'd blown up and hung on the wall. She had restored the name of the once nameless sharecropper, Ed Bush, who "did not at any time see the stone until it hit the ground."

"I feel very provincial about New York," Simpson told me. She'd spent most of her life within a mile of where we were standing—an isle of sidewalk under the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway where the bustle of the Navy Yard gives way to Fort Greene. She has lived in the neighborhood since 1988, when a gift of twenty thousand dollars from her grandmother allowed her to buy a Federal-style rowhouse that predated the Civil War. It took Simpson five years to restore it. "Everyone would say I was crazy, because I was living on the top floor and I had to tear out the staircase," she recalled. "But I had a ladder."



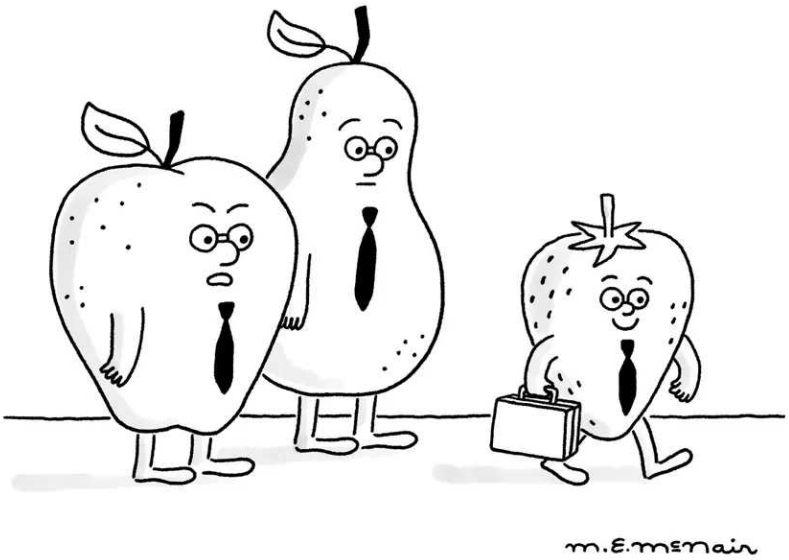


The home was just a few blocks from Lafayette Gardens, a public-housing development on Classon Avenue where Simpson was raised. It later became notorious for gun violence, but in her childhood it was filled with hopeful young families. “The projects were new,” she said. “I would take the elevator and go see friends on different floors.” She coveted the Puerto Rican girls’ First Communion dresses. Her own father, Elian—known as Chico—was a Cuban-born social worker; her mother, Eleanor, was from Chicago and worked as a hospital secretary. Simpson was their only child.

A family friend, Jacqueline McMickens, described Simpson’s parents as a vivacious, fashionable couple with sizable Afros who collected art prints, argued ceaselessly about Black politics, and threw memorable house parties. “We treated the kids like they were adults, which was probably to our detriment,” McMickens said. Her son Charles, who attended a small private elementary school with Simpson, recalled the freedom they felt in middle-class Black Brooklyn, where neighbors knew one another and celebrations often spilled onto the streets: “Nobody called the police.”

Chico and Eleanor immersed Simpson in the arts from a young age. “They weren’t going to pay for babysitters, so they just took me to everything,” she said. “I saw the first theatrical performance of ‘Hair,’ and they were naked. I was horrified!” Her talent was obvious from elementary school, when she

traded tissue-box coupons for a Polaroid camera and constructed a model city out of spools. She also danced, joining a Lincoln Center youth program affiliated with Alvin Ailey, in a routine involving gold body paint and wigs. “Even at ten or eleven, it was, like, ‘This is so Vegas,’ ” she said. But something was off: “I realized that I wasn’t a performer, because I wanted to see what was happening onstage so bad.”



In 1968, when Simpson was eight years old, the family moved to Hollis, Queens. “It was like going to the country,” she said. “People had back yards and grew flowers.” When she got into the High School of Art and Design, in midtown, the commute was two hours each way. She turned the distance into a social advantage. “I had friends who lived in Co-op City in the Bronx, the Upper East Side, the Upper West Side,” she told me. “The subway was our friend.”

At Olea, a Mediterranean restaurant near the Clinton-Washington G stop, Simpson fortified herself with a glass of rosé. “You asked about my childhood,” she explained. As a teen-ager, she often stayed out, partly to avoid her father’s violent outbursts—a memory she blocked out for so long that it fell to old schoolmates to fill in the gaps. “Your friends are the ones that remind you of who you are and what you’ve experienced,” she told me. “The psyche can only take so much.”

At seventeen, Simpson moved to Harlem and enrolled at the School of Visual Arts, where she meant to study painting before she was seduced by the darkroom. Considering a career in photojournalism, she took out extra loans to travel. Once, she drove a "teeny, tiny Fiat Cinquecento" with a boyfriend to the edge of the Sahara, where a scorpion sighting ruined an overnight stay with local nomads. "They were, like, 'Oh, that's no big deal,' " she recalled. " 'All you have to do if you're stung is suck out the venom and pee on it.' " (She slept in the car.)

A summer internship at the Studio Museum in Harlem proved more inspiring. There, in 1980, Simpson met the conceptual artist David Hammons, whose ephemeral approach to art-making expanded her horizons. (She remembers him nailing bottle caps to telephone poles.) "New York became a sort of adult playground for me," she said, describing nights out to hear poetry and see avant-garde performances. "It was so much more of an education than my education." A frequent companion was Kellie Jones, a fellow-intern and now an art historian at Columbia. "We enjoyed thrifting together," Jones told me—clothes, ceramics, mid-century-modern furniture. "Lorna was top-notch."

They became lifelong friends. Jones often visited Simpson in California, where she'd been persuaded to enroll in U.C. San Diego's M.F.A. program by the artist and photographer Carrie Mae Weems. Simpson and Weems shared a two-bedroom apartment with a balcony. "We'd come home from class, have a glass of wine, and brainstorm about all the knuckleheads," Weems reminisced. The two took dance classes and made cross-border trips to Tijuana for coffee and flowers. "We looked out for one another, and we were almost the only Black women in our department," Weems said. "The question that shook us and shaped us was, what was the meaning of representation?"

"Representation" had to do not only with identity but also with the formal relationship between life and art. U.C.S.D.'s faculty included many poets and performance artists of the nineteen-sixties vanguard, not least Allan Kaprow, whose zany public "happenings" revealed the constructed nature of social reality. Weems, like them, went on to use her body in her work. But Simpson felt alienated by the retired radicals—a cliquish, overwhelmingly

white group—and their antics. “I was too introverted for all that,” Simpson said. “But I was interested in the performative *aspect* of work.”

Her thesis, a multi-panel piece called “Gestures and Reenactments,” explored the performance of race in everyday life. It shows a muscular Black man in a white T-shirt assuming six different postures. (He was a member of the water-polo team whose California physique threatened to short-circuit Simpson’s conceptualism: “As a New Yorker, I was, like, ‘There are humans that look like this?’ ”) The captions imply a vulnerability that complicated the stereotypes of Black masculinity: “Sometimes Sam stands likes his mother,” one reads; another alludes to the fear of being confronted by police. The result is a kind of anti-portrait, one that does not so much portray an individual as ask the viewer: Who do you think you’re looking at?

“I was so done with California, I didn’t even take pictures,” Simpson said of the work’s exhibition in an unused storefront. She was eager to return to New York. There, she’d already met artists like Hammons and Ana Mendieta, and, in 1986, she had her first solo show at Just Above Midtown, a gallery for Black contemporary art, featuring a series of photo-texts on folding screens. The city’s art scene was still largely segregated, and still suspicious of photography. Yet that was beginning to change. “They’d already had five years of Cindy Shermans and Barbara Krugers,” Jones told me. “But we were the women in these pieces,” she went on. “That was the exciting part.”

In an age of sensationalized Black hypervisibility, Simpson coolly dissected the assumptions embedded in both language and looking. A dark-skinned woman in white, reclining between the phrases "*YOU'RE FINE*" and "*YOU'RE HIRED*," could evoke a catcall, an odalisque, or a clinical inspection. Another paired hair-braiding instructions with a triptych showing a woman's neck from behind, her coiffure from above, and the inside of an African mask. The works suggested the rigors of taxonomy and anatomy, only to reveal that such systems fail to capture the lives they claim to classify.

Thelma Golden, the director and chief curator of the Studio Museum, encountered Simpson's photo-texts in the *Village Voice* as a student at Smith College. "She was mining not just the written language," Golden said, "but the spoken language"—drawing on folklore, news reporting, and Black vernacular idioms that went beyond the explorations of her white conceptualist peers. Jones introduced the two soon after Golden graduated. A few years later, as a young curator at the Whitney, Golden helped usher Simpson's work into the mainstream—and later became her close friend and Zora's godmother.

"Lorna makes place," Golden said, comparing the opportunities that Simpson has created for a generation of Black women artists to the many

gatherings she's hosted. Golden recalled a New Year's party that Simpson threw with the curator Okwui Enwezor in 2017. It was meant to be a small dinner party, but after a blizzard the guest list swelled to more than a hundred. Golden described guests clambering over snowbanks to make it inside, where they danced through the night and feasted on lobster, turkey, and crown rack of lamb. Simpson had come a long way, but in spirit, Golden insisted, the party wasn't so different from those she'd once thrown at the unfinished brownstone: "Even in the days that we were climbing that ladder, Lorna made a space that we could all be in. And, yes, Lorna is renovating again."

A few weeks later, I accompanied Simpson to the opening of a Jack Whitten retrospective at *MOMA*. The museum was thronged. In the lobby, a jazz band played; upstairs, an art-world Who's Who took in Whitten's mosaiclike abstract paintings. Golden held court in a corner; Jones walked up and gave Simpson a squeeze around her waist. A young curator named Thomas Jean Lax—who had recently mounted a show about Just Above Midtown—took her warmly by the hand, asking when her Met retrospective would open.

"May 19th?" Simpson replied.

Lax brightened: "Grace Jones's birthday, Malcolm X's birthday, and Ho Chi Minh's. That's good energy."

Simpson twirled her index finger and did a little dance. "I'm glad I left the house," she said. "And who wants to leave the house these days? Not I."

She sidestepped a cluster of familiar faces and continued through the exhibition. Simpson marvelled at the disciplined breathing Whitten must have required to make such straight lines across one orange canvas, which reminded her of atmospheric heat waves. (He'd gone over it with a rake-like tool called the Developer, often comparing his process to photography.) Nearby was a painting that evoked a silhouetted head and shoulders: "Black Monolith II: Homage to Ralph Ellison the Invisible Man." Whitten was deeply engaged in the struggle for Black liberation, but some leaders of the Black Arts Movement had little patience for artists who dithered around with shapes, colors, and concepts when they should have been representing Black lives.

It's a false choice—abstraction versus representation, aesthetics versus politics—that Simpson knows all too well. By 1990, she had emerged as an art-world star, with a show at *MoMA* and a prime spot at the Venice Biennale, where my colleague Hilton Als, then writing for the *Village Voice*, favorably contrasted Simpson's photo-texts with the L.E.D. texts of Jenny Holzer, who was representing the United States. "What the faceless woman with her back turned is doing in these pieces," he wrote, "is finally turning her back in order to address herself."

Few others crossed the color line to consider Simpson in such company. She was routinely identified with her models; a *Newsday* profile characterized her work as being about "what a tangled and terrifying thing it is to be a black woman." Simpson *was* interested in race. Yet her focus was not self-expression but systems of meaning. "Wigs II," a photo wall depicting dozens of hairpieces—blond bobs, Afros, and everything in between—contains no bodies at all. Other works were nearly Dadaist in their freewheeling associative play. But, as late as 2009, the Met omitted Simpson from a survey of the so-called Pictures Generation, which included Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger, Louise Lawler, James Casebere—then Simpson's husband—and not a single Black artist. She felt too little affinity with the group to care much. More lastingly troublesome is the general blindness to anything but race in her work. "Why can I not assume some universality around

having a Black character?" she asked. "Everyone wants a mirror of themselves."

Midway through the Whitten exhibition, Simpson's progress was all but arrested by a carrousel of friends and fans. One was Glenn Ligon, dressed in brown corduroy—a Black conceptual artist of Simpson's generation, who credited her with clearing a path for his own wily text-based work. Another was Rashid Johnson. Simpson seemed particularly excited to see the photographer Dawoud Bey, who's spent a half century chronicling life on the streets of Black communities, mostly through dead-on portraits. They'd been classmates at S.V.A., and in 1992 Bey took a striking Polaroid of Simpson, her right eye glinting amid the shadows cast by her shoulder-length mane. Recently, though, he's turned to photographs of forested scenes—and a professor and curator who knew the pair seemed skeptical.

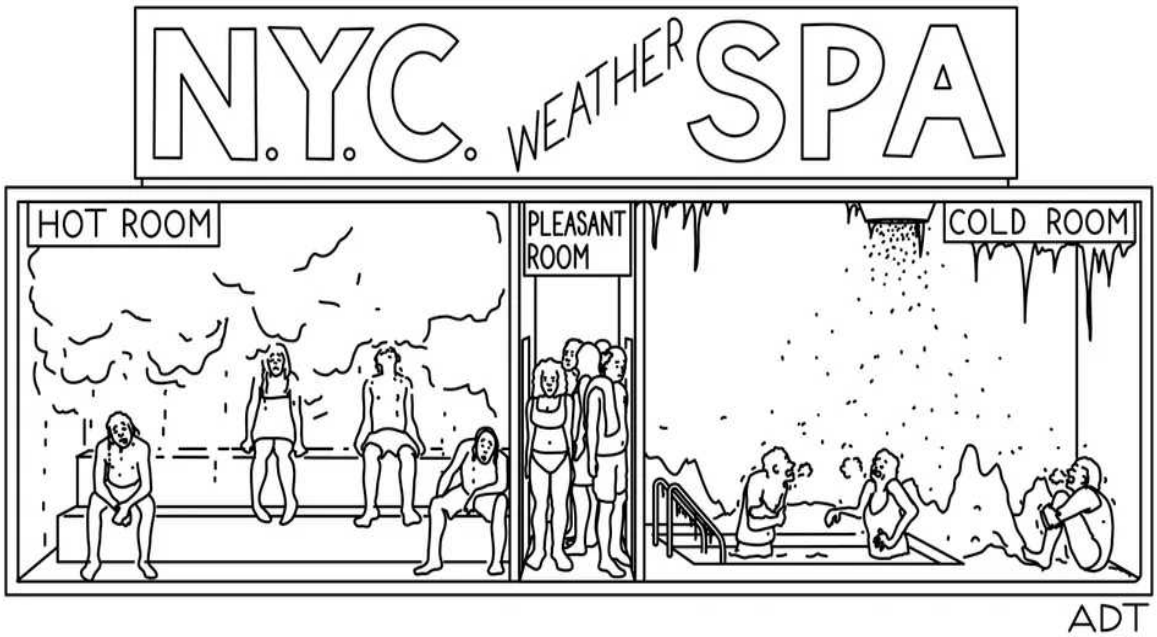
"You threw me with the landscapes," the curator teased Bey. "*Trees!* " Artists, he went on—clearly trolling—ought to stay in their disciplines, if only to simplify syllabi. Simpson, who'd been side-eying the exchange, theatrically folded her arms. "You gotta get a grip, man," she said. "Art is a lifelong activity. People make choices. You get to switch it up!" Everyone laughed. "I always tell people what I think. That's why I get in trouble all the time," the curator said, boasting that Whitten had once ejected him from

his studio. Once he'd gone, Simpson turned to me and rolled her eyes: "Can't you see why?" The vehemence reflected her own quest to outrun legibility, which propelled her beyond photo-text and into other orbits.

Six hands pulled a squeegee down the length of a table, pressing ink through a mesh screen onto a fibreglass board. Simpson gripped the tool from the left, shimmying backward in her teal Nikes. Her longtime printmaker, Luther Davis, knee-walked on the tabletop to steady its middle, while a colleague in blue gloves held the far end. When they reached the edge, they carefully lifted the frame. "Ta-da!" Simpson declared. "One swipe."

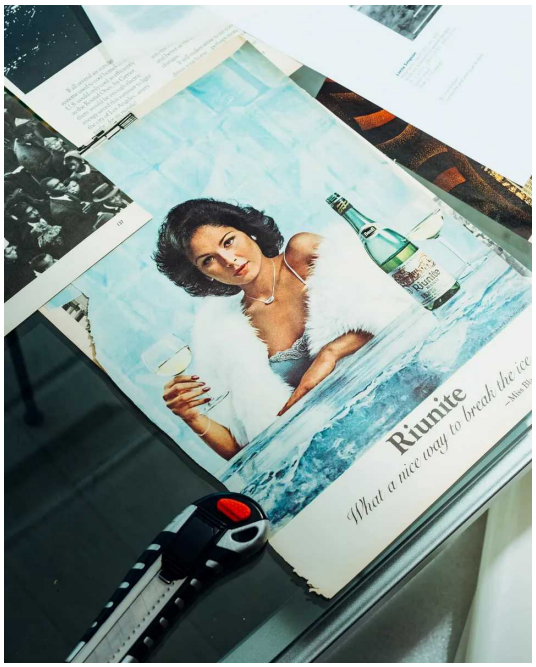
A young assistant in a Lakers jersey blow-dried the composition: a dancer atop a platform, surrounded by ladders, with a cigar in her mouth and astronomical charts draped across her jauntily posed figure. It was a reproduction of a collage from a series called "Sky Pinups," partially inspired by Zora's gift of a book called "The Disordered Cosmos," by the physicist and Black feminist writer Chanda Prescod-Weinstein. A construction tower behind the figure was from an article in *Ebony*, Simpson told me; the face belonged to the dancer and choreographer Carmen de Lavallade, and the starry raiment had been clipped from a nineteenth-century engraving. A pocket of air had left a white splotch—Davis fretted, but Simpson didn't. "I'll paint in the dots!" she told him, before turning to me with an explanation: "The aberrations become starting points I can play with."

The printshop was at Powerhouse Arts, a Brooklyn nonprofit in a converted subway power station. A half-moon window looked out on the Gowanus Canal and the identical luxury condos rising around its stinking waters. Davis, who runs the shop, has worked with Simpson since the mid-nineties, when she began silk-screening cityscapes onto felt panels. Felt, he noted, was less forgiving than fibreglass: the ultraviolet dryer used to cure the ink would sometimes singe the felt's edges. "They would curl up in the light and smell like burning lambs," he told me.



Simpson had grown bored with framing photographs, and the familiarity of her enigmatic figures threatened to blunt their unsettling effect. In her new cityscapes, which she pieced together in sections, she left people out entirely. But the felt's furred obscurity conjured novel mysteries. "The more you get up close to the images, the more they fall apart," Simpson said.

They were seamy in both form and content. For a series called "Public Sex," Simpson blew up photos of places like parks, alleyways, an office building, and a museum gallery to wall size, captioning them with riddling erotic narratives that alluded to the city's underground life. "I once almost went to a dungeon on Fourteenth Street," Simpson told me, but she backed out at the last minute. More often, she went dancing in the meatpacking district, and hung out at Florent, an all-night diner in the neighborhood. Her depopulated tableaux also served as an elegy for the friends she'd lost to *AIDS*, and for the lives and losses that photographs of cities, like photographs of people, can't quite contain.



As Davis power-washed de Lavallade off the reusable screen, Simpson settled into an armchair and reached into her formidable black canvas tote. “You wanna see?” she asked, pulling out a slim package. Inside were five wallet-size photos, probably from the nineteen-thirties or forties, of a Black man in a three-piece suit trying out various expressions. They were destined for one of her “photo booth” works: large, cloudlike arrays of found snapshots, drawings, and magazine clippings, each housed in a tiny custom frame. It’s as if the viewer were being asked to sort memory—nebulous, secondhand—into reality and invention. Simpson considered letting me watch her browse eBay: “Maybe you’ll make me lucky.”

Her art took an archival turn around the millennium, coinciding with the deaths of her parents, her marriage to Casebere, and the birth of Zora. The felt and photo-text works gave way to films and installations built from repurposed images and reënacted memories. “If you need to find something—something obscure, something that you can’t imagine—Lorna Simpson is who you call,” Golden told me. Once, Simpson offered to restore a photo album that Golden had inherited, in terrible condition, from her Jamaican grandmother. “She gave me back a museum-archive treasury,” Golden said.

Simpson, whose parents told her little about their backgrounds, has long been drawn to the memories of others. One of her most beguiling photo-

booth works, “1957–2009,” began with a single snapshot: a Black woman, stylishly dressed, leaning against a mid-century car. Simpson liked it so much that she amassed nearly a hundred other photos of the same woman, sometimes along with a man. The pair appear in a series of flamboyant poses: noodling on a piano; smoking solemnly in front of art works; curtsying mid-phone call in a risqué nightdress.

Simpson came to see these photos not as candid moments but as the record of an elaborate performance—Cindy Sherman before Cindy Sherman. Defying her usual ban on appearing in her work, she decided to become the duo’s double, reënacting their “crazy narrative” shot for shot. “It took an entire summer,” she recalled, partly because she was so camera-shy. She bought wigs and costumes, and enlisted Zora—then still a child—to help set up outdoor scenes near the house she shared with Casebere in upstate New York. The resulting work includes both the original portraits and Simpson’s rendition.

It was a new and more impish kind of refusal—flaunting faces and poses while keeping the source material’s mystery intact. Around the same time, Simpson started painting small watercolor portraits, a respite from the logistical demands of film. Then, in 2010, she found a box of *Ebony* magazines that had belonged to her grandmother. She was riveted by the models’ stylized expressions—young women, posed within an inch of their lives, hawking jewelry, cosmetics, and hair-care products. She was drawn to the before-and-after shots, in which women were transformed into fierce “huntresses” or beaming “corn row cuties.”

Simpson began making collages, clipping out the women and giving them watercolor perms in “unnatural” shades such as lime green and violet. “It was a relief to not have to make sense,” she told me. Like the German Surrealist Hannah Höch, whose own collages she’d long admired, Simpson aimed for simplicity and strangeness. In one series, crystals replace hairdos. A pensive woman contemplates a lavender column of spodumene; another dreams up an unruly Afro of azurite malachite. It’s as if their inner lives had erupted, breaking through the glossy surface of bourgeois fantasy.

One especially arresting collage shows a pair of mascaraed eyes glaring from the shaft entrances of a graphite mine—the refusal to meet a gaze from

without recast as a penetrating stare from within.

Simpson's collages nearly always use found images, but she made an exception for Rihanna, who invited her to shoot her cover of *Essence,* in 2020. "There was a separate security detail for the jewelry," James Wang, who works at the studio, recalled. Rihanna kept them waiting for seven hours. During the shoot, which went late into the night, Rihanna hovered behind Simpson and Wang, oohing and ahing as they edited in Photoshop. In the final image, the singer stares out from beneath a hairpiece made of sodium-chloride crystals—a heap of transparent cubes that echoes her diamond collar and suggests, perhaps, that she might be a bit salty.

The high-profile commission coincided with a broader resurgence of interest in Black portraiture. Many younger artists—some following Simpson's lead—were probing the conventions of representation and remixing archival material in speculative ways. Most were painters, and Simpson, albeit somewhat unconsciously, joined them. In 2014, she began working on Claybord panels, sometimes starting with a silk-screened image, sometimes painting freehand. "She was very resistant to calling them paintings," her studio director, Jennifer Hsu, said. Intensely private, Simpson often sneaked into her studio on weekends, when no one else was around.

Then, one day, her friend Okwui Enwezor visited. After seeing the new work, he invited her to exhibit in his edition of the Venice Biennale. He singled out "Three Figures," based on a news photograph of civil-rights protesters being hosed by police. Simpson had broken the image across several panels and ringed it with runny black ink; he encouraged her to go even bigger, envisioning a series of monumental history paintings.

Simpson moved from wood and Claybord to fibreglass, which allowed her to scale up, and from hand-painted figures to screen-printed images layered with pigment. “It’s an overlay,” she said of her paint use. “I can obliterate parts or revert, make this part or the mid-tones a different kind of darkness.” Her series “Special Characters” enlarges and fuses the faces of different models making similar expressions, highlighting their subtle asymmetries—what might, at first glance, read as a lazy eye or a lopsided hair style—by framing them with contrasting squares.

“She leaves relics of the screen-printing process visible through these organic veils of ink and acrylic,” Lauren Rosati, the curator of the Met exhibition, told me. “You are always aware—even if the source may not be apparent—that images have been embedded in a surface.”

Time’s alteration of photographs and their associations is set in parallel with natural cycles. Around 2016, a poem about the Black polar explorer Matthew Henson by her friend Robin Coste Lewis—another maverick of the archives—helped inspire a series of paintings about the Arctic, which flood its frozen landscapes with electric blues. In these seemingly inhuman terrains, the figure coyly persists: a woman’s profile appears along the sheer side of a craggy peak; another’s eye peeks out from a crevasse.

Is Simpson carving out a space for Blackness in a realm long claimed by white explorers? Or is she critiquing what Toni Morrison once described as the conflation of Blackness and femininity with wilderness and its terrors? What do bullet holes, from an *Ebony* spread on gun violence, have to do with the polka dots on a model's dress? The layering of contexts becomes as politically charged as their absence was in the photo-text works. Yet the lush, sensuous surface of the paintings shifts the focus inward.

Perhaps turning one's back on the world, for Simpson, is no longer about exposing its assumptions but about opening a space for imaginative play. Asked about a recent glacier painting, she simply said, "I just enjoyed making that painting. It was really cool."

I never did get to watch Simpson paint. The Friday I came to her studio for that purpose, she said that she'd been struggling, then whisked us off in her Volvo XC90 to an early dinner in Fort Greene. There was, as usual, no parking. A trio of middle-aged white pedestrians were saving a spot in front of an elementary school—not far from a house that was characterized, in a nineties profile of Simpson, as so dodgy that "the cabbie hesitates to discharge his fare." Simpson accepted their apologies with a smile, rolled up the window, then exclaimed behind the wheel, "This ain't the suburbs."

Eventually, she dropped me off at a corner to scout a table. I stopped by four restaurants before I found one. There are downsides to growing up with the neighborhood, and the beloved haunts, the affordable brownstones, and the bushy-tailed young artists are—like David Hammons's bottle caps—fugitive, alas, as the years.

Several days later, Simpson texted me snapshots of two new paintings—a glacier and a figure in a bikini wearing a costume tiger's head. She'd used the acrylics sparingly: to tint the water blue, the fur orange, to cover the woman's skin with stars. Whole swathes were left unpainted. Did she mean to keep going? I asked. Simpson replied with a string of emojis: "😱😂😂 they are finished," and I winced at the faux pas. But, then, images in Simpson's work rarely declare themselves finished. They flicker into view, like something falling through the atmosphere, briefly lit. ♦

On and Off the Avenue

My New York City Tour of Tours

Things I learned by embedding with the tourists: the Ramones loved Yoo-hoo, Peter Stuyvesant was uptight, and how to do “a quick Donald Trump dance.”

By Patricia Marx

May 05, 2025

I’m a sucker for guided tours. I love a CliffsNotes condensation of a place. All of Rome in ninety minutes gave me a Visigothic sense of accomplishment, untarnished even when my tour bus’s automated audio commentary got out of synch, implying that the Pope lived in the Trevi Fountain. I was once shepherded through Beijing’s Forbidden City by the voice of Roger Moore, coming from a stuttery tape recorder; while visiting the Teotihuacán ruins, outside Mexico City, I was de-toured to a basilica housing the cloak of the Virgin of Guadalupe, which we viewed from a moving sidewalk. It looked like a dry-cleaned blouse still covered in plastic. I was fascinated to learn, therefore, that some consider Herodotus the father of the travel guide. His fifth-century-B.C. account of Egypt arguably invented the form, and it even included the obligatory section on public rest

rooms: “[The Egyptians] established for themselves manners and customs in a way opposite to other men in almost all matters . . . the women make water standing up and the men crouching down.”

Until recently, though, it never occurred to me to be a tourist in the city where I’ve lived for forty years—namely, New York, which received almost sixty-five million visitors in 2024. So, during a span of a few weeks, I went on seven guided tours. I learned so many factoids that I am practically a walking almanac of New York City, with a useful appendix listing Some Amusing Things You Can Say at Cocktail Parties.

The options were bounteous. Among the tours I didn’t take were “Smelling Bushwick,” “Death in New York,” and one of Ellis Island Hospital, for which tourgoers must wear hard hats, and traipse through infectious- and contagious-disease wards, the mortuary, and the autopsy room. In other words, as Samuel Johnson said of the Giant’s Causeway, in Northern Ireland (some forty thousand volcanically formed basalt columns sticking out of the sea), “Worth seeing, yes; but not worth going to see.”

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My tour of tours began on a freezing February morning. For three hours, I trekked through the streets of Hasidic Williamsburg along with two Swiss sisters, a married lesbian couple from Argentina, a Jewish Lebanese woman now living in New York, two friends of hers from Romania, and a Frenchman living in England accompanied by his mother (Tours by Frieda, $99, includes noshing). Frieda Vizel, our cicerone, was raised in the ultra-Orthodox upstate village of Kiryas Joel. ("It's a different planet," she said.) Vizel was set up at eighteen with a man she married after a thirty-minute meeting; fifteen years ago, when she was twenty-five, she left the community for a secular life, taking her five-year-old son with her. An outsider who knows the ways of the insiders, she is the amphibian of tour guides. She has two hundred and sixty-four YouTube videos, on topics ranging from female head shaving to Hasidic wedding-night sex, which have been watched millions of times; 2.3 million have viewed her TikTok on kosher phones (i.e., flip phones or browser-free smartphones that can't access social media, streaming, or gaming).

Vizel, a pert, petite blonde whose face was partially concealed by sunglasses, a scarf, and a ski hat, was a fount of Hasidic semiotics. Of the three Hasidic Jewish neighborhoods in Brooklyn, Vizel told us, Williamsburg is the "most Amish." She meant the most insular. Pointing to a squat building across the street from a luxury high-rise where Justin Bieber used to live, she asked, "Does anyone know what architectural detail tells me this is a Hasidic apartment house?" Answer: the balconies are arranged in a staggered pattern, so that the terrace on one floor is never directly above or below the terrace on another. Why? The observance of Sukkot, a weeklong fall holiday, stipulates that you must eat all meals in a hut open to the sky. ("Camping vibe meets Christmas vibe," she said.) We stopped at Brachsoni Shirts, a pickleball-court-size store carrying nothing but stacks of identical-looking men's white button-downs, then paused in front of a parked B110 bus to Borough Park—D.O.T.-franchised, but operated by a private company and used mostly by Hasidim. In 2011, the line was investigated by the D.O.T. for making women sit in the back. Officially, the rule no longer exists, but, according to Vizel, any female passenger who dares to sit up front must be O.K. with males in the vicinity moving away.

My favorite stop on the tour was a variety store called Lee Avenue Photo—specifically, the toy section. Vizel explained how the assortment of

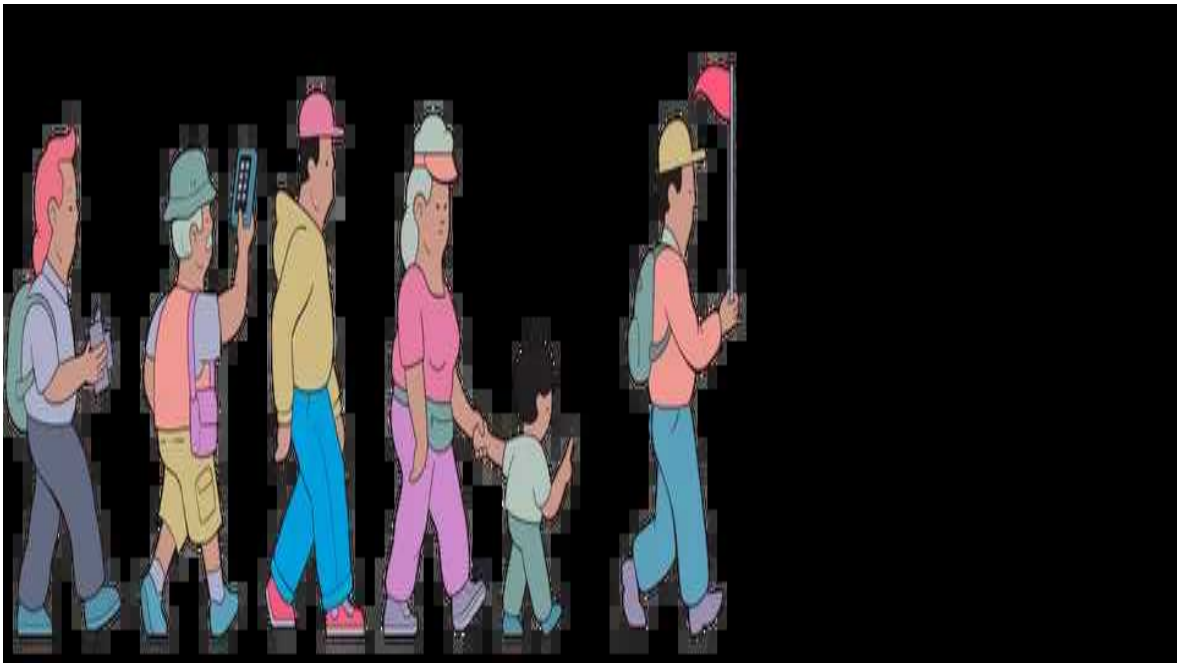
playthings reflects Hasidic family values: for instance, instead of princess dolls, there are brides. A "Babysitter Set" of miniature dolls includes one baby-faced babysitter and nine very young children, which is three more offspring than Angelina Jolie has. Boys, how about a "Hat Store"? Five male dolls accessorized with seven different hats, each worn by various members of the Jewish diaspora—and a hat brush and box. Jealous, Ken?

If there were Michelin stars for tours, Vizel's would get three. A standout was the crunchy fried lox on a bagel that we were given at Williamsburg Bagel, where we met Michael Stoessel, who helps his friends manage the store, and works as a diamond cutter.

The two-hour "Remnants of New Amsterdam" walk, an archeological take on the seventeenth-century colony that became Manhattan, began on the steps of the National Museum of the American Indian, near the Battery (Untapped New York, $39). Four hundred years ago, on this spot, the Dutch began building Fort Amsterdam to keep the Natives (and the English) out. Our guide, Mandy Edgecombe, a trained geologist with a background in archeology who is also a former park ranger at Ellis Island, livened up the tour by periodically pulling items out of her messenger bag, Mary Poppins style. She started by brandishing a giant oyster shell. (According to some biologists, in the sixteen-hundreds, half the world's oysters were in New York Harbor, some so big that their shells were the size of a pro basketball player's shoes.) Next came a nutmeg (the spice was so valuable that in 1667 the Dutch ceded control of New Amsterdam to England in exchange for a teeny Indonesian island called Run, which was then one of the only nutmeg sources in the world), and a copy of a map of New Amsterdam drawn in 1660 by the surveyor general of New Netherland. Edgecombe explained that when the British took control of New Amsterdam, in 1664, the colony's Dutch director-general, Peter Stuyvesant, couldn't get anyone to join him in resisting the invasion. "Eventually, he received a letter signed by ninety-three townspeople," Edgecombe told us. "It said, 'Please chill out. We don't give a shit about New Amsterdam.' " She went on, "Life in the colonies was not so great. If you got kidnapped by a Native, there's a chance that you wouldn't want to go back home to your family, because life with the Natives was much more culturally warm and safe." (The Patty Hearst story prefigured!) Edgecombe dispensed a bit of historical trivia that delighted

me: the Lenape were called “the old women” by the neighboring Iroquois, who considered them too nice.

At the start of Rock Junket’s “East Village Rock n’ Punk” tour ($47), our guide said, “I’m your host, Bobby Pinn, and I thought I would tell you I made that name up, because the majority of people I’ll speak about today had stage names—all the Ramones, Dylan, Bowie. I thought, *What the hell, man, I’ll go with the flow, right*?” Pinn, who said that he worked in marketing and sales at various record labels from around 1990 to 2010, speaks with the relaxed cadence of a late-night radio announcer who needs to inhale only once an hour. He had on a baggy Rolling Stones sweatshirt and a pair of jeans, and his platinum-blond hair was styled in punky spikes, à la Billy Idol. Pinn preferred not to divulge his age (“Rock and roll’s a young business,” he said), but if I had two guesses I’d say “Sixty-three but looks fifty-three” or “Fifty-three but looks sixty-three.” “You guys have any favorite bands?” Pinn asked me and my six tour-mates. They included a d.j. from Chicago; the C.T.O. of a software company from Raleigh, North Carolina, accompanying his seventeen-year-old drummer son and a sixteen-year-old guitarist nephew; and a guy studying music theory at Juilliard.



“I’d have to say the Ramones,” the d.j. said, and most everyone chimed in, “Yeah.” Pinn was delighted. Our first stop was 115 East Ninth Street, a

white brick building where Joey Ramone, né Jeffrey Hyman, lived in a four-hundred-square-foot apartment until his death, in 2001, of lymphoma. Pinn explained that Johnny Ramone walked a straighter line than his bandmates. "I don't know if you guys remember that Johnny went to military school as a kid," said Pinn, "so he was a bit more orderly around the guys than I think they were hoping for. In the dressing room at gigs, Johnny would always request a couple of cold six-packs of Yoo-hoo." There were plenty of other rock tidbits. For instance: an annual readers' poll in a 1973 issue of *Creem* named the New York Dolls both the best new group of the year and the worst new group of the year. Standing in front of the former CBGB, Pinn lowered his voice to a reverential register, and explained that when the club was forced to close over a rent dispute, in 2006, Hilly Kristal, its owner, put everything inside into storage, including the urinals. "And, when asked why, he had the best answer," Pinn said. "He said, 'Man, a lot of famous people pissed in these.' "

Not everyone on a tour is a tourist. Because the Mount Vernon Hotel Museum and Garden, a restored antebellum day resort at 421 East Sixty-first Street ($15), is situated in a neighborhood dense with doctors and hospitals —sometimes called Bedpan Alley—it attracts locals looking for diversion when visiting a sick friend or family member, according to our docent, Rosemary Bergamo. The tour starts with mandatory viewing of a quaint introductory video ("What was America like when the hotel operated here [1826-33]? . . . Swine innumerable roam at large . . ."), narrated by a woman in a puffy-sleeved frock of a sort that the Old Lady Who Lived in a Shoe might wear when she has company. Bergamo led us through eight period rooms, including a women's parlor with sewing equipment, and the tavern, with its well-stocked bar. The property was originally owned by President John Adams's daughter, Abigail, and her husband, William Stephens Smith, who sold it in 1796 after Smith lost all his money. Today, it is owned and operated by the Colonial Dames of America, who seem to have bought it from the Standard Gas Light Company, in 1924. My favorite antediluvian bit of gossip: in 1806, the ne'er-do-well Smith (about whom President Adams wrote, "All the Actions of my Life and all the Conduct of my Children have not disgraced me so much as this Man") stood trial for treason for trying to free Venezuela from Spain.

“The world reveals itself to those who travel on foot,” Werner Herzog is said to have said. Damn. After a few chilly and windswept tours, I’d had it with walking. And that is why I was happy to sign up for a tour of the Green-Wood Cemetery, in Brooklyn, which would largely be conducted from the Subaru Outback of the guide, Benjamin Feldman. Our excursion through the cemetery’s four hundred and seventy-eight acres ignored whatever is left of such famous residents as Leonard Bernstein, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and Louis Comfort Tiffany, and instead focussed on the graves of an 1857 murder victim and a former lover of his, who likely arranged his murder. We hopped out of the car only occasionally, to look at a tombstone. In 2007, Feldman, a former real-estate lawyer, who had on a parka patched with reflective tape, published a book called “Butchery on Bond Street.” The salacious crime, in brief: body of scummy but prosperous dentist Harvey Burdell found in “pool of gore,” his “torso stabbed 15 times with pig sticker.” (Actually a dirk.) Did Emma Cunningham, a widow with five children and a faked marriage certificate calling Burdell her husband, do it? Likely, believes Feldman, who, in 2007, bought headstones for both. Feldman told us that before the trial the coroner considered allowing the deceased’s eyeballs to be examined. A going theory at the time, he explained, was that the retinas of a corpse retained an image of the last scene viewed before death. Despite Feldman’s storytelling expertise, he was less expert in the guiding part of tour-guiding, getting us lost in the boneyard more than once.

Have you ever encountered a gigantic shiny black-and-red bus in Times Square, one side a floor-to-ceiling window through which you can see forty-nine or so screaming passengers, arranged in three tiers of stadium seating? Chances are they’re acting like doofuses, dancing in their seats as they wave to the pedestrians, who are also acting like doofuses and waving back. If this rings a bell, then you’ve been an unwitting extra in the extravaganza called THE RIDE ($79), in which bystanders are a part of the show. How to describe THE RIDE (almost always printed, shouting-style, in caps)? If you sent its DNA to 23andMe, the lab results would reveal it to be thirty-one per cent Broadway musical, twenty-seven per cent comedy club, twenty-three per cent Carnival cruise, seventeen per cent cheese, two per cent bus tour, and zero per cent Henrik Ibsen play. Each bus has a pair of hosts, whose badinage is corny but crowd-pleasing. (Host 1: “We are on a mission today to find out what makes New York City such a magical place!” Host 2:

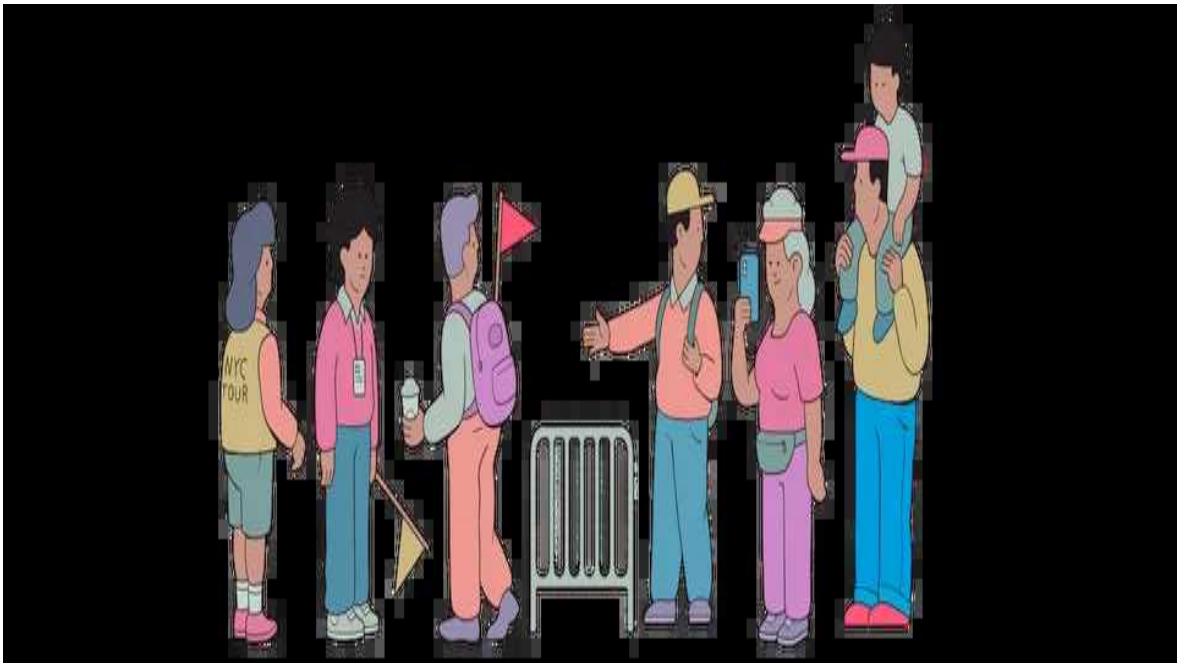
“Where millions of people come to visit each year! Where millions more live on top of each other! And, with all these millions and millions, why am I still single?”)

As THE RIDE pauses frequently along its 4.2-mile loop, allowing RIDE-ers to take in a string of staged-to-look-spontaneous performances—for example, an out-of-work actor dressed as a UPS man doing a hip-hop dance; a “street-cleaner” tap-dancing with his broom; two pedestrians (really ballet dancers!) who pretend to bump into each other, then do a pas de deux. If it bugs you that actors in musicals break out inexplicably into song, these bits will make you break out explicably into rage. You also won’t love the part where the hosts make everyone on board belt out “New York, New York.” Inside the bus, L.E.D. screens display “fun facts” about the city—e.g., Liza Minnelli and David Gest’s wedding cost $3.5 million, a kebab from a food cart will run you $4. (Wrong.) The vehicles are tricked out with surround sound, too; and at one point on our joyride the bus was jerked around by the bus driver to simulate the sensation of a subway speeding underfoot. To enjoy THE RIDE, you must be willing to suspend being a snob for seventy-five minutes (give or take fifteen minutes, depending on traffic). You must become a hundred per cent tourist. I had a great time, in spite of myself.

Julian Locke, the brawny middle-aged guy who devised and leads a New York walk called “Tour D’Trump” (NYC Tour Guys, $45), thinks that A.I. has had a hand in thwarting his First Amendment rights. He’s been having a tough time promoting his tour. “I’ve tried to take out ads on Facebook, TikTok, and other social media, but my boosts keep getting rejected,” he said. “They say the ads are political. My theory is that it’s A.I. rejecting me.” Nonetheless, Locke, a chipper sixty-one-year-old who moved to New York from Winchester, England, in 1990, conducted his tour group of two as if he were addressing the hugest crowd in history. Locke was cagey about his own political leanings (did the red beanie provide a clue?) as he led us briskly along what he called the “resident to President” route. First, he told us we looked tired. “And Donald Trump does not like low-energy people,” he said. “So I need to turn you into winners.” He then made us do what he called “a quick Donald Trump dance, which doubles as an exercise.” He went on, “If you can just put your hands up. Then pinch your fists”—or did he say “punch”? should I split the difference?—“and you just kind of move up and down, up and down, up and down.” After this ordeal, we hit our first stop,

Trump Tower, where I tried not to think about the latent meaning in putting one's daughter on the menu at one's eponymous bar-and-grill (the Ivanka Salad, $21), and Locke held forth about the famous escalator. He padded out the hour with some Trump show-biz trivia: when the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation aired "Home Alone 2," in 2019, it cut out the scene that featured Trump saying a line. "This sent Donald Trump ballistic," Locke said. "He blamed Justin Trudeau." At the end, Locke handed out complimentary Donald-faced key chains to all participants.

The tours I took were all over the map, but for the most part they were led by official New York City Sightseeing Guides. Just as you need a license from the Department of Consumer and Worker Protection (D.C.W.P.) to become an official Bingo Game Operator, so, too, do you need a license from that department to lead tourists around town. According to an nyc.gov website, "You must have a Sightseeing Guide license to guide or direct people to any place or point of public interest or to describe, explain, or lecture about any place or point of public interest to any person in connection with any sightseeing trip or tour within the city."



Applicants are required to take a written exam. The cost is fifty dollars, and you're allowed to fail it twice; after that, you'll need to pony up another fifty dollars. The test consists of a hundred and fifty questions, both multiple

choice and true or false, and you must answer at least ninety-seven correctly. For those wishing to bone up, here are some examples of what might appear on the exam: 1. What is unusual about the diamond trade? (There are no contracts, only handshakes.) 2. What arcade game was banned by Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia in 1942? (Pinball.) 3. What was one of the first items sent through the New York Post Office's pneumatic-tube system? (A live cat.) 4. Where does the blind character played by Audrey Hepburn in "Wait Until Dark" live? (Greenwich Village.)

The N.Y.C. exam was not unprecedented. In 1915, the United States War Department, concerned by reports that some of the locals showing visitors around the Gettysburg battlegrounds were too creative with their facts, mandated that guides pass a written exam. This made Gettysburg the first federally regulated tour site in the country. Those caught leading a group without a license were arrested. The first Gettysburg tour took place not long after the smoke cleared, in July, 1863. By 1884, the attraction had become so popular that an advertisement by a local hotel touted, "Dinner with drive over the Battlefield . . . $1.35 each. Field Glasses go with every team."

If taking a test seems too daunting, why not volunteer as a Big Apple Greeter? Greeters introduce out-of-towners to a few of their favorite spots in the city as though they were friends or family. Gail Morse has been the organization's director of programs and volunteers, which began in 1992, for twenty-one years. Over Zoom, Morse explained that there are more than a hundred and eighty Greeters in the city; being Greeted is free, and tipping is not allowed. The organization tries to match visitors and Greeters according to their interests. "They get to know each other by e-mail ahead of time," Morse said. "So once they meet they're no longer strangers." She was emphatic about terminology. "We don't use the word 'tour,' 'tour guides,' or 'guide,' " she said. "If a visitor thinks they are booking a tour guide, they'll think they had a stupid tour guide who doesn't know how many steps to the top of the Empire State Building. That kind of information can be looked up on the phone."

Lester Barnett, an eighty-two-year-old retired adman who has been a Greeter for twenty-one years, told me, "A tour guide shows you the hardware of New York, and we show you the software." No two Greets are the same, he said, then he reeled off tales of the various new friends he's made. He

recalled a couple who wanted to have a glass of wine at each of a series of New York bars. “They wanted a rich bar, they wanted a poor bar, they wanted an Irish bar,” he said. Toward the end of the night, the woman went to the ladies’ room and her husband told Barnett that she had a terminal illness. “All she wanted to do was go to New York and toast each other all over the city,” Barnett said. “That’s why I’m a Greeter. You enter people’s lives in a way that is astounding.”

Most Greets have a happier ending. Morse told me that several Greeters have ended up being witnesses at the City Hall weddings of couples who’d travelled to New York to get married. For a follow-up visit, they might want to consider the “Divorce Party Jet Ski” tour, operated by an outfit called Sea the City. For $179 a head, the newly uncoupled and their guests can zip themselves into wetsuits and “glide up close” to the Statue of Liberty and the Brooklyn Bridge. According to the website, sights like these “can help divorcees bounce back: New research shows that experiencing awe, like marveling at vast and powerful landmarks, can reduce stress and improve overall well-being.” Herodotus couldn’t have put it better. ♦

The Weekend Essay

Why I Broke Up with New York

Most people accept the city's chaos as a toll for an expansive life. It took me several decades to realize that I could go my own way.

By Lena Dunham

May 05, 2025

I cannot tell you the moment that New York began for me, only that I began in New York. There are stories from the months before I was born, when I was still nestled inside my mother like a Yonah Schimmel knish to go. In September, during her first trimester, the city was overtaken by a heat wave so mighty that it made being inside without A.C. unbearable—you had to stay moving just to create a breeze. My mom remembers thinking that New York hadn't felt so unhinged since the Summer of Sam, that the heat lent an edge of hysteria to everyday interactions. Circling the block one day, she ran into an equally sweaty and disoriented friend on the corner of Broadway and Houston, who told her that the sculptor Carl Andre had been accused of throwing his wife, the seminal Cuban-born artist Ana Mendieta, out a window the previous night. Despite the temperature, my mother turned toward home.

I recall being told about another time, weeks before I was due, when my parents went to see a movie at Lincoln Plaza, and the smell of other people's buttered popcorn made my mom so sick that she had to leave halfway through. Afterward, on the subway, my father—who has often been accused of charging ahead with little concern for those travelling with him—made a mad dash out of the train car just before the doors closed, leaving her behind. "I looked around and everyone was laughing," she recalls. She laughed, too, just to seem like she was in on the joke. But then, as the train began to pull away, she placed her hand on the glass between her and my father and burst into tears. Come to think of it, neither of these is a very romantic story. They're about the struggle of living in a city where, compressed like office workers in a stalled elevator, we are driven to a kind of madness.

I came home from the hospital to a loft on Broadway between Prince and Spring. At this point, my mother had already lived there for almost fifteen years. It was my first home, and in a way it had been hers, too. She moved in fresh out of art school, and had a landlord who was so hostile to his "bohemian" tenants that he often turned off the heat and water, so the building became a sort of glorified campground. It's hard to convey, to those who know SoHo only in its current form, just how different it was to live there even by the late eighties. With wide, empty streets and garbage piling on the curbside, it lives in my memory as a gray industrial wasteland, evoking either "Gangs of New York" or "Blade Runner" depending on the time of day. A generation of artists had begun to populate the area, and many were revolting against the status quo and remaining childless by choice. The ones who became parents were still living in the aftershocks of the case of Etan Patz, a beautiful blond boy a few blocks over who had set off for the school bus one morning and never returned. Around that time, the local preschool playgroup began using a new contraption for walking toddlers to the park—a rope with a mitten attached for each child, forming a makeshift group leash.

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It didn't take long for me to grow into possibly the least adaptable native the city had ever seen. All good New Yorkers know that to live in, and love, the city takes a certain amount of chutzpah—you have to be ready, at a moment's notice, to push your way through the throngs, shout your coffee order, rush to nab the last subway seat or the only on-duty cab. You have to be unsurprised by the consistent surprises that come with a new day in New Amsterdam. And you have to love it all, even if you pretend you don't. My parents had both been raised far enough outside the city to have childhoods that could be called idyllic, but close enough that Manhattan exerted a strong pull. Getting to New York was their ultimate expression of self-determination, the place where they would shed preconceptions about who they were meant to be and create a new life among artists and experimental thinkers, planting their seeds in the fecund soil of the city. If we are to continue with the plant metaphor, I was more like an avocado pit mashed into a cup of dirt by an excited third grader who then forgot to water it. I never actually sprouted.

As devout citizens of their adopted city, my parents ought to have been ashamed of the creature they'd wrought. First, I hated the subway—the noise, the smells, the fact that any route you planned would, the next day, inevitably be littered with fresh obstacles. In the third grade, my best friend, Isabel—a brave, scrappy child whose natural independence I envied—was

riding in a subway car when a bomb went off. She described being rushed through the resulting mayhem by her grandmother, a glamorous woman with a bonnet of gold hair whom she called Dammy, as injured commuters lay all around them. Seemingly unfazed, Isabel was back on the 2/3 line within weeks, whereas I still stood at the mouth of the subway station, inconsolable, begging to turn back.

Navigating the city on foot was only marginally better. I hated the smell of rotting fish on Canal Street, where I'd bury my nose in my mother's pants as we walked to Isabel's house. I also hated Central Park—though we rarely went—because, during a class trip, I'd seen an ailing pigeon, laboring through its final breaths, sitting atop what looked to be a nest of its own intestines. I'd promptly thrown up in the bushes near Strawberry Fields. I liked the local park on Thompson and Spring, until one day I entered a plastic tube on the jungle gym to find a bald-headed man on his belly, reaching his arms out toward me. I hated St. Marks Place, because I had seen a handsome young guy asleep on a stoop with a needle in his neck, and I hated Sixteenth and Third—inconveniently, the block my school was on—because I had once passed a dapper elderly gentleman in a camel overcoat, who'd smiled warmly, then begun to twitch and let loose a sudden stream of shocking expletives, after which he smiled again and kept moving. I hated our front door, because, leaving for school one morning, we had found someone lowering his pants to defecate.

You may be sensing a theme. Every place where I had seen something or someone that provoked unease was deemed permanently suspect. And, if you couldn't return to the scene of some randomized chaos in pre-Giuliani Manhattan, you couldn't do much at all. For so many people, New York seems to open a portal to the expansive lives they had always felt they should be living. For me, the city constricted until the only place I felt safe was in my loft bed at the back of our apartment, my head in a book, the faint sounds of the streets below my window like a white-noise machine that occasionally yelled, "Out of my way, motherfucker!" Even at home, there were no guarantees. A few months after the defecation episode, my mother called the elevator, which opened directly into our living space, only to find a disoriented person wearing a tutu and smeared red lipstick advancing into our home. "I think you are in the wrong place," my mom said calmly, again and again, her voice low and powerful, and the person eventually left

without incident. But for months afterward I froze whenever I heard the elevator straining to lift off: I was in the wrong place, too.

All this may seem to imply some deeper judgment about the city—that I think it's wanton and unregulated, a "Where's Waldo?" of Boschian perversion. But I will always defend New York from those sorts of charges—after all, no one can talk shit about my mother but me. The issue isn't that New Yorkers leer, jeer, curse, and shit in public. It's that the city's messy scrum was a poor fit for a chronically ill child with obsessive-compulsive tendencies and a preternatural inability to look both ways when crossing the street.

It took me years to understand that most people accept New York's mayhem as some kind of toll, a small price to pay for the panoply of delights available to them at a moment's notice—whoever said "Nothing good ever happens after midnight" has never lived in New York. But anyone who has ever fallen in love with the city knows that they will accept myriad slights just to stay in that relationship—cramped apartments, troublesome neighbors, two trains and a bus home, the night shift. How many Hollywood movie plots hinge roughly on the idea that the hero will do anything, anything at all, not to be shipped back to the suburbs? It was my parents, however, who had chosen that plot; I was simply the culmination of it.

My late grandmother—my primary confidant, whose house in rural Connecticut I considered to be the apex of peace—would sometimes shake her head and tell my parents to get me out of the city. "It's no place for a child," she would whisper to me when my parents left the room, noting my "terrible nerves." But my father, *her* child, had felt the same way about his home town of Old Lyme, which was so insular that nearly every business in the nearby neighborhood of Hamburg was owned by a relative. Recently, we went back there to visit my grandmother's grave on the twenty-fifth anniversary of her death. Buried there, too, are her aunts, whose names—Tess, Hazel, Ruth, Grace, Helen, Margaret—suggest a good Protestant stability. The longer we spent in the town, the more my father's shoulders hunched, and he shuffled along like a little boy. "You can't even imagine how small this place feels," he told me. "There's nowhere I can look without being faced with a memory."

Somehow, it hadn't occurred to him that I might have similarly complicated feelings about New York. I may not have come of age with a group of stiff Republican relatives whose offspring still own the local Subaru dealership, but growing up is one of a handful of things that everyone has to do. My father's family was baffled that anyone would ever want to leave the bucolic world of Hamburg. Mine seemed to wonder who could ever see New York as anything other than the center of the universe.

I loved spending time at my grandma's house because of the slow pace of her days. A trip to the grocery store to buy a half pound of London broil constituted a major outing. We sat side by side reading, opened the mail when it came, took a break at five o'clock for peanuts and tonic water, and I'd be safely tucked into bed by 8 *P.M.* In the city, by contrast, my mother could pack ten or eleven separate excursions into a single day—or, conversely, spend hours wandering the floors of the discount department store Century 21, striking up endless conversations in the communal dressing room (another place I regarded poorly, having seen one woman elbow another in the face over a cut-price Victoria's Secret negligee). My mom and her sisters—Jewish girls at the opposite end of the spectrum from the Margarets, Hazels, and Tesses of the world—lived to move. I distinctly remember my mother repeating that "what I love about Manhattan is that if you really want to you can always get from one end to the other in twenty minutes." (This is not, strictly speaking, true, and I blame the remark for my lifelong inability to properly judge commute times.)

My aunt Susan once said of my mother, "Laurie is a 'from' girl—the lox is from one place, the bagels from another, the flowers from someplace else." Knowing how to get the best out of the city—from discount Manolos to vintage buttons to a ten-dollar blow-dry—gives my mother the satisfaction of a chess grand master stumping her opponent with a series of unexpected moves. But being a "from" girl is about more than the provenance of goods; it's about living at such high speeds that your inner life can never quite catch up to you. In my mother's New York, I couldn't help but feel like a character in a children's book where, say, a sloth must attend school with human kids, taking great pains to hide his true identity under glasses and a cardigan.

It was largely my discomfort with the world outside our door that sent me to therapy in fourth grade, and put me on anti-anxiety medication by middle

school. I'd take a sneaky route to the psychiatrist lest my classmates put two and two together, but, even so, I became marked with the amorphous and dreaded designation "kid with issues." I was sure there was an alternative reality in which I could be "normal," some chosen realm in which I could shine. At that stage of life, my chosen realm was the world of "Eloise," Kay Thompson's iconic book about a six-year-old girl—a quixotic creation with unbrushed hair and a potbelly, a.k.a. my celebrity look-alike—who lives essentially unsupervised in the Plaza. On the book's second page, Eloise declares, "I am a city child / I live at The Plaza." But this city child never seems to set foot outside: everything and everyone she needs exists within the walls of the hotel, and she is its wayward princess.

After years of begging, I persuaded my father to bring me to the Plaza to experience it firsthand. It was my twelfth birthday, and I was roundly unpopular at school, so, as a stand-in for the slumber parties that other girls were having, the two of us spent the night in a twin room on a low floor. By then, the hotel had passed through the hands of Ivana Trump, who had done a grandiose renovation, and the space—drawn in the book with such vivid low-key glamour by Hilary Knight—was hard to recognize. I asked for Eloise's usual meal of beef medallions, but it wasn't on the menu, so we ate grilled cheese and watched "The Rainmaker" and I got a bloody nose.

In the months following 9/11, my parents briefly considered moving us out of New York. Like everyone during that endless "after," they were stunned by the destruction and unsure of what could come next. We piled into the car and drove up to look at a rental house on a rural stretch of road in northwest Connecticut. My visit to Housatonic Valley Regional High School ended with a peek at the agricultural center, where I dreamed of bottle-feeding baby goats and winning trophies in animal husbandry. "I think we could have a wonderful life here," I said again and again, with the energy of Annette Bening's character in "American Beauty" chanting, "I will sell this house today!" But it was clear that, though my mother might be worried for her family, she could not be parted from her lover: New York. And, really, what was I expecting? This was the woman who had tried to pay extra to keep her 212 number when we moved to Brooklyn. "From" girl, indeed.

New York and I had a brief moment when it seemed like we might fall in love after all. Of course, it was when boys really entered the chat. I was back

from college (in the cornfields of Ohio, which is a great place to send your kids if you want them to return with a fresh appreciation of what New York has to offer) and had only recently shed some of my fearfulness and begun dating in earnest. I found myself waiting in a bar on Ludlow in knee-high boots and red lipstick, excited to be crushingly disappointed; dancing to music by yet-to-be-cancelled men in basements in Chinatown; lying prone in a ransacked house share in Flatbush, shivering with anticipation (or maybe just shivering). I fell in lust at the edges of Park Slope, standing on the aboveground subway platform (much preferred to the other kind) in a dress that had seemed perfect the night before, but in the glaring sun made its absurdity apparent. I fell in love in Bemelmans Bar, at the Carlyle, and again on the Brooklyn Heights Promenade, and once more eating fried clams on City Island. I choked back unrequited passion looking at an installation at P.S. 1, wondering whether every artist had felt this way, and whether that was why artists made anything at all—to hold on to the feeling, or perhaps for revenge.

It was during this time that I was able to write my own story about the city in the form of a television show, "Girls," which lasted for six seasons. The irony was that the series cemented me, in the minds of everyone I met, as a New York girl through and through. How could they have known that the safest I'd ever felt in New York was either hiding under the covers or pretending to be someone else under klieg lights? The character I played, Hannah Horvath, thought that New York held the key to all her dreams—but, tellingly, she'd grown up in Michigan. (I had been told by countless cabdrivers—soothsayers, all of them—that I seemed like I was from someplace else, because no matter how far off course they drove me, or how late I was running, I always babbled cheerful thank-yous, and unlike other native New Yorkers I had no preferred routes.) Hannah was an expression of homesickness for a place I'd never truly lived in, and of my hope that I could meet New York again under an assumed identity. In the series finale, she left New York and boldly set sail for . . . upstate New York, a story line that signalled how much of a question mark the rest of the world still seemed to me. I wasn't a natural New Yorker, and yet I had a New Yorker's certainty that there really wasn't anywhere else to go.

A few years after "Girls" concluded, when I was in my early thirties, I was deep in the kind of heartbreak that I now know is on the required curriculum

for that stage of adulthood but that seemed, in the moment, life-ending and completely unique to me. As if some higher power were sensing my need, work offered me the chance to leave. I'd escaped briefly before, but only to the equally bedevilling city of Los Angeles. This time I was headed farther afield, to explore the elfin mysteries of Wales. It was a sojourn fit for one of the Brontë heroines I had always loved (or so I thought, not realizing the difference between the moors of Yorkshire and the Celtic rain forests of Powys—a place that Charlotte, Emily, and Anne had likely never visited. Like me, the Brontës were homebodies.) In my mind, this break would provide a chance for New York and me to hook up with other people, reignite our feelings for each other, and then realize we were meant to be together all along. We all know how well that plan usually works out for couples.

One job bled into another. One year became the next. Wales—with woods so uncannily green I could compare them only to the computer game Myst—led to London, and London shocked me with its reassuring differences from New York. The city, which is large enough to contain all five New York boroughs twice, had a spaciousness I could not get over, streets so wide that the buildings seemed to be stepping aside for me to pass. Three decades of urban sense memory cleared, as if I had woken up to a system upgrade and damaged files had been erased in the process. Maybe it was the blank slate of it all, the fact that I'd yelped in pain on exactly zero London street corners. But it felt more mystical, like walking into a house I'd been to only in a dream. "Well, hello, *London Lena*," a friend cooed when I agreed to go out for a third night in a row. My reputation back home was as a work-obsessed hermit with an inappropriate fear of the "human statue" performers in Times Square. Here, I moved with ease, whether walking on Hampstead Heath or sliding into a black cab, greeted by a gruff "Oy! Where you 'eaded?"

In New York—the fastest city in the world—days had felt like years. In London, years passed like days, which is how I ended up, five years on, realizing that London is my home now, so much so that I call seltzer "sparkling water" and settle for bagels that taste like caulk. Even when Londoners remind me of New Yorkers, the city doesn't jangle me the way New York does. One recent weekend, a drunk man unzipped his fly to pee

on my stoop, not noticing my presence behind some overgrown ivy. “Move it along, sir,” I told him. *You are in the wrong place*.

On my first journey back to New York after the pandemic—which had kept me away for nearly two years—the experience of walking out of J.F.K. and into the airport cab line was so powerful I nearly keeled over. One day back in the city left me breathless and panicky, outpaced. When friends and I made plans to get together, I’d suggest restaurants that had been shuttered for years. No matter how often I’ve returned in the time since, I’ve found myself standing anxiously at crosswalks, the way I would as a child, unsure when to step off the curb, as if trying to hop into a game of double Dutch. But now the sense of dislocation is temporary. The three-decade fight to mold myself to the city is over.

In Joan Didion’s essay “Goodbye to All That,” about her own decision to leave New York for her native California, she writes that New York is best suited to the very young. My grandmother said that it was no place for a child. All I know for sure is that it was simply no place for *me*—at least, not *forever*. And that’s O.K. Sometimes, in a relationship, you both try to show your best and truest selves, but still the other party sees only your worst. Plus, this was the most mature sort of breakup—the sort where we can still have coffee sometimes. It turns out that I felt about New York City the same way so many New Yorkers feel about whatever place they started: it’s just where I was born. ♦

A Reporter at Large

Twelve Migrants Sharing a Queens Apartment

In New York City, a shadow economy helps new arrivals find a place to sleep. Sometimes it's just a bed and a curtain.

By Jordan Salama

May 05, 2025

In my neighborhood, everyone knows the corners where migrants wait for work. I live in Jackson Heights, Queens, where you can't so much as step out the door without hearing a language other than English. Newcomers arrive in waves and settle like layers of sediment. On my block, there's a contingent of elderly Polish ladies who have been living in their century-old co-ops for decades. A few blocks over in one direction is Calle Colombia, the official nickname for a corner of Eighty-second Street since 2009; countless times, I've walked past a street vender guarding tall stalks of sugarcane that she feeds through a machine to make juice. A few blocks over the other way, Bangladeshi men, their beards dyed orange, hawk prayer rugs and other religious goods from overturned milk crates on the sidewalk.

In recent years, the newest residents have come mostly from Venezuela, Colombia, and Ecuador. Such migrants line up each day at dawn at *paradas*—"stops"—hoping to get picked up for day jobs, like tiling, roofing, or painting. At least among Spanish speakers, paradas across New York are known by names that describe either their location or their purpose, such as "La de Limpieza" ("the Housecleaning One") or "Home Depot." How these spring up is less complicated than one might think—people learn to do whatever work is immediately available in the area. The main housecleaning parada is in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, where women regularly find jobs in the homes of Hasidic Jews. In the leafy suburbs, there are more landscapers. In Flushing, close to a blocks-long stretch of Chinese-run kitchen-and-bathroom showrooms, there's a street corner where the waiting Chinese men know how to install kitchens and bathrooms.

These word-of-mouth spots exist all over the city and in the surrounding suburbs, but nowhere are they more crowded than in Queens. The most popular construction parada near my apartment is technically in Woodside: "La 69" is a section of Sixty-ninth Street between Roosevelt Avenue and Broadway. For years, it was normal to see a few dozen men milling around there, but since 2022 hundreds of workers have been lining up in the mornings, including more women than ever. In the winter, nonprofits and church groups hand out jackets and hot breakfasts, and during the warmer months, at one end of La 69, some people sleep in a tiny plaza called Pigeon Paradise. Earlier this year, after the Trump Administration took power and began what it called the "largest deportation effort in U.S. history," the numbers lessened for a while—people are terrified of *ICE*. A regular told me that, at least twice, an unmarked car pulled up to the parada, sending everyone running. But attendance at the parada has since returned to pre-Trump levels, despite the obvious risks. People have to work.

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At La 69, there is hardly a system, but people are known to wait in certain areas according to their nationality: Mexicans and Guatemalans near the plaza, Ecuadorians and Colombians closer to Roosevelt Avenue. This could be because contractors prefer workers who hail from their home countries. One day last summer, a car pulled up to La 69. It was 10 *a.m.*, which is around the time when people at the parada who haven't been picked up yet think about going home. A crowd of Central Americans who were still waiting by Pigeon Paradise sized up the car as it slowed to a stop. When they realized that this meant a potential job, they swarmed. More than twenty men tapped on the windshield and called out day rates in Spanish: "Hundred fifty!" "Hundred forty!" "Hundred twenty!" One man agreed on a rate and jumped in. "Please," the other men pleaded, as they do every day. "Just take one more."

"Don't worry too much about that," the day worker said, in Spanish, as he took his seat and cracked open a can of Coke. He went by Pato, and he was twenty-seven. "I've been here eight years, but it's never been as bad as this," he said. There were just too many migrants, Pato said, and not enough jobs. Guys would work for anything nowadays.

We went to an apartment building nearby, where Pato spent several hours unscrewing shelves, pulling down old panelling, and organizing piles of debris. During a lunch break, Pato called his family back home—his parents still lived where he'd grown up, in the mountainous region of Chimaltenango, Guatemala. He spoke with them in Kaqchikel, his first language. Later, Pato told me that he was building a home there with the money he'd earned here. "Not even renovating—from scratch," he said. Construction was coming along, and he hoped that in two or three years it might be ready, and that he could go back to finally start a family. "I'll have my little house and my little land," he said. "Now that's what you call a dream. Here, there's no life, only work." He shook his head. "Work every day for eight years."

As Pato kept on through the afternoon, he told me that he lived in a shared house in Corona, some forty blocks from La 69, with other migrants from Guatemala, Mexico, and Ecuador. He considered himself lucky: you can never be entirely sure about living with anyone besides your own family, he said, but he got along fairly well with the other tenants.

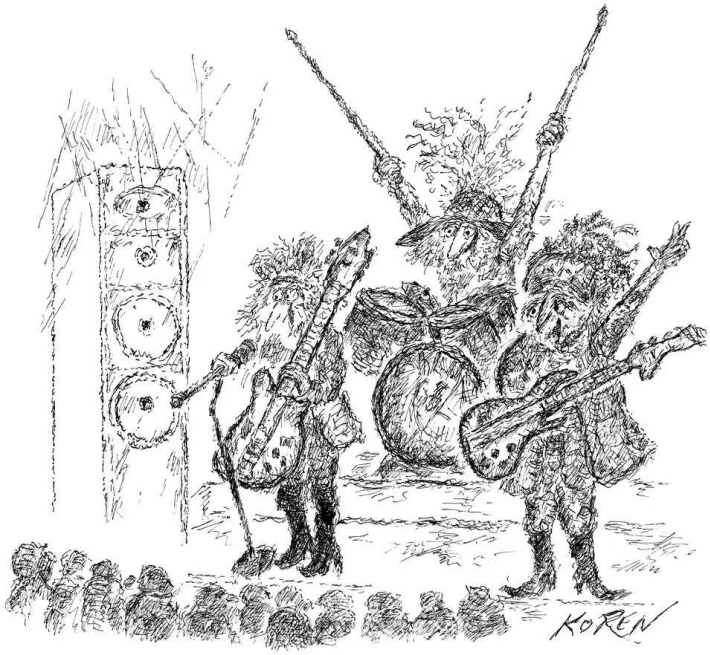
I'd heard about migrant houses like the one Pato described. Jackson Heights, Corona, and Elmhurst are full of them—you can identify them, in many cases, from the black garbage bags of personal belongings that have been

stuffed onto metal balconies, for lack of interior space. These dwellings range from crowded but legitimate sublets to dangerous and unlawful boarding houses. At worst, they resemble modern-day tenements: entire families crammed into single bedrooms, with any common spaces subdivided by curtains or sheets or partition walls to allow for as many additional beds as possible. They are often dark, cramped, and poorly ventilated, with barely any privacy.

When the pandemic began, it quickly became clear which New York neighborhoods suffered the most from overcrowding, because of their overwhelmingly high rates of infection. (Central Queens became known as the "epicenter of the epicenter.") In 2021, during Hurricane Ida, ten people living in unregulated basement apartments drowned in floodwaters. Last month, three men died when a fire broke out in an overcrowded home in Jamaica Estates where immigrant tenants lived; according to reports, the landlord lived in the back of the house and had long been renting out beds in small makeshift rooms divided by partition walls. Migrants in New York also whisper about an even cheaper arrangement: renting beds by the hour, alternating with others on a schedule. This is sometimes known in Spanish as a *cama caliente*, because the bed is still warm when a night-shift worker comes home in the morning to sleep.

In February, I paid a portion of one migrant's rent for a bed in a two-family row house in East Elmhurst. I came and went as I pleased. Twelve migrants, all from Ecuador, lived on the first floor. The housemates told me that another large group lived on the second floor, though they weren't allowed upstairs and rarely spoke with their neighbors. The house's owners—an older woman and her adult son—lived in the basement.

The first floor had four bedrooms, each occupied by a young couple paying eight hundred to eleven hundred dollars a month; one of the couples shared their room with their five-year-old daughter, the only child in the house, and her uncle. In the narrow hallway, brown and red shower curtains cordoned off a fifth "room" that had twin beds (about seven hundred dollars each) placed so close together that they were almost touching; two single men slept there. Everyone shared a tiny bathroom, where a handwritten sign over the toilet read, in Spanish, "Gentlemen, aim well into the bowl. Thank you."



A small kitchen was the sole common area. On one side, there were stained-wood cabinets, sticky from years of grease; along the other wall stretched a peeling bar counter with three chairs. There wasn't enough space in the fridge and the cabinets for a dozen people's food, so a lot of it stayed out in the open. On the bar counter sat three giant plastic tubs of rice. In some cupboards, unrefrigerated leftovers, such as grilled fish or cooked rice speckled with peas and carrots, were kept in covered pots and pans. Large bags of sugar sat unsealed on the tile floor, where cockroaches scurried around day and night.

On a freezing afternoon in mid-February, the entire house reeked of nail-polish remover. I entered the kitchen to find one of the residents, Lilia, getting a manicure. Supplies were strewn across the counter: brushes, cotton balls, bottles of acetone, various colors of polish. Two of Lilia's housemates, Elisa and Mercy, were doing the nail painting—one woman on each hand. "We didn't find work at the parada today, so we're doing this," Mercy told me, in Spanish, without taking her eyes off of the smooth coat of violet polish she was applying. "We have to pass the time somehow."

"How fun," I said, tentatively.

Lilia, a twenty-six-year-old, had long black hair and wore a T-shirt printed with the word "Hatteras"—the North Carolina beach town. (She'd never been there.) She had an air of confidence that set her apart from the other housemates. She slipped more English words into her Spanish sentences, even if incorrectly, and she'd been in the country for a year or two longer than most of the others. I was impressed that she had enlisted the two women to work feverishly on her nails. For a moment, I wondered if Lilia might actually be paying them. Then I realized that, whenever Elisa or Mercy finished a coat, they immediately scrubbed off the polish with acetone and started again. This was a training session. "I work in a spa, and the girls are hoping to get jobs there this summer," Lilia explained. "I'm teaching them."

Besides Lilia, the other housemates worked in construction. Those who lacked regular work set out for the paradas each morning before dawn. All the tenants were young, mostly between twenty-four and thirty, and over time they'd learned certain skills. Elisa and Mercy were mainly plumbers; Elisa's husband, Iván, and her brother, Matías, were mostly roofers; others described themselves as Jacks-of-all-trades, capable of doing everything from house painting to Sheetrock installation. Lilia's husband, Adolfo, placed himself in this category: "Anything to renovate a home—that's what I know how to do." A housemate named Anita had recently been finding work in the parking lot of a Home Depot in the Bronx. This led some of the others to start looking for gigs there, too.

This past winter, the housemates seldom went out. Day jobs were scarce, and it was too cold for volleyball and soccer, their favorite pastimes. Perhaps more important, the Trump Administration had them terrified. Nobody had any kind of legal status, and although none of them personally knew anyone who had been deported, rumors of mass arrests were enough to restrict their behavior.

Throughout January and February, the neighborhood's streets were hushed, the Latin American restaurants emptier. Even before Trump's Inauguration, a city campaign named Operation Restore Roosevelt had forced the removal of many unlicensed street venders from the area, compounding the eerie quiet. "We just stay at home," Matías told me. They passed the time in their bedrooms, where they ate most of their meals and scrolled TikTok or

watched TV. A bilingual sign hanging in the front entrance read "*NOTICE*: Door must remain locked at all times." Even Yuri, Mercy's five-year-old, played mainly inside now, running in and out of the room that she shared with her parents and her uncle.

On the day of the nail-painting marathon, Elisa and Mercy kept at it until well after dark, becoming dizzy from the pungent chemical odor that hung in the stale kitchen air. When they finally stopped, Lilia's cuticles were stained black.

All over Queens, especially along major thoroughfares such as Roosevelt Avenue, posters in Spanish affixed to lampposts, walls, and train pilings advertise rooms and apartments meant for migrants. "I rent an apartment. 4 Bedrooms. Available Now. Living Room, Kitchen, Bathroom. 7-8 people"; "I rent rooms. Veronica. 'No Papers.' Kitchen OK."

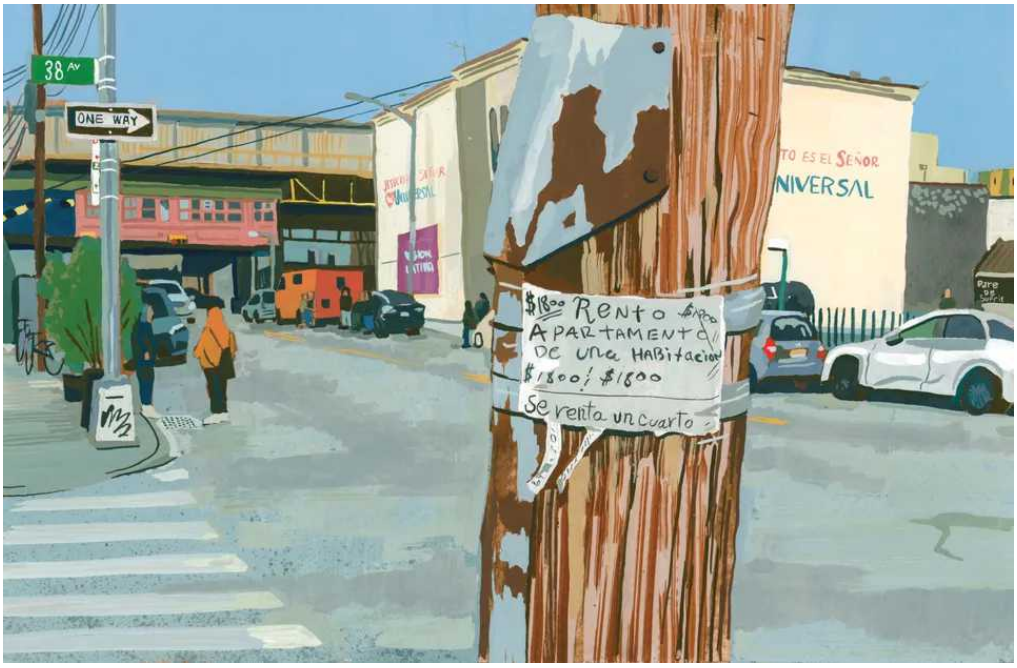
Some signs, taped over one another, specify if rooms are exclusively for women or couples, and if children are allowed. In recent years, real-estate agents and landlords have begun posting versions of these signs on Facebook groups and TikTok accounts, accompanied by photographs of bare mattresses in empty rooms. Migrants try to avoid real-estate agents—who typically charge three times one month's rent for the first payment—and landlords who require documentation, especially income verification. (It's illegal in New York City for landlords to require proof of immigration status when selecting tenants.) Among migrants who post online in search of housing, one of the most common phrases is "No Real State." The best way to find housing, everyone said, is to hunt with people you already know.

Plenty of migrants have no choice but to depend on the ads. I recently came across a Facebook page called "Cuartos en renta Queens New York." An affiliated website advertised apartments and single rooms for sublet in Queens. I messaged a number on WhatsApp and soon began texting with a broker named Renata, who wrote to me in Spanish, in all caps, and immediately began trying to persuade me to rent a room in a shared apartment in Woodside, two blocks from the 7 train.

"*THEY ARE ASKING WHAT YOU DO FOR WORK AND WHAT COUNTRY YOU ARE FROM*," Renata texted. Just like some of the contractors hiring

day workers, people frequently prefer to live with housemates from their own countries. Migrant communities in Queens have their own prejudices and stereotypes about one another. I've learned that many Ecuadorians think that Mexicans are drunks and Venezuelans are criminals; Mexicans and Guatemalans, in turn, often think of Ecuadorians as vagrants.

In the days and weeks that followed, Renata sent me photographs of small but neat-looking bedrooms across central Queens—mainly in Jackson Heights, Elmhurst, and Woodside. If I didn't respond instantly, she called and texted multiple times. "*YOU DON'T ANSWER*," she wrote. Finally, one night, we spoke on the phone. Renata told me that, for her clients, the ideal roommate spends most of his time out of the house and doesn't cook much. *Derechos a la cocina*—rights to the kitchen—are a negotiated "amenity" in a shared house. You pay lower rent if you eat all your meals elsewhere.



In New York, one of the most expensive rental markets in the U.S., the reasons for sharing a space with so many others are almost always financial. Non-immigrants in New York may not understand how widespread and varied these arrangements are, especially in the outer boroughs. I met a Peruvian couple who were renting out their second bedroom, originally meant for their baby, to a single man. I visited a Mexican family in their Corona apartment, where a young relative who was new to the city slept on

the couch. Janeth, an Ecuadorian woman living in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, told me that ten people were staying in her three-bedroom apartment. The landlord had recently raised the rent because of the number of tenants, Janeth told me, but otherwise didn't bother them. (A landlord who allows overcrowding can be subject to fines, but the penalties per violation are relatively low.)

Plenty of these roommate arrangements are cordial. Everyone living at Janeth's place ate dinner together at night. "There's one gentleman from El Salvador living with us, and he's gotten used to Ecuadorian food," she said, adding that she sometimes lets fresh arrivals sleep in the living room for free.

Nevertheless, living in such tight quarters with so many other people can create severe tensions, particularly when everyone's financial condition is precarious. Emperatriz Carpio, who manages the domestic-violence program at Voces Latinas, a nonprofit that serves migrants in the Jackson Heights area, told me that some of her most complicated cases arise in shared living spaces where victims lack the financial stability to move out. "I had one client who had been experiencing emotional and psychological abuse, and she still lived in the same house with her ex and his new partner," Carpio said. "I believe the house had three rooms. She was in one room with her two kids, and the ex and his new partner were in another room." Eventually, the new partner also brought her family into the third room. The client "mostly just stayed in her own room."

Alcohol abuse, Carpio added, was another common problem. I thought of Pato, the Guatemalan man I'd met at La 69. After that work was done, he offered to return the next day with a companion to help haul out debris that he'd arranged in dusty heaps.

The following afternoon, Pato showed up with one of his housemates, María, a short Ecuadorian woman who wore leggings and a long-sleeved shirt. "Don't worry, she's strong," Pato grinned, and María nodded. "Works harder than any man I've seen. She's the strongest woman in Ecuador!" For the next two hours, they trudged up and down three flights of stairs, lugging hundreds of pounds of trash. María lifted the heaviest loads, navigating the stairs in determined silence. Later, on the drive back from the dump, the

strongest woman in Ecuador spoke about the three children she'd left behind, more than a year earlier, in a coastal community overrun by drug cartels. "I'm doing this for them," María said.

Pato opened his backpack and began drinking from a tall can in a brown paper bag. I smelled beer. He spoke longingly about Guatemala and the home he was building there. I eventually learned that, however lucky Pato felt about his housing situation in Corona, his housemates saw things differently. Not long after the dump run, his phone number went out of service, and María told me that she and the other tenants had kicked Pato out because he was drinking too much. When I finally tracked him down, six months later, he told me only that he'd had "personal problems" and was now living in another shared house in Elmhurst. I tried on several occasions to meet him again, but he always cancelled. He sometimes called me randomly; twice, he rang in the middle of the night. One morning at ten, I answered, and Pato's speech was so slurred that I could hardly understand him.

The owners of properties where new migrants live are often immigrants themselves. Having arrived in New York a few decades earlier, perhaps from China, Ecuador, or the Dominican Republic, they settled in Queens and eventually achieved homeownership. Some, such as the owners of the East Elmhurst house, live in the basement, maximizing their own margins by renting the upper floors and minimizing liability by likewise living in the shadows. Other property owners rent out multiple units and reside elsewhere. In New York State, such people are known as "small landlords," which means that they own no more than ten units. Many are middle class and view their rentals as necessary to offset high living costs.

From public records, I learned that the landlord of one crowded Corona migrant house—some of whose renters I've known for a while—owned at least four other properties across Queens and the Bronx. I couldn't reach him directly, but one of his tenants told me that he was kind. He went by Jack, but she referred to him as El Chino. "El Chino treats us well," she told me. "When he comes to the house, he asks us what's bad, what's not bad, and fixes things. At Christmas, he gives a toy to each of the kids." Jack spoke only Chinese and English, she said, so her eldest daughter, who is eleven, translated his instructions—"how to put the bottles where the bottles go, the

plastic where the plastic goes, the cardboard where it's cardboard, the food where it's food." The tenant added that her daughter has a protocol for translating. "Mami, first I'll listen, and then I'll talk," the girl likes to say.

Small landlords often know about overcrowding or other irregularities in their units, but they tend to ignore such matters as long as the rent is paid on time. Sometimes they just want to avoid conflict. Roy Ho, the president of the Property Owners Association of Greater New York, an organization that he founded, in 2020, to support Chinese small landlords, told me, "Landlords are aware that this problem exists. They trade stories. Their tenants might come in and say, 'I'm renting for me, my wife, and my kid.' Then, two months later, they go to fix the water or the plumbing and realize it's so many more people." Attempting to resolve the issue in court is a long, costly process that can end up being more of a financial risk than accommodating such renters. "They are reluctant to address the problem, even if they want to," Ho said.

Hongyao Chen, a forty-one-year-old hospital worker based in Bayside, Queens, manages a two-family rental property in Maspeth for his elderly parents. He told me, "We were tenants ourselves in the beginning." After the family of four moved to New York City from Fujian, China, in 2001, they shared a cramped one-bedroom apartment in Manhattan's Chinatown for nearly seven years. "We were never late paying rent," he said. "My parents worked super hard, and they encouraged us to finish school. Luckily, my sister and I were able to go to college." In 2008, during the housing bubble, Chen's parents bought the home in Maspeth for nine hundred and twenty-eight thousand dollars. To afford the mortgage, they rented out the second unit to the employees of a company based in Poland. Nine years later, they moved into a five-bedroom home in Bayside, along with Hongyao, his wife, and his children, and started renting out the entire Maspeth property to supplement their monthly Social Security income of about eight hundred dollars.

Chen told me that he and other small landlords he knew used to be quite content to accept tenants on the margins of the economy. "Some people maybe had a cash job, or didn't have a stable job, but we had no problem renting to them," he said. Chen also acknowledged that it was a common practice to rent out basement apartments at lower rates, mainly to

undocumented tenants. Small landlords often consider undocumented renters to be among the most reliable tenants—because they don't want to attract any legal trouble. "I know landlords who *prefer* undocumented tenants, for this reason," Ho said. "The renters might not have a pay stub, but you know they will pay on time."

For Chen's family, everything changed during the pandemic. In New York State, eviction moratoriums lasted until early 2022, and in 2024 the state passed the Good Cause Eviction Law, which solidified eviction protections for renters. At the time, Chen's father, who speaks no English, was still in charge of managing the Maspeth property. "He got scammed by a real-estate agent," Hongyao Chen said. The agent, who he says was unlicensed, presented false proof-of-income documents, saying that a man would occupy a three-bedroom unit with his wife and two children. Nine people ended up living there, and they all stopped paying rent after the first month. "They slept in the living room—everywhere," Chen said. The utility bills were extremely high. Chen felt that he had no recourse but to contact the police. The tenants eventually left. "My parents are talking about to transfer the ownership to me," Chen texted me recently. "But I don't want it. I hate being a landlord. That is more than a full time job and too much problem to be a landlord in nyc now. One day I want to sell it. Life is too short, I want a peaceful life." (Chen's sister, who is now married, at one point owned two rental properties of her own, on Staten Island. She has since sold them, he said.)

Such stories led Ho, a small landlord himself, to found his group as a way of organizing Chinese landlords in the city. Asian households have the highest rate of homeownership in New York City, partly because in immigrant communities there can be a lack of knowledge about securities such as stocks and bonds; a dearth of legal status can sometimes make utilizing such options difficult. "They may have a nail salon, a restaurant, retail, even a cash business—and a 401(k) is not accessible to them," Ho told me. "Real estate is one of the only assets that they understand."

Several activist groups in the Asian American community have since embraced the landlords' cause, as part of organizing campaigns that often include unrelated issues popular with conservatives, such as opposition to affirmative action in college admissions. Ho told me, "The impression that

you get is that Chinese landlords have become more vocal than they used to be, and they have become more vocal than other ethnic landlords." He said that in New York the issue was a major driver of the community's rightward shift in recent elections.

The resentments of immigrant landlords illustrate a broader paradox of current city politics: older immigrant communities, often inherently sympathetic to the challenges faced by new arrivals, are increasingly voting for politicians who espouse broadly anti-immigrant policies. Thomas Yu, the executive director of Asian Americans for Equality, a community-development organization with an office in Jackson Heights, told me, "There is a lot of anger at the city for how they feel like the legislators have left them behind."

For more than twenty years, Yu has been looking to find solutions that work for both landlords and tenants in immigrant neighborhoods. In 2022, his group launched a pilot project providing grants for small landlords to renovate their units, thus allowing them to participate in a federal program in which tenants experiencing homelessness or abuse pay part of their rent with vouchers. (Although federal housing vouchers are generally unavailable to undocumented tenants, a new bill that has been introduced in the legislature in Albany would establish a housing-subsidy program for all renters across New York State, regardless of their immigration status.)

Yu found that, especially in the outer boroughs, small landlords were eager to accept the grants. "They needed that economic stability themselves," he said. "There's a sort of dogma in this world that all landlords are bad, and all tenants are free from fault. It's very hard for people to be nuanced about it." He worries that the pressures on small landlords will have a long-term impact on what he calls New York's "cultural enclaves"—neighborhoods such as Jackson Heights, Chinatown, and the Lower East Side. "It forces a lot of these small owners to cash out. They're, like, 'I give up. I cannot sustain this.' So they sell to bigger and bigger, and fewer and fewer, property owners."

All the immigrant homeowners I spoke with emphasized that they did not want to make things harder for new migrants. But they insisted that the current system is failing, making it more difficult for small landlords to turn

a profit and for tenants to find decent, affordable housing. An Iranian American landlord, whose family, seeking asylum during the Iran-Iraq War, brought him to New York as an infant, told me, “People have to do what they can to get by, just like my family did when we came to America.” Today, he manages six rental units in Queens. He lives in the basement of one of his multifamily properties in Astoria, where he has noticed issues of overcrowding in other homes nearby—including one multifamily dwelling that seems to house a phalanx of delivery drivers, who speed around the neighborhood on electric scooters. “I’m not here to pull up the ladder after making it off the lifeboat,” he noted, in an e-mail. “Still, it’s tough to see how this plays out for landlords and neighbors.”

Lilia and Elisa, two of the Ecuadorians in the East Elmhurst unit, are sisters-in-law. In 2023, they were living together with their husbands in a smaller Corona apartment when they learned that a group of relatives was headed to the U.S. border. The two women set out to find a bigger place where all of them could live. After work, they knocked on the doors of local houses that had “For Rent” signs in the windows.

They found the East Elmhurst house after a few weeks. They didn’t know to check the Department of Buildings website, where they would have learned that there were no certificates of occupancy registered for the property, and that there had been numerous complaints, filed over the past ten years, alluding to overcrowding and illegal conversions. (One complaint, filed in 2015, reads, “The house is subdivided in many rooms and is renting the rooms like a hotel.”)

The place was certainly tight, but the housemates were glad to keep costs down, even if it meant piling up on top of one another. Over time, more family members and friends arrived from Ecuador and occupied the remaining rooms. The two couples had learned some useful lessons in their first apartment together, where the landlord had lived in the same unit and enforced strict rules about kitchen rights and cleaning responsibilities. “It’s not good to live with strangers,” Lilia’s husband, Adolfo, told me. There were small things that they came to like about the new house, such as its proximity to a bus that took them to the parada La 69. Between the house and a neighboring one, there was a light well, and the housemates realized that in the winter they could use it as a second refrigerator, storing cartons of

milk on the windowsill. They set house rules; no outside shoes were allowed indoors. Everyone wore black Nike or Adidas slides inside—or, in Mercy's case, fluffy Teddy-bear slippers. Every day, a housemate was assigned to clean the kitchen and the bathroom and to empty the garbage. They called one another "neighbor," and soon gave out nicknames. Adolfo, who constantly used sad-face emojis in the house group chat, was Tristito. Eduardo was lean and strong, and he wore tight-fitting shirts that showed off his muscles, so his nickname was Músculo. The house's eldest resident, a thirty-seven-year-old single man named Efer, liked to play soccer, so he was called Messi.

But for the most part the house was uncomfortable. The absence of privacy was maddening, and the tenants were constantly smashing the cockroaches in the kitchen with their slides. "We have to live like this," Matías told me. "This is the reality of being a migrant." Everyone had kitchen rights—eleven adults to one four-burner stove—and this meant that they cooked meals in shifts beginning at 3 *a.m*. One of the residents had heard that New York City tap water was unsafe to drink, so for nearly two years they had needlessly bought cases of plastic water bottles from a market down the street.

Frustratingly, the house came unfurnished. On Junction Boulevard, the tenants found the basics—mattresses, bed frames, kitchenware—but the items cost them a relative fortune. They learned to be wary of Facebook Marketplace, where sellers frequently asked for payment up front and then disappeared; they were surprised that things like that happened in America. The tenants began to trust only one another as they established a routine that marked the beginning of their American Dream.

We talked a lot about dreams during the days I spent there. Most of the housemates had left everything behind; some had parted with their kids without knowing when, or if, they would see them again. Some wanted to leave the U.S. as soon as they had enough money to take substantial savings back with them. A few were considering staying for good. Mercy, whose daughter barely remembered Ecuador, said, “Ultimately, God will decide.” One day, in the kitchen, the tenants discussed the infamous case of a social-media personality who’d offered to help transport the body of a dead migrant back to Ecuador—and then allegedly ran off with all the money. I told the residents that a business near my apartment offered a similar service: funeral transports to Latin American countries. They looked horrified, and I sensed the years flashing before their eyes.

Since they’d come to New York, many of their dreams had begun to feel more abstract, as they focussed on the day-to-day difficulties of surviving. Músculo still had a vision, though: he wanted to become a licensed plumber, so that he could start his own business and work for himself. Some friends had recommended a vocational school in New Jersey. But the tuition—about four thousand dollars—was prohibitive. Mercy, his wife, told me that she was hoping to find an affordable after-school program for Yuri when she enrolled in kindergarten; currently, the couple was paying two hundred dollars a week for day care. Mercy didn’t realize that many public schools in

the city provide after-school care for free. All Matías wanted was to get a tax I.D. number, so that he could find a regular job and stop waiting for contractors at the parada every day at dawn. He was trying to figure out how to do the necessary paperwork.

Lilia was determined to learn enough English to be able to communicate with her clients at the spa. Indeed, all the housemates had the goal of mastering basic English. Some showed me notebooks that they had filled up at free classes around the city; Lilia told me that she had trekked all the way to Long Island City for her first such class. Inside the notebooks, they had carefully written out Spanish phrases and their English equivalents, translated phonetically so that they could more easily pronounce the words. ("Uan mor taim pliz" for "One more time please"; "Si iu tumorou" for "See you tomorrow.") But, for the most part, they had found these classes "boring" and far too advanced. They needed to focus on the basics ("I," "you," "we") and the essentials ("room," "bed," "job"). The few words that they already knew were entirely trade-related: "roofing," "plumbing," "nails."

Sometimes, late at night in the kitchen, when the housemates had returned from work, or from looking for work, and were cooking in shifts—two people at a time using the four burners, reheating rabbit or potato stew—they asked me to hold casual English lessons. They wanted to learn how to ask very specific questions.

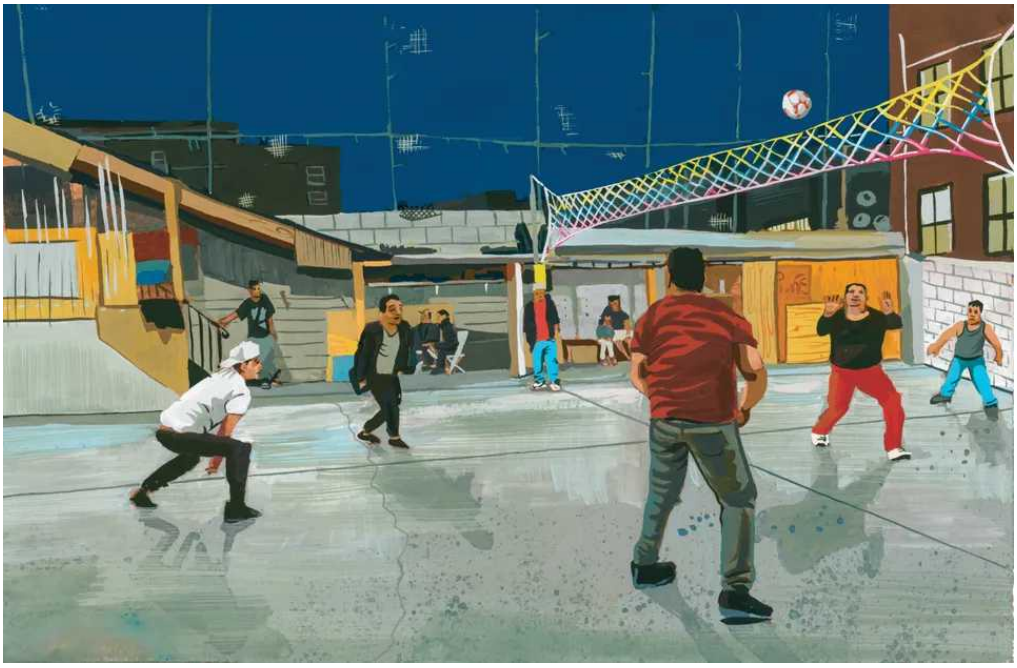
Matías's request: "Will you pay now, or later?"

Mercy's: "Why are you discounting more from my paycheck than from hers?"

The only person who understood everything I said was Yuri, Mercy's daughter. But the five-year-old, like so many immigrant children her age, was too shy to speak English in front of her parents. Of the adults, Lilia was the most engaged student. She said that her bosses at the spa spoke mainly Korean but some English—and that she would be grateful for any chance to communicate with them, even if her own English were limited to halting sentences. After a few days of lessons, she coined my house nickname: I became Profe, as in "teacher."

A prize-ribbon sticker—the kind that kids get for winning first or second place in a school competition—was stuck to the door of the bedroom where Anita slept with her husband, Hernán. “I did my best!” it read. Yuri must have received the award at day care, I figured, unless it was a trace of previous tenants.

The housemates didn’t know anything about the prior residents. A migrant dwelling doesn’t tend to break up all at once, unless something happens with the landlord—an eviction notice, say, or the sale of a property. More often, people gradually trickle out, their rooms or beds given to new occupants, until the home’s population looks nothing like it did a year or two earlier. A tenant could become financially secure enough to rent on their own, or a job offer could lead them to another city or state. Perhaps, as with Pato, a dispute or a vice churns up enough trouble to warrant a less amicable departure. Now another possibility loomed large: *ICE* might pick someone up at work, and they’d never be heard from again.



Even though the East Elmhurst housemates lived in such intimate quarters, and some of them had been well acquainted back home, they kept a great deal from one another, especially when it came to matters such as money and their plans for the future. Why were some of the housemates unsure about exactly how much the group paid in total rent? (Adolfo collected the

money, individually, at the start of each month.) At one point, Matías mentioned to me that he might be moving to another state. Through "some contacts" from La 69, he'd heard about a potential long-term job at a building in Kansas—or maybe it was Minnesota. "It would be for two years, wherever it is," he told me. When I brought this up in the presence of some of the other housemates, he winced. "I didn't tell them," he revealed afterward.

The out-of-state opportunity fizzled, but Matías still contemplated leaving and finding a proper room that he could have to himself, instead of paying some seven hundred dollars a month to sleep in a bed inches from another tenant. He began an active search in mid-March, after his roommate, Messi, drank too much one Saturday morning and caused an altercation, breaking the front door of the house before passing out in his bed. A housemate called the police, but the officers didn't come inside. Messi ended up paying about a thousand dollars to repair the door.

As with every dispute in the house, alliances formed over whether to kick Messi out. Some were vocal about wanting to expel him. Mercy, for her part, was upset that the incident had happened while Yuri's cousin was visiting. The little girls had been scared. To my surprise, Matías was more willing to let Messi try to redeem himself. He noted that he and Messi had both left their wives and kids behind when they came to New York. "I understand that people are lonely. I really get it," Matías told me. I thought, again, of Pato—the Guatemalan migrant whose own removal had seemingly led him to spiral—and considered how lonely he must have been, too. Living with many others was no antidote to emotional solitude.

Things blew over, and Messi stayed. Still, Matías said, the episode had made him intent on improving his own situation. He'd called numbers he'd seen on "For Rent" signs, and was considering some rooms a few blocks away. The only thing stopping him from moving out was that he didn't want to leave his sister Elisa—the only family member he had nearby. "It's a very, very difficult decision," he told me. "I'm thinking about it a lot."

As Matías considered his options, spring nudged Queens back to life, even if many people remained fearful of the intensifying deportation efforts. People have been flocking back to Thirty-fourth Avenue—the longest pedestrian

street in the city. Children play in the shade of budding oak trees, and women from Mexico and Ecuador ring handbells and scoop ice cream from red carts. The remaining members of the neighborhood's old Argentine and Uruguayan communities—who were prominent here before they moved out to the suburbs—share sips of mate on park benches. A group of older Bangladeshi and Nepalese residents gather for tea. In the evenings, an elderly husband and wife from Eastern Europe, who must be in their nineties, are wheeled out by their Caribbean aides to watch people stroll past. I've never seen the couple say a word to each other, but sometimes his finger grazes the side of her hand and, staring straight ahead, she smiles.

Everything in New York City is touched and shaped by these waves of people, not only those who came earlier but those who continue to arrive now. The idea of "making it" in the new country is inextricably linked to memories of the old country and those who remain there. In Queens, it's virtually never a mistake to ask someone where they are originally from. People's eyes will widen—with happiness or with sadness, depending on how long they've been away, but always with longing.

"Everyone has their own way to cope," Matías told me in late March, in Corona. "I play volleyball." He led me to three houses on the same block whose residents had constructed elaborate volleyball courts in their back yards, complete with spectator bleachers, floodlights, and tall mesh fences around the courts' perimeters. At least one of the homes had been a "volleyball house" for more than twenty years, I learned, and had hosted generations of Ecuadorian and other Latin American migrants who gathered to play or watch anytime the weather was good. The people who lived there worked the courts, renting them out. Elderly Spanish-speaking women grilled chicken and pork off to the side, which they served in abundant portions alongside potatoes and rice; others sold hot and cold beverages and loose cigarettes, or worked as referees. The matches continued into the night, even when gusts of wind left us shivering in our windbreakers. The most competitive courts had dozens of onlookers. There, Matías and I ran into familiar faces: Iván, Hernán, and even Messi also hung out at the volleyball houses. The others, they told us, were still at work. ♦

Annals of Transportation

No-Parking Zone: The Perils of Finding a Spot in N.Y.C.

Why do city drivers waste two hundred million hours a year circling the block?

By Zach Helfand

May 05, 2025

One of the first jobs that George Bichikashvili had in America was securing some street-parking spaces in the Bronx for Con Edison, at ten dollars an hour. Bichikashvili, who is from Tbilisi, Georgia, didn't understand why anyone would pay for this. "You just take up four spots of parking and sit there until they tell you to leave," he said. But a job was a job. On the morning of November 18, 2022, Bichikashvili pulled a blue Chrysler minivan onto St. Theresa Avenue, in Pelham Bay. As directed, he parked atop a Con Ed manhole, set out some orange cones, and settled in. He wore a safety helmet and a neon work vest. The morning was beautiful. He watched the sunrise in the rearview mirror. Winter was creeping in. His breath fogged up the glass.

Bichikashvili was twenty-nine, an outgoing guy with a bright optimism. He'd moved to New York because he was determined to live an interesting life. In Tbilisi, he'd danced in the Sukhishvili National Ballet, Georgia's most prestigious troupe. He loved Americans, in part because of Kobe Bryant. He loved New York because of the TV show "Suits." He told himself that in this country he could do anything.

In the minivan, he passed the day making video calls to Tbilisi. He used the bathroom in a bodega. He is an eager conversationalist, but sitting in the car sapped his desire to do anything, so he mostly scrolled his phone. A supervisor had told him that Con Ed needed him to block off several parking spaces and the manhole so that some repairs could be made. No one told him when the work crew might come. Night fell and he dozed off. He woke up every four hours to upload a photo in an app, as he'd been instructed, confirming his location, and to turn on the heat for a bit. There was a frost. By sunrise, he was wearing leggings, two pairs of pants, two shirts, a hat, and two jackets, which was every item of warm clothing he had with him.

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In the morning, he walked around the corner to a Planet Fitness to shower and brush his teeth. He got coffee and cigarettes at the bodega. He called Tbilisi. He sat and scrolled. He put on all his clothes before going to sleep. He woke up every four hours. The next day passed in the same way, as did the one after that. A malaise set in. He lost track of the days. He spent his first Thanksgiving in the parking spot. He didn't notice. Christmas decorations went up.

New York's problem is that it doesn't have enough parking and it has too much parking. If you arranged all the curbside spots single file, the line would reach Australia. Yet nobody can find a spot. At any time, about half the cars driving in Park Slope are just circling, waiting for someone to leave. It's not unheard of for parkers to stray so far from home that they come back on a bus or in a cab. Drivers, naturally, tend to advocate for more parking. This runs into problems of geometry. A city with ample parking is, eventually, no longer a city. To offer as many spaces per capita as Los Angeles County, you'd need a garage the size of Manhattan, ten stories high.

Unlike the bodega bag or admission to the Metropolitan Museum, parking, with enough wiles and time, can still be had for free. There are some three million street spots. Ninety-seven per cent cost nothing, the domain of one of New York's weirdest institutions: alternate-side parking. The real estate alone—the same as thirteen Central Parks—is worth hundreds of billions of dollars. Every day, it's the world's biggest land rush. This produces strange behaviors.

The director Noah Baumbach, who grew up in Park Slope, used parking as a metaphor for entitlement, grievance, and impotence in his films "The Squid and the Whale" and "The Meyerowitz Stories"; the experience of looking for a spot makes you think that you're the only person who hasn't got one. In "Bananas," Woody Allen has a dream in which he is nailed to a cross and carried by hooded figures into a parking spot, where the cortege gets into a brawl with another group of hooded figures carrying another crucified man, who also want the space. Even when you've got the spot, you're stuck.

The rhythms of the curb are governed by byzantine alternate-side rules. Most blocks have signs indicating that, for a ninety-minute period on different days of the week, the cars on one side of the street must clear out to

allow the street sweeper to go by. During that window, cars are supposed to vacate their blocks and park elsewhere. In practice, most people end up sitting in their cars and waiting until the sweeper appears, at which point they quickly double-park on the opposite side so they can reclaim their spot in a mad dash once the street has been cleaned. In New York, more people take part in this ritual than attend church. A few hundred thousand city dwellers pay to keep their cars in garages, but the monthly cost in Manhattan usually starts at four hundred and fifty dollars. To be a street parker, you need scrappiness and a certain finesse. Mother Teresa, who ran an *AIDS* hospice in the West Village in the nineteen-eighties, once dropped in at Gracie Mansion unannounced to persuade Ed Koch to give her two reserved spaces. Drivers build lives around parking: the work shifts altered to align with the alternate-side-rotation hours, the keys always in the pocket, the Pavlovian alertness at the chirp of an unlocking car. A friend who no longer parks in the city told me that when he encounters a vacant spot he experiences a kind of phantom-limb pain. Parking can weasel its way into any conversation. When Rudy Giuliani spoke after the September 11th attacks, he included the announcement "Alternate-side street parking is suspended."

Once parkers move in, they're difficult to dislodge. During the pandemic, the city reappropriated eighty-five hundred spots for outdoor dining sheds. (Drivers had only recently adjusted to the loss of the thousands of spots given over to Citi Bike kiosks.) Initially, this caused a reëxamination: people noticed that parking was the thing preventing new bus lanes, bike lanes, rat-proof trash bins, flood-mitigation gardens, drop-off zones, and pedestrian plazas. Henry Grabar, whose 2023 book, "Paved Paradise," argued that an overabundance of street parking has decimated cities and driven up rents, told me, "When I started writing the book, I said, 'Wouldn't it be great if people could realize how much value is locked up in the curb?' And then it actually happened." The next thing that happened was the pandemic's car boom, which made parking even scarcer. Sam Schwartz, a former N.Y.C. traffic commissioner, recommended eliminating three parking spaces near a hospital in Washington Heights, because ambulances were getting stuck in jams. "You would've thought I was seizing the firstborn of people in that community," he told me. The spots remained. Last year, the outdoor dining sheds came down, and the parkers pulled back in.

The unusual vehemence of city parkers could have something to do with the fact that circling for a spot produces a hormonal response similar to being at war. Every year in New York, people are bludgeoned, shot, or killed over parking spaces. Aggression arises from desperation, and from violations of unwritten codes. In 2018, a pedestrian was holding a spot for a family member when another driver swooped in. The police arrived after the losing parker apparently punched the victor in the face. The alleged puncher was Alec Baldwin. (Baldwin claims it was a light push.) This incident proved that you can have the resources of a garage guy and the disposition of a street guy. "I've got every fucking numb-nuts asshole in the world writing to me online, going, 'You don't have a garage?' " he said afterward. "I have a parking garage down the block, actually."

On St. Theresa Avenue, George Bichikashvili learned that, in order to maintain friendly relations, he had to share his spots. He let neighbors move his cones and park, provided they left their phone numbers and moved when called. One family asked Bichikashvili to make his spaces available during a birthday party. He agreed. They invited him to join, but he wasn't in a party mood.

One day, a Con Ed truck finally showed up. Bichikashvili moved the minivan, and the workers opened the manhole. He asked them, "Today we're closed? The job is finished?" The crew said he had to stay.

Around day twenty, he woke up with a toothache. It became difficult to sleep. A darkness set in. "I had bad feelings for life," he said.

It can take years to learn the rules and cadences of a neighborhood. Parking customs function like accents. It's easy to identify the interlopers. People in the Rockaways are friendly to neighbors but shun outsiders. In Chelsea, drivers used to double-park on the opposite side and await the sweeper, but now they don't move until the sweeper honks at them. This development, common around the city, may demonstrate pandemic-related behavioral shifts, or, perhaps, the breakdown of our social fabric. Levels of courtesy, aggression, and entitlement vary. There are blocks of Brooklyn Heights where people sit in their cars but never move at all, even when the sweeper arrives. All New Yorkers think that their neighborhood is the worst, though some are less bad. Over a three-year stretch, three hundred thousand cars

were towed or booted citywide for parking illegally, but zero in Staten Island.

In Ridgewood, Queens, I met an Eastern European Uber driver who said he often slept in his car in order to pounce on early spots. “Parking here, it’s the ass,” he told me. On a block in South Ozone Park, one man had nineteen cars that he moved back and forth. There are double-parkers who stay in the car, double-parkers who leave, and double-parkers who put a note on the dash displaying their phone number, in case someone needs them to move. In Mott Haven, in the South Bronx, cars double-park long-term. “People honk for hours and nobody comes,” a woman named Liz told me from her Honda Pilot.

In Greenwich Village, near Fifth Avenue, cars move for the sweeper in an elegant, coördinated undulation. “It’s like the wave at Citi Field,” John Bianchi, an editor at a P.R. agency and a musician who has been parking in the area for twenty-five years, told me. Re-parking is like the closing of a zipper. These are complicated crowd dynamics. “You have to have a chess mentality,” Bianchi said. “You need to think two or three moves ahead. Some people have a checkers mentality, and it screws everything up completely.” Bianchi compared the maneuver to an oral tradition, passed down through generations. The Homer of Fifth Avenue was a local building super he’d nicknamed the Mayor of Parking, because of how he supervised the alternate-side dance and generally insured orderly conduct, such as maintaining proper spacing between cars. Eighteen inches is considered both respectful and efficient. It’s just enough for the garbage men to get through.

There are universal rules. Parking sharks—poachers who trail the sweeper in order to slip into vacated spaces—are handled through mob justice. Reversing into a spot is regarded as proper. One parker told me, “Head first is barbaric.” Bianchi once found himself in a Seinfeldian standoff in front of his apartment—he backing in, his rival pulling in. “I said, ‘I can stay here all night,’ ” he recalled. She said, ‘I can stay here all night.’ So I left the car, turned it off, and went upstairs, and I sat by the window reading a book until she gave up.”

Asking about someone’s preferred parking spot is like asking to see their tax return. People clam up. There are a couple of blocks with a thirty-minute alternate-side window, rather than the usual ninety: the parker’s arbitrage. Some people know alternate-side blocks where the sweeper never comes, which means, as Bianchi put it, “We have actually formally created a law in which New Yorkers have to be in a certain place at a certain time for no fucking reason at all.” Enterprising parkers have found work-arounds. A guy named Carmine who used to hang out at a social club in Little Italy moved cars as a side gig. One woman paid him a hundred bucks a month. “The biggest tension was he would always find a spot by his house, which was, like, two and a half blocks away from mine,” she told me.

Mostly, people sit in their cars and find ways to fill the time—the nappers, Bible studiers, book readers. Mary Norris, an author and a former copy editor at *The New Yorker*, wrote a blog called *The Alternate Side Parking Reader*. Jim Downey, a longtime head writer for "Saturday Night Live," thought of bits. His car jokes include O. J. Simpson gags for Norm Macdonald's "Weekend Update" and lines for Stefon, the Bill Hader character. In a parking space, the juices flow. "You're in this little cocoon," Downey told me. "People aren't bugging you." These days, people do therapy sessions, or take work calls or video meetings. Where else, in a city of eight million, do we get such solitude? Bianchi likes to make music. "The ukulele is easy because it fits behind the wheel," he said.

Parking problems began, more or less, with the first vehicles. In 705 B.C., the Assyrian king Sennacherib prohibited chariot parking on royal roads. Violators could be beheaded. One of New York's first parking panics came in the nineteen-twenties. Young couples, having discovered that cars were a nice, private place for making out, began parking wherever passion called. At night, fifty or sixty automobiles would clog Kings Highway, in Brooklyn. Another popular spot was Lookout Hill, in Prospect Park. The police staged periodic raids. After one, the Brooklyn *Eagle* wrote, "And so the petters, like the Gypsies, must move on again, a wandering tribe with every hand against them." But to where? City designers at the time were lining streets with little parks. These became filled up with cars. We replaced parks with parking.

In the first decades of the automobile age, New York banned parking for longer than a few hours. The prohibition was irregularly followed. The N.Y.P.D. would just drive the illegally parked cars to the police station. (A later proposal suggested letting the air out of violators' tires.)

The other day, I visited parking court. Manhattan's Parking Violations Bureau is housed in an office building downtown. The vast majority of defendants argue their cases online. (Generally, the best defense is not to argue circumstances or evidence but to find an error on the ticket.) A handful show up in person. The bureau looks like a D.M.V., with a counter for checking in. The head judge, Marian Morris, talked affably with me. She asked what my neighborhood does when the sweeper comes. I told her that everyone double-parks. She winced.

There are parking defense attorneys, but not many; the penalty for ignoring alternate-side rules and blocking the sweeper is just sixty-five dollars, which is what a few hours in a midtown garage goes for. (The city tows, too, but usually only cars with unpaid fines.) Larry Berezin got into parking after he retired as a personal-injury lawyer. “People I beat parking tickets for were more grateful than people I beat criminal charges for,” he told me. In 2018, the city created a new position, the parking-summons advocate, whose office is in the Parking Violations Bureau. The current advocate is Anthony Tse, a friendly man who grew up in Bensonhurst, where his father scrapped for alternate-side parking. Now Tse lives in downtown Brooklyn and pays for a garage. His office instructs drivers on how to prepare evidence for their hearings (it helps if photos and videos are time-stamped and show a street sign), and, in obviously losing cases, educates people on the rules. He also assists a lot of people who were parked in a legal spot, only to be towed—by utility workers or film crews—to an illegal spot, where they were then ticketed.

As mayor, Fiorello LaGuardia once sat as a parking magistrate for a day. He stayed for five hours, heard a hundred and ninety-seven cases, and left in a police car that had been stationed next to a “No Parking” sign. Under Giuliani, the Parking Violations Bureau was transferred to the Department of Finance. Dennis Boshnack, a former parking judge who now contests parking tickets for clients, told me that this creates an unavoidable conflict of interest. “The Department of Finance, their mission is to collect money for the city,” he said. Judges can see a case every couple of minutes.

Parking court was empty when I arrived. A few defendants trickled in. A FedEx driver showed up with ten tickets. A security guard recognized him. “You’re a regular!” she said. He took off his hat when his hearing began. One woman came in with two tickets for using a fraudulent Department of Transportation parking permit. (The permit was legitimate, it turned out.)

Each hearing room is just a small office. A judge sits at a desk with a computer. The respondent sits in a chair. I watched one case involving a guy who lived on West Forty-eighth Street. He had six tickets on his Porsche. The first charge was a street-sweeping violation. The judge swore him in.

“How do you plead?” she asked.

“Not guilty.” He told the judge, “I was actually in the car fixing my daughter’s car seat.” Tse told me people often don’t realize that sitting in the car or double-parking for the sweeper isn’t a legal defense.

Over time, though, parking practices tend to solidify into law. New York ended its overnight-parking ban in 1954. The reason cited by the mayor was that no one was following the law, anyway. The reversal received modest press coverage. An argument could be made that it ranks among the most consequential decisions the city has ever made. It was also one of the most casual.

George Bichikashvili didn’t know it, but he was part of an entire industry of professional parkers. One consequence of New York legalizing free long-term parking is that much of the city’s critical infrastructure is now covered by parked cars. When Con Ed needs to access electric cables or steam lines, it sends someone like Bichikashvili, called a parking spotter, to reserve space around the manhole. Spotters work for cable companies, gas utilities, and movie shoots, but Con Ed’s are everywhere. Each year, the company spends millions of dollars on spotting. This is how New York has decided to keep the lights on. Owing to the unpredictability of the work, it’s not unusual for spotters to spend days, weeks, or more living in a parking space.

For Con Ed, spotters are an easy solution to a persistent problem. “We’re as frustrated as anyone is about the difficulty of parking in New York,” Jamie McShane, a Con Ed spokesperson, told me. The company farms out the jobs to a big contractor called CE Solutions. CE Solutions passes the work on to an array of subcontractors. The ideal subcontractor is just a guy who knows guys. One subcontractor was a reputed soldier for the Genovese crime family; another was a reggae musician in Harlem. Subcontractors typically get twenty-one to twenty-nine dollars per hour of spotting, and pay spotters as little as eight. On occasion, subcontractors get sued for failing to comply with New York’s overtime and minimum-wage laws. (Today, the minimum wage is sixteen dollars and fifty cents an hour.) Generally, courts have found that the layers of outsourcing insulate Con Ed and CE Solutions from liability. One subcontractor, CE 217, accused CE Solutions, in a lawsuit, of using subcontractors in “an elaborate shell game” to skirt labor laws. (A lawyer representing CE Solutions said, “The allegation is completely false.”)

Bichikashvili found the spotting job through a Georgian friend he called Sam. He was renting a room from Sam in Gravesend, Brooklyn. Later, Bichikashvili worked for another subcontractor, called A&M Transport. One former A&M employee has sued the company, alleging that his supervisor, Madina Shukurova, withheld his pay when his car broke down and he had to leave his spot, telling him that she would "make sure he can never get work." In another lawsuit, workers alleged that supervisors controlled their bathroom breaks. When their break requests weren't granted, they sometimes had to use a bucket. (Shukurova said in legal filings that she doesn't have enough information to confirm or deny this.) The year that Bichikashvili was parked on St. Theresa Avenue, A&M made eight and a half million dollars.

New York drivers waste two hundred million hours each year circling for parking. This is enough man-hours to build four Nimitz-class U.S. Navy aircraft carriers. Twenty minutes to find a spot is routine. An hour isn't crazy. Drivers have always complained that parking has never been worse. (In the nineteen-twenties, the city considered building a thirty-thousand-space lot beneath Central Park.) Car ownership keeps going up. Risks have gone down. In 1990, one car was stolen off the street for every fifty residents. Last year, it was one in six hundred.

Parking is the city's most visible form of corruption. Roy Cohn got his start fixing his teachers' parking tickets. A kickback scandal at the Parking Violations Bureau almost took down the Koch administration. Eric Adams has used parking as a political favor. As the Brooklyn borough president, he rewarded staffers with spots in the middle of the pedestrian plaza outside Borough Hall. (Adams compared one anonymous critic of his parking regime to a Klansman.) Back when diplomats at the U.N. were immune from paying parking tickets, they often just parked in front of a driveway. The more corrupt a diplomat's home nation, the more brazen the parker. Kuwaitis were the worst offenders. The Canadian delegation went without a violation for eight years. In the eighties, the city began towing diplomats' cars, and Sam Schwartz, who was then the traffic commissioner, was hauled before the U.N. "I addressed what I heard was the best-attended session of the General Assembly ever," he told me. He recalled that the issue united the Arabs and the Israelis.

Every year, the city issues around a hundred thousand parking permits, called placards, to groups like the police and fire departments, and to people with disabilities. In 2017, Bill de Blasio gave placards to fifty thousand teachers and school employees during his reëlection campaign. Legally, placards confer limited privileges (you can park in some restricted zones; meters are free), but in practice they can function as blanket immunity. On the black market, placards go for as much as twenty-six hundred dollars. People also counterfeit their own. On cars parked in bus lanes or beside fire hydrants, you can find placards purporting to be from *FEMA* or the Red Cross, or just pieces of paper listing professions: "*WORKING PRESS*," "*doctor of podiatric medicine*," "*NEW YORK STATE FUNERAL DIRECTORS OFFICIAL BUSINESS*." These work surprisingly well. For years, Jann Wenner, the editor and publisher of *Rolling Stone*, wangled special press plates for his car which allowed him to park where most others couldn't.

The worst placard abusers are the police, who park on sidewalks, in front of hydrants, and in traffic lanes, bus lanes, and bike lanes. In the past, ticketing agents have been arrested for writing tickets to police officers. In 2011, eleven N.Y.P.D. officers were charged with fixing more than a million dollars' worth of parking tickets. Patrick Lynch, the head of the police union at the time, said that the practice had been "accepted at all ranks for decades." On the Upper West Side, officers of the Twentieth Precinct double-park their personal cars in the middle of Columbus Avenue. Cops get free subway and bus rides, but the precinct's traffic sergeant argued that the parkers had no choice. "I can't tell all the officers they need to take mass transit," he said.

I recently met up with Gersh Kuntzman, the editor of the transportation website *Streetsblog*. Kuntzman hunts for traffic cheats—placard scofflaws, license-plate defacers. (People alter their plates to escape detection on tow cameras.) We wandered Brooklyn Heights to check out some parked cars. Kuntzman rode a bike that had a big parking placard on it. "I'm a chaplain!" he said. As part of an investigation, he had paid seven hundred and fifty dollars to something called the New York State Chaplain Group, which gave him a scam placard and a badge.

The first block we looked at was anarchy—placard cheats, meter skippers. On the dashboard of one car was a neon M.T.A. work vest. “He’s an M.T.A. employee?” Kuntzman said. “Why’s he driving to work? Because he’s an asshole.” He noticed that it had out-of-state plates. “Oh, he’s a Jersey asshole.”

We talked about parking over eggs at a nearby diner. “The question is not ‘Why is it too hard to park?’ ” he said. “It’s ‘Why is it so easy to own a car in the city with the most congestion in the world?’ ”

Kuntzman thinks that street parking should be mostly banned, and, when available, very expensive. Charging for parking was essentially the life’s work of Donald Shoup, a professor at U.C.L.A. and the country’s foremost parking scholar. Shoup died in February. His obituary in the *Wall Street Journal* said, “The magnitude of his influence has been likened to that of Robert Moses and Jane Jacobs.” (Moses happened to oppose street parking on national-security grounds: if the Soviets bombed, the congestion would be deadly.) The *Journal* continued, “He’s also been compared—in seriousness, by serious people—to Pythagoras, Cezzane and Einstein.” Shoup calculated that the country dedicates more space to parking each car than to housing each human. His insight was that free parking is not actually free. We spend as much on off-street parking—via things like taxes, higher rents, and subsidies—as we spend on Medicare. Shoup’s proposed solution was to charge enough that there’s always an open space or two on every block. The payments could be made in a number of ways: dynamically priced meters, residential parking permits. In Europe, cars come equipped with sensors that detect when you’re in a parking space and allow you to pay automatically, sort of like a parking E-ZPass. In Manhattan, of course, the market price might be obscenely high—probably not much less than a monthly garage. “He sounds like an enlightened individual,” Mary Norris told me, of Shoup. “But he was my archenemy.” If priced right, on the other hand, Shoup’s proposal could eliminate the time wasted on spot hunting.

I’m sometimes asked what I do in my spare time. I park. For years, I lived in Cobble Hill, where the alternate-side custom is to double-park but remain in the car, which I think of as responsible yet expedient. While I wait for the sweeper, I eat breakfast in the car. I look at the birds. It’s a nice time to think. Occasionally, as we all wait, someone drives onto the block and pulls

into a space on the vacated side. Now it's musical chairs. Everyone scrambles back across the street, and one person loses. I call this the stampede. At home, I spend a lot of time looking out the window to watch for cars leaving. If you catch it right, you can sometimes move your car back and forth in such a way that you avoid the alternate-side wait for the week. Recently, I moved to Brooklyn Heights, which, despite being only a ten-minute walk away, is inscrutable to me. My street inexplicably has a ten-hour alternate-side window, instead of the usual ninety minutes, which requires a sit-and-wait in the morning and in the evening. I did it a few times, then gave up and went back to my old block.

To this, Kuntzman said, "Look at how much mental capacity you need to be able to figure this out." The odd thing, I told him, is that I hardly use the car. I drive it occasionally to leave the city, but almost never within the city. In New York, only a small fraction of car owners drive to work. To city residents, the car is mostly a pleasure vehicle, or—in theory, at least—a convenience. This, paradoxically, binds us to the parking spot more than to the car. The dynamic is found almost nowhere else, except maybe Boston, where Henry Grabar, the author, discovered a woman who was so afraid of losing her spot that she wouldn't drive to the supermarket and had consequently lost eleven pounds. Kuntzman threw up his hands. "They sold you on a car, a symbol of American freedom," he said. "And you're shackled!"

When I'm looking for a parking space, I turn into a monster. One popular anger-management book advises drivers, enraged at a rival stealing their spot, to pretend that the space was taken by something without malicious intent, like a cow. I've only once considered keying someone's car. Usually, I just scream. One time, as the sweeper went by, a woman in an S.U.V. darted into my vacated space. I opened the window and yelled, "You can't do that!" It turned out that there was room enough for two cars, and she was just pulling forward, out of my way. Moo. Parking is one of the most consistent sources of stress in my life. When I'm parking, the radio gets switched off. Conversation stops. And yet the euphoria of finding a spot is somehow worth it. I'd compare the tension, shock, and release to those videos in which a soldier has a surprise reunion with a loved one.

On familiar turf, I'm a good parker. The Guinness World Record for tightest parallel park is 2.95 inches of clearance, performed by a stunt driver in a Fiat 500. Most street parkers I know (myself included) are convinced that they've done tighter. Like fishermen, we have our trophies. Mine was on Congress Street, where, after forty-five minutes of circling, I once launched a thirty-point assault on a spot I'd dismissed several times earlier. I made it in. You could've fit a couple pieces of paper on either side of my bumper. On the Upper West Side, I've been told, this is referred to as "cracking the matzo." This was before the back-up camera, which ruined the sport of it, like baseball in the live-ball era.

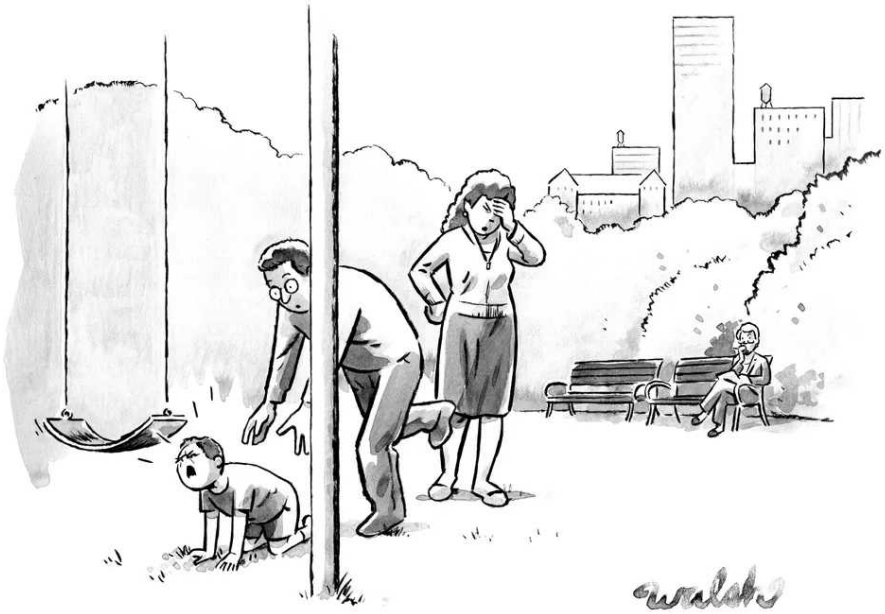
Several people have told me that it makes them sad to contemplate how their years of parking knowledge will disappear when they die. There's our Talmudic reading of the alternate-side calendar, with its we-are-the-world assemblage of holidays: to celebrate the Solemnity of the Ascension, Eid al-Adha, and Tisha B'Av, a day of fasting that commemorates various Jewish disasters, nobody has to move their car. Some years, with enough planning, you can string together several holidays in a row. "It's like drawing a straight flush," Jim Downey, the "Saturday Night Live" writer, said. He once planned a vacation around a two-week holiday string, then came back to find he'd been towed by a crew shooting "Law & Order" to a non-holiday spot. This year, the calendar added Losar, the Tibetan Buddhist New Year. Ben Furnas, the executive director of the street-reform nonprofit Transportation Alternatives, is a free-parking skeptic, but nevertheless told me, of the calendar, "It brings tears to my eyes. It's one of the most beautiful illustrations of multiculturalism anywhere in the world. It's just deeply hilarious that it's associated with having to move your car on a certain day. It sort of shows the ad-hoc, historically contingent way in which we found ourselves here."

Parking is a way of seeing the world. I can tell you where every fire hydrant is in my neighborhood. I drive down the streets in the same way each time, in ever widening circles, a route I've refined over years. Drew Velkey, a neuroscientist who has studied hunting strategies across species, identified two main ones in parkers. "We call it soaring versus perching," he said. "Eagles will get into these flight patterns where they're soaring over the landscape and more actively searching. Owls and falcons will sit on a branch and wait for the food to come by." Velkey said that New York City—

resource-scarce, competition-heavy—rewards a third strategy, a ritualized hunting route. We're cheetahs, essentially. One parker spoke of marital tensions arising from irreconcilable parking differences: one is a circler; one is a waiter.

One night, as George Bichikashvili slept in the minivan, the temperature dropped. He shivered in his two jackets. He couldn't sleep. "Sometimes, a little bit, I cried," he said.

The work crew came again and left again. His tooth ached. He video-chatted with a friend celebrating a birthday. "I had a beer and three shots of whiskey," he told me. "It was not good."



After a while, another Con Ed parking spotter showed up: a woman living in a Mercedes, which she parked over another manhole. She was a model and an aspiring influencer. They began talking. The guys in the bodega took a liking to him. They let him pay a little less for cigarettes. He told himself, "I've got a fighting spirit for my life goals." He channelled Kobe Bryant.

On day thirty-three, the work crew came again. This time, he was exasperated. He implored, "When will this end?"

The average street sweeper collects fifteen hundred pounds of debris every day. “We pick up rats, pigeons,” Antonio Taliercio, who has driven a street sweeper for nineteen years, told me on a recent morning.

He was on Seventy-second and Amsterdam with his supervisor, John Piazza. His shift was about to begin. The Department of Sanitation calls this district Manhattan 7. The sweeper comes here twice a week on each side. Different neighborhoods are swept at different frequencies. This is determined in part by a cleanliness rating calculated by Sanitation, and in part by community request. “Certain areas tend to coöperate better than others,” Taliercio said. “We find that the Upper West Side is generally a problem.”

Piazza nodded his head at Taliercio. “His brother used to sweep in this district and then left,” he said. “It’s frustrating every day. You don’t want to take that home to your family.” The Sanitation Department used to slap neon stickers on the windows of cars that didn’t move for the sweeper, as a shaming tactic, but the City Council forced them to stop. “I believe it was deemed, like, cruel and unusual punishment,” Taliercio said.

Taliercio, who wore a green Sanitation hoodie and driving gloves, hopped up into the cab. I got in a jump seat. He used a few dials to control the broom speed and the pressure. At one point, we squeezed past a double-parked car with a few inches on either side. “That’s all experience, my friend,” he said. “I can do this route with my eyes closed.” Basically no cars moved until we were right behind them, honking.

Piazza’s job was to drive another car, leading the sweeper and cajoling drivers sitting in parked cars to move out of the way, ticketing non-compliers. This buddy system is deployed frequently in problem districts. (Sanitation issues about a million alternate-side-parking tickets a year; the N.Y.P.D. issues three million.) There’s currently a bill in the State Senate to outfit the sweepers with cameras that would automatically photograph violators and send out tickets by mail.

Their route for the day wound from Riverside Drive to Central Park, mostly in the Eighties and Nineties. Piazza communicated with Taliercio via walkie-talkie. Trouble began almost immediately. On Ninetieth Street, a woman in a white Subaru blocked the sweeper while she carried items from

her building. “But if I tag her I’m an evil person,” Piazza said. There was a woman who’d fallen asleep in her car, a belligerent guy with a dog, a Range Rover driving the wrong way. “He’s about to kill someone,” Piazza said. Across Columbus, a double-parked construction van caused a clog. Piazza yelled up to a worker on some scaffolding: “Yo!” The worker jumped down and moved the van. It took Taliercio twenty-two minutes to travel three blocks. This was three per cent of the route.

After many years, Piazza can recognize the license plates of serial offenders. He’s more lenient with some buildings—a funeral parlor, a school—because the occupants keep the street clean themselves. He has a good relationship with the doormen along Central Park, who’ll run out of a building to move cars for the broom. Piazza told me, “I’ve had kids in the car, alone. ‘Hi, I don’t have a license.’ Well, tell your parents—they’re getting a ticket.”

On Central Park West, he honked repeatedly at one oblivious parker. “This guy’s picking his ear,” he said.

The caravan turned onto Eighty-ninth Street. Piazza got out to tell someone to move. “I’ve been sitting in the car. I don’t know how to drive it,” an older man said.

“I’ve gotta write you a ticket,” Piazza said.

The man said that he was helping out a woman who was away.

“She set you up for failure!” Piazza said. He wrote a ticket.

The pair made it through only a fraction of the route. I asked Taliercio what sweeping has taught him. “People are territorial,” he said. It’s the lack of courtesy that bothers him, not the parking. He drives to work, and parks in the Sanitation garage, so he can avoid his own alternate-side obligations. Piazza lives in Riverdale and drives to work, too. “I’m never home, so when I am on a day that there’s alternate side I don’t think about it. I’ve gotten tickets. I’m, like, ‘All right, I screwed up.’ ”

On day thirty-three, shortly after George Bichikashvili’s outburst to the work crew, he was notified that the job was closed. He bellowed, “Freedom!” He

blasted electronic music and drove straight home. He showered and went to the barber. He had a drink and relaxed. He bought a plane ticket for somewhere warm. He spent New Year's in Miami.

Upon returning, with no other options, he picked up more spotting work. He had a shift of twenty-seven days, again in the Bronx. There was a twenty-four-day stint on 149th Street. "Every narco man and every homeless lived on this street, and also me, together," he said. He gave dollars to the homeless. He liked parking in Manhattan better. He had conversations with doormen and dog-walkers. During a stint on West End Avenue, he befriended a writer, Daniel Krieger, who photographed him for a short online article. Sometimes people would ask why he was living in a parking spot. "One time, someone told me, 'America's good, right?' I told them, 'Why?' He said, 'Because you do nothing and someone gives you salary.' "

He found that, despite the job, he did love America. On the flight back from Miami, he felt himself longing for New York. "It was a feeling of coming home," he said.

He quit spotting after nine months. Recently, he joined a lawsuit against CE Solutions, A&M Transport, Shukurova, and others, for failure to pay minimum wage and overtime.

He's moved on. He reminded himself that he is a world-class dancer, and that, in Tbilisi, he'd run two small businesses. "I have two hands, two legs, two eyes. I can do everything," he said. "I just need my time." Recently, he has worked as a driver for Access-A-Ride and Lyft. One perk is that, when he's working, he never has to park. ♦

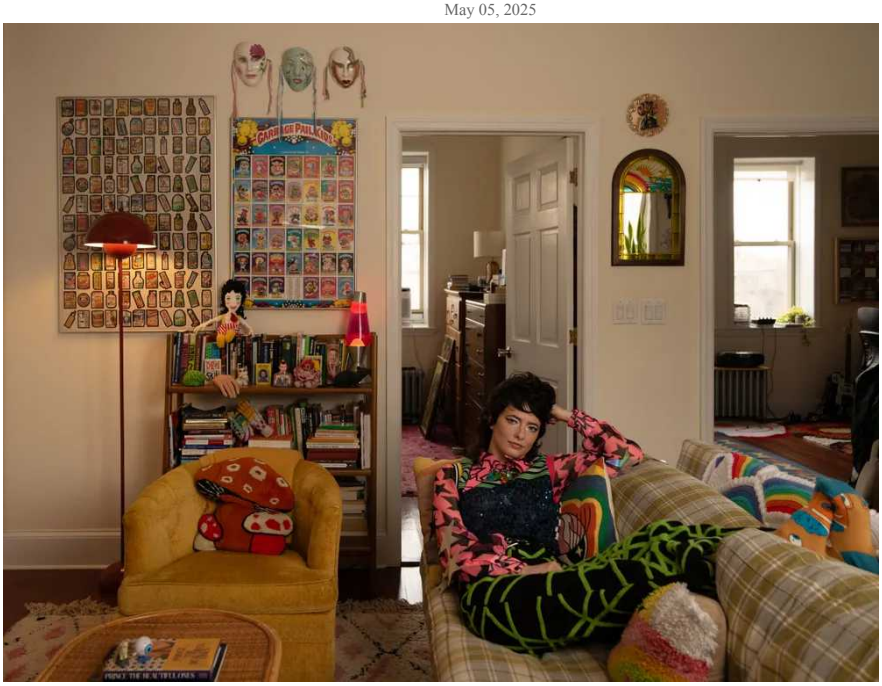
Portfolio

Power Houses

Inside the living rooms of notable New Yorkers.

By Gillian Laub

May 05, 2025

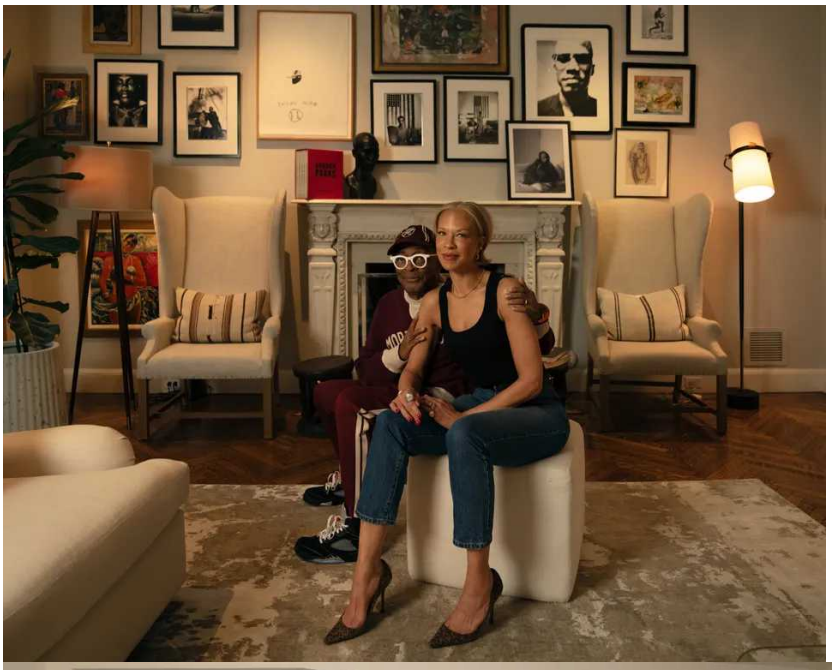


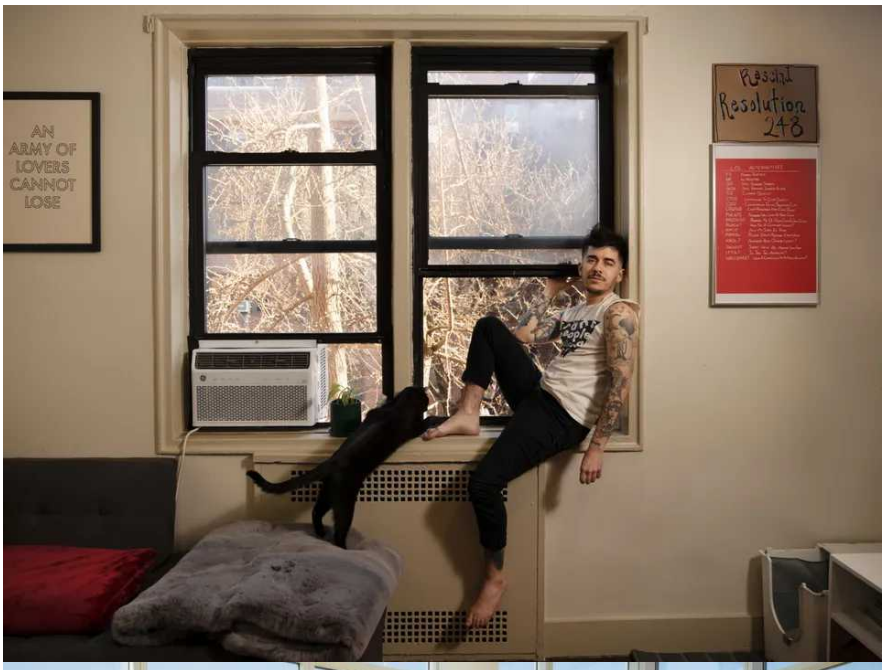
What aspects of living are meant to be done in a living room, exactly? Not eating, which takes place, at least theoretically, in the dining room or in the kitchen; not sleeping or having sex, which takes place in the bedroom. (And, unless you live in an old East Village tenement, I won't even mention bathing.) What the living room *is* for, ostensibly, is gathering. It's the most public-facing of a home's spaces, and, as such, it bears a particular burden: that of showcasing to others who the occupants are. The quilt you drape on your couch, the paintings you hang on your walls, the tchotchkes you select for your mantel—all are about as important to your adult self-conception as heavy eyeliner and chunky boots are to an emo teen's, which is to say, very. The signifiers might change, but the impulse remains the same.

That this idea holds most true, perhaps, for the living rooms of New Yorkers shouldn't surprise us: this is a city made for outsized characters. In 1995,

The New Yorker commissioned the photographer Dominique Nabokov to capture such spaces, free of the homes' residents. It was interior photography as portraiture. To celebrate the magazine's centenary, the photographer Gillian Laub was asked to revisit a similar brief, but this time she included the inhabitants. We see the fashion designer Diane von Furstenberg, coquettishly cross-legged beneath a gargantuan image of her own face; and the political operative Huma Abedin and her fiancé, the investor and philanthropist Alex Soros, in a room whose spectacular city views serve as its adornment. In Laub's pictures, we encounter the city's powerful and formidable, amid the precious objects that define them. But even the more modest parlors teem with meaning. The "S.N.L." cast member Sarah Sherman stretches out on her couch, surrounded by bits and bobs as colorful and chaotic as her harlequin-style getup: a doll made in her likeness, a disembodied hand, a framed poster of Garbage Pail Kids cards, a Pee-wee Herman candle. It all tells a story, as any living room—and any photograph—should do.

—*Naomi Fry*

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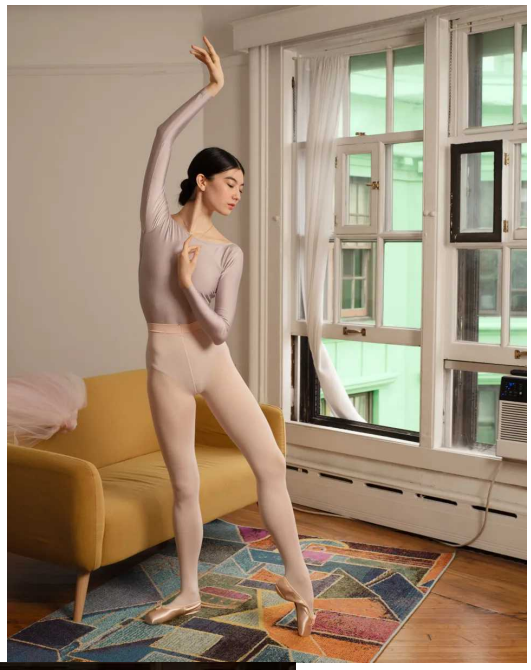

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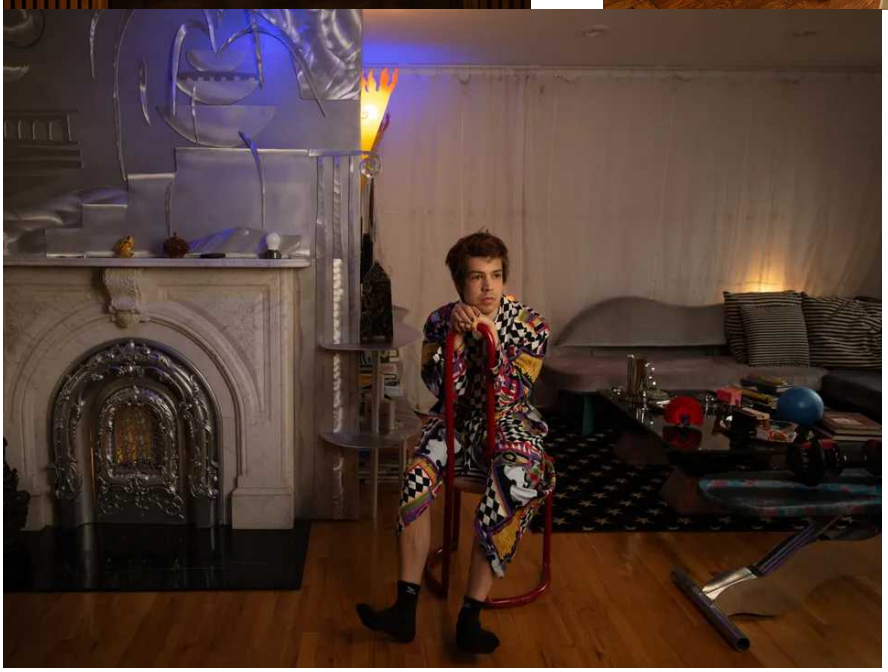


Sister Act

TWO BUTTERFLIES WENT OUT AT NOON

Do The Right Thing
30th Anniversary

Takes

- Michael Schulman on Lillian Ross's "The Shit-Kickers of Madison Avenue"
- Rachel Syme on Kennedy Fraser's "As Gorgeous as It Gets"

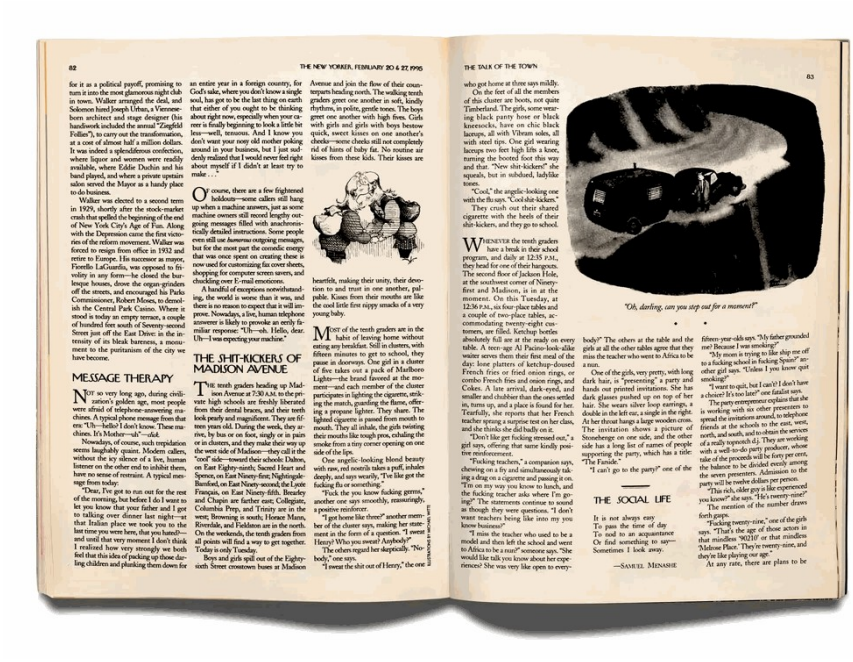
Takes

Michael Schulman on Lillian Ross's "The Shit-Kickers of Madison Avenue"

The piece runs sixteen hundred words—long for Talk of the Town, short for an instant classic.

By Michael Schulman

May 04, 2025



82 THE NEW YORKER, FEBRUARY 20 & 27, 1995

for it as a political payoff, promising to turn it into the most glamorous night club in town. Walker arranged the deal, and Solomon hired Joseph Urban, a Viennese-born architect and stage designer (his handiwork included the annual "Ziegfeld Follies"), to carry out the transformation, at a cost of almost half a million dollars. It was indeed a splendiferous confection, where liquor and women were readily available, where Eddie Duchin and his band played, and where a private upstairs salon served the Mayor as a handy place to do business.

Walker was elected to a second term in 1929, shortly after the stock-market crash that spelled the beginning of the end of New York City's Age of Fun. Along with the Depression came the first victories of the reform movement. Walker was forced to resign from office in 1932 and retire to Europe. His successor as mayor, Fiorello LaGuardia, was opposed to frivolity in any form—he closed the burlesque houses, drove the organ-grinders off the streets, and encouraged his Parks Commissioner, Robert Moses, to demolish the Central Park Casino. Where it stood is today an empty terrace, a couple of hundred feet south of Seventy-second Street just off the East Drive: in the intensity of its bleak bareness, a monument to the puritanism of the city we have become.

MESSAGE THERAPY

NOT so very long ago, during civilization's golden age, most people were afraid of telephone-answering machines. A typical phone message from that era: "Uh—hello? I don't know. These machines. It's Mother—ah"—click.

Nowadays, of course, such trepidation seems laughably quaint. Modern callers, without the icy silence of a live, human listener on the other end to inhibit them, have no sense of restraint. A typical message from today:

"Dear, I've got to run out for the rest of the morning, but before I do I want to let you know that your father and I got to talking over dinner last night—at that Italian place we took you to the last time you were here, that you hated—and until that very moment I don't think I realized how very strongly we both feel that this idea of packing up those darling children and plunking them down for an entire year in a foreign country, for God's sake, where you don't know a single soul, has got to be the last thing on earth that either of you ought to be thinking about right now, especially when your career is finally beginning to look a little bit less—well, tenuous. And I know you don't want your nosy old mother poking around in your business, but I just suddenly realized that I would never feel right about myself if I didn't at least try to make . . .

OF course, there are a few frightened holdouts—some callers still hang up when a machine answers, just as some machine owners still record lengthy outgoing messages filled with anachronistically detailed instructions. Some people even still use *humorous* outgoing messages, but for the most part the comedic energy that was once spent on creating these is now used for customizing fax cover sheets, shopping for computer screen savers, and chuckling over E-mail emoticons.

A handful of exceptions notwithstanding, the world is more than it was, and there is no reason to expect that it will improve. Nowadays, a list, human telephone answerer is likely to provoke an eerily familiar response: "Uh—uh. Hello, dear. Uh—I was expecting your machine."

THE SHIT-KICKERS OF MADISON AVENUE

THE tenth graders heading up Madison Avenue at 7:30 A.M. to the private high schools are freshly liberated from their dental braces, and their teeth look pearly and magnificent. They are fifteen years old. During the week, they arrive, by bus or on foot, singly or in pairs or in clusters, and they make their way up the west side of Madison—they call it the "cool" side—toward their schools: Dalton, on East Eighty-ninth; Sacred Heart and Spence, on East Ninety-first; Nightingale-Bamford, on East Ninety-second; the Lycée Français, on East Ninety-fifth; Brearley and Chapin are farther east; Collegiate, Columbia Prep, and Trinity are in the west; Browning is south; Horace Mann, Riverdale, and Fieldston are in the north. On the weekends, the tenth graders from all points will find a way to get together. Today is only Tuesday.

Boys and girls spill out of the Eighty-sixth Street crosstown buses at Madison Avenue and join the flow of their counterparts heading north. The walking tenth graders greet one another in soft, kindly rhythms, in polite, gentle tones. The boys greet one another with high fives. Girls with girls and girls with boys bestow quick, sweet kisses on one another's cheeks—some cheeks still not completely rid of hints of baby fat. No routine air kisses from these kids. Their kisses are

heartfelt, making their unity, their devotion to and trust in one another, palpable. Kisses from their mouths are like the cool little first nippy smacks of a very young baby.

MOST of the tenth graders are in the habit of leaving home without eating any breakfast. Still in clusters, with fifteen minutes to get to school, they pause in doorways. One girl in a cluster of five takes out a pack of Marlboro Lights—the brand favored at the moment—and each member of the cluster participates in lighting the cigarette, striking the match, guarding the flame, offering a propane lighter. They share. The lighted cigarette is passed from mouth to mouth. They all inhale, the girls twisting their mouths like tough pros, exhaling the smoke from a tiny corner opening on one side of the lips.

One angelic-looking blond beauty with raw, red nostrils takes a puff, inhales deeply, and says wearily, "I've like got the fucking flu or something."

"Fuck the you know fucking germs," another one says smoothly, reassuringly, a positive reinforcer.

"I get home like three?" another member of the cluster says, making her statement in the form of a question. "I swear Henry? Who you swear? Anybody?"

The others regard her skeptically. "Nobody," one says.

"I swear the shit out of Henry," the one who got home at three says mildly.

On the feet of all the members of this cluster are boots, not quite Timberland. The girls, some wearing black pretty hose or black kneesocks, have on chic black lacesups, all with Vibram soles, all with steel tips. One girl wearing lacesups two feet high lifts a knee, turning the booted foot this way and that. "New shit-kickers?" she squeals, but in subdued, ladylike tones.

"Cool," the angelic-looking one with the flu says. "Cool shit-kickers."

They crush out their shared cigarette with the heels of their shit-kickers, and they go to school.

WHENEVER the tenth graders have a break in their school program, and daily at 12:35 P.M., they head for one of their hangouts. The second floor of Jackson Hole, at the southwest corner of Ninety-first and Madison, is in at the moment. On this Tuesday, at 12:36 P.M., six four-place tables and a couple of two-place tables, accommodating twenty-eight customers, are filled. Ketchup bottles absolutely full sit at the ready on every table. A teen-age Al Pacino-look-alike waiter serves them their first meal of the day: lone platters of ketchup-doused French fries or fried onion rings, or combo French fries and onion rings, and Cokes. A late arrival, dark-eyed, and smaller and chubbier than the ones settled in, turns up, and a place is found for her. Tearfully, she reports that her French lighted cigarette is passed from mouth to mouth. They all inhale, the girls twisting their mouths like tough pros, exhaling the smoke from a tiny corner opening on one side of the lips.

"Don't like get fucking stressed out," a girl says, offering that same kindly positive reinforcement.

"Fucking teachers," a companion says, chewing on a fry and simultaneously taking a drag on a cigarette and passing it on. "I'm on my way you know to lunch, and the fucking teacher asks where I'm going?" The statements continue to sound as though they were questions. "I don't want teachers being like into my you know business?"

"I miss the teacher who used to be a model and then left the school and went to Africa to be a nun?" someone says. "She would like talk you know about her experiences? She was very like open to everybody?" The others at the table and the girls at all the other tables agree that they miss the teacher who went to Africa to be a nun.

One of the girls, very pretty, with long dark hair, is "presenting" a party and hands out printed invitations. She has dark glasses pushed up on top of her hair. She wears silver loop earrings, a double in the left ear, a single in the right. At her throat hangs a large wooden cross. The invitation shows a picture of Stonehenge on one side, and the other side has a long list of names of people supporting the party, which has a title: "The Fatsida."

"I can't go to the party?" one of the

THE SOCIAL LIFE

It is not always easy
To pass the time of day
To nod to an acquaintance
Or find something to say—
Sometimes I look away.

—SAMUEL MENASHE

83 THE TALK OF THE TOWN

"Oh, darling, can you step out for a moment?"

fifteen-year-olds says. "My father grounded me? Because I was smoking?"

"My mom is trying to like ship me off to a fucking school in fucking Spain?" another girl says. "Unless I you know quit smoking?"

"I want to quit, but I can't! I don't have a choice? It's too late?" one fatalist says.

The party entrepreneur explains that she is working with six other presenters to spread the invitations around, to telephone friends at the schools to the east, west, north, and south, and to obtain the services of a really topnotch dj. They are working with a well-to-do party producer, whose take of the proceeds will be forty per cent, the balance to be divided evenly among the seven presenters. Admission to the party will be twelve dollars per person.

"This rich, older guy is like experienced you know?" she says. "He's twenty-nine?"

The mention of the number draws forth gasps.

"Fucking twenty-nine," one of the girls says. "That's the age of those actors in that mindless '90210' or that mindless 'Melrose Place.' They're twenty-nine, and they're like playing our age."

At any rate, there are plans to be

Lord knows what the gaggle of tenth graders chewing French fries and puffing Marlboro Lights made of the small septuagenarian woman who approached them at Jackson Hole, a burger joint on Ninety-first and Madison, claiming to be a magazine writer. Surely they knew nothing about Lillian Ross, the legend, who had written famous portraits of Ernest Hemingway and John Huston. (Who were they, anyway? Like, old guys?) Ross was fifty years into her career at *The New Yorker*, where she'd helped perfect the form of the Talk of the Town piece, with its cool, friendly eye and its limber, syncopated rhythms. For whatever reason, the Jackson Hole girls let her in on their chatter, as they planned their weekend and commiserated over a pop quiz in French class. "I was immediately fond of

them, in their honesty and in their straightforwardness," Ross later wrote. "I was deeply touched by the way they accepted me, strangely enough, as one of them."

The resulting story, "The Shit-Kickers of Madison Avenue," appeared in the magazine's seventieth-anniversary issue, in February, 1995. It runs sixteen hundred words—long for a Talk piece, short for an instant classic—and is filled with gabby, anxious, kooky, self-dramatizing teen talk. ("I sweat Henry? Who you sweat? Anybody?") Ross, a longtime Upper East Sider, had noticed the daily flight path of private-school kids—Nightingale girls, Buckley boys—along the west side of Madison (the "cool" side). She observed them in the wild, like a nature documentarian watching a herd of grazing antelopes, as they kissed hello and showed off their new lace-up boots, or "shit-kickers." She begins, "The tenth graders heading up Madison Avenue at 7:30 *A.M.* to the private high schools are freshly liberated from their dental braces, and their teeth look pearly and magnificent. They are fifteen years old." When I started writing Talk pieces, eleven years later, I read and reread "Shit-Kickers," trying to absorb its joyful simplicity. Ross always made it look easy.

After her son started school, she heard from a teacher that Jackson Hole was an "in" hangout, so she infiltrates a table of girls there at lunch. Hot with anticipation for a party at a midtown club, the girls fuss over what they'll wear and where they'll pregame with vodka and orange juice. (One of them is grounded.) Ross catches them again on the other side of the weekend, disappointed; the party was a bust. Ross didn't believe in tape recorders—she thought they got in the way of true listening—but her rendering of the girls' dialogue invites the reader into their buzzing inner world. You can sense her delight in the upspeak, the exuberance, the rituals of fries and ketchup and onion rings. Like her friend J. D. Salinger, Ross loved the openness of young people and wrote about them often. She doesn't name the girls in "Shit-Kickers," identifying them as "the entrepreneur" or "the one who got home at three." Nevertheless, as she recalled in her book "Reporting Back," the piece "caused a bit of an uproar among some parents and teachers, but very few of them said that it was misrepresentative."

It's hard to see how anyone could be scandalized. "Shit-Kickers" has none of the salaciousness of Larry Clark's film "Kids," which came out that

summer, or later depictions of Upper East Side preppies, such as “Cruel Intentions” and “Gossip Girl.” There’s no finger-wagging at their hedonism or their privilege; they’re just kids, still outgrowing their baby fat, but with the ersatz sophistication of New York City teens. I should know. I grew up on the Upper East Side, attended one of the schools mentioned in the piece, and sometimes went to Jackson Hole for burgers. I was in ninth grade when Ross’s subjects were in tenth. I saw how the oddity of adolescence in the upscale Manhattan of the Giuliani years—the too-lavish bar mitzvahs, shoplifting at Bloomingdale’s—crossed with normal teen-age preoccupations, like crushes and algebra tests. Jackson Hole is on Sixty-fourth now, and teen-agers still pass through there, speaking a different slang. But much else has changed. Six months after “Shit-Kickers” was published, Windows 95 hit retail, and kids started planning their weekends on e-mail, then AOL Instant Messenger, then Facebook, then Snapchat. Ross, in her winsome slice of New York life, had inadvertently captured the last gasp of teendom before it went online forever. ♦

Read the original story.

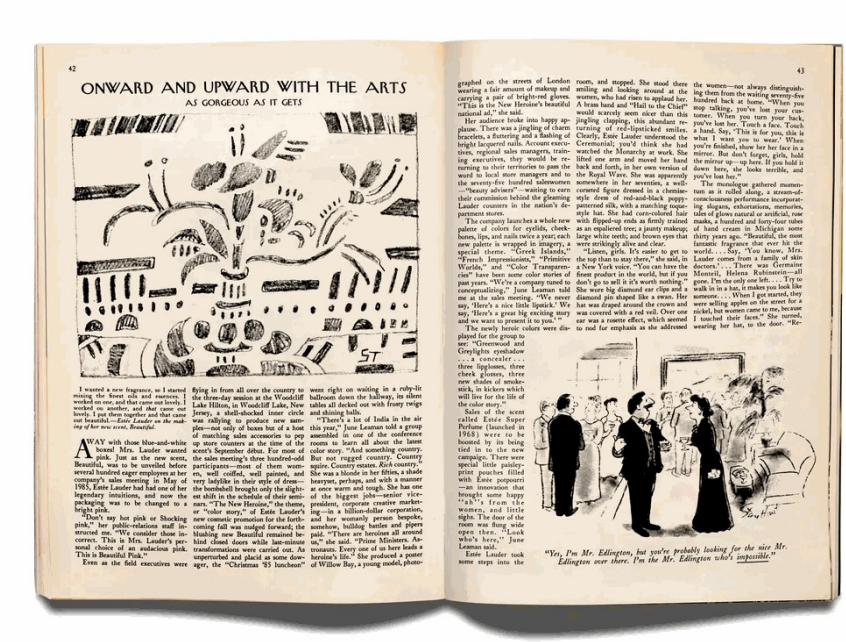
Takes

Rachel Syme on Kennedy Fraser's "As Gorgeous as It Gets"

The article, about the launch of a new perfume, treats what might be considered a frivolous subject with exhaustive attention.

By Rachel Syme

May 04, 2025



42

ONWARD AND UPWARD WITH THE ARTS

AS GORGEOUS AS IT GETS

I wanted a new fragrance, so I started mixing the finest oils and essences. I worked on one, and that came out lovely. I worked on another, and that came out lovely. I put them together and that came out beautiful.—*Estée Lauder on the making of her new scent, Beautiful.*

AWAY with those blue-and-white boxes! Mrs. Lauder wanted pink. Just as the new scent, Beautiful, was to be unveiled before several hundred eager employees at her company's sales meeting in May of 1985, Estée Lauder had had one of her legendary intuitions, and now the packaging was to be changed to a bright pink.

"Don't say hot pink or Shocking pink," her public-relations staff instructed me. "We consider those incorrect. This is Mrs. Lauder's personal choice of an audacious pink. This is Beautiful Pink."

Even as the field executives were flying in from all over the country to the three-day session at the Woodcliff Lake Hilton, in Woodcliff Lake, New Jersey, a shell-shocked inner circle was rallying to produce new samples—not only of boxes but of a host of matching sales accessories to pep up store counters at the time of the scent's September debut. For most of the sales meeting's three hundred-odd participants—most of them women, well coiffed, well painted, and very ladylike in their style of dress—the bombshell brought only the slightest shift in the schedule of their seminars. "The New Heroine," the theme, or "color story," of Estée Lauder's new cosmetic promotion for the forthcoming fall was nudged forward; the blushing new Beautiful remained behind closed doors while last-minute transformations were carried out. As unperturbed and placid as some dowager, the "Christmas '85 luncheon" were right on waiting in a ruby-lit ballroom down the hallway, in silent tables all decked out with *frosty* twigs and shining balls.

"There's a lot of India in the air this year," June Leaman told a group assembled in one of the conference rooms to learn all about the latest color story. "And something country. But not rugged country. Country again. Country estates. *Rich* country." She was a blonde in her fifties, a shade heavyset, perhaps, and with a manner at once warm and tough. She has one of the biggest jobs—senior vice-president, corporate creative marketing—in a billion-dollar corporation, and her womanly person bespoke, somehow, bulldog battles and pipers paid. "There are heroines all around us," she said. "Prime Ministers. Astronauts. Every one of us here leads a heroine's life." She produced a poster of Willow Bay, a young model, photographed on the streets of London wearing a fair amount of makeup and carrying a pair of bright-red gloves. "This is the New Heroine's beautiful national id," she said.

Her audience broke into happy applause. There was a jingling of charm bracelets, a fluttering and a flashing of bright lacquered nails. Account executives, regional sales managers, training executives, they would be returning to their territories to pass the word to local store managers and to the seventy-five hundred saleswomen—"beauty advisers"—waiting to earn their commission behind the gleaming Lauder counters in the nation's department stores.

The company launches a whole new palette of colors for eyelids, cheekbones, lips, and nails twice a year; each new palette is wrapped in imagery, a special theme: "Greek Islands," "French Impressionists," "Primitive Worlds," and "Color Transparencies" have been some color stories of past years. "We're a company tuned to conceptualizing," June Leaman told me at the sales meeting. "We never say, 'Here's a nice little lipstick.' We say, 'Here's a great big exciting story and we want to present it to you.'"

The newly heroic colors were displayed for the group to see: "Greenwood and Greylights eyeshadow . . . a concealer . . . three lipglosses, three cheek glosses, three new shades of smoke-stick, in kickers which will live for the life of the color story."

Sales of the scent called Estée Super Perfume (launched in 1968) were to be boosted by its being tied in to the new campaign. There were special little paisley-print pouches filled with Estée potpourri—an innovation that brought some happy "ah"s from the women, and little sighs. The door of the room was flung wide open then. "Look who's here," June Leaman said.

Estée Lauder took some steps into the room, and stopped. She stood there smiling and looking around at the women, who had risen to applaud her. A brass band and "Hail to the Chief" would scarcely seem nicer than this jingling clapping, this abundant returning of red-lipsticked smiles. Clearly, Estée Lauder understood the Ceremonial; you'd think she had watched the Monarchy at work. She lifted one arm and moved her hand back and forth, in her own version of the Royal Wave. She was apparently somewhere in her seventies, a well-corseted figure dressed in a chemise-style dress of red-and-black poppy-patterned silk, with a matching toque-style hat. She had cure-colored hair with flipped-up ends as firmly trained as an espaliered tree; a jaunty makeup; large white teeth; and brown eyes that were strikingly alive and clear.

"Listen, girls. It's easier to get to the top than to stay there," she said, in a New York voice. "You can have the finest product in the world, but if you don't go to sell it it's worth nothing." She wore big diamond ear clips and a diamond pin shaped like a swan. Her hat was draped around the crown and was covered with a red veil. Over one ear was a rosette effect, which seemed to nod for emphasis as she addressed the women—not always distinguishing them from the waiting seventy-five hundred back at home. "When you stop talking, you've lost your customer. When you turn your back, you've lost her. Touch a face. Touch a hand. Say, 'This is for you, this is what I want you to wear.' When you're finished, show her her face in a mirror. But don't forget, girls, hold the mirror up—up here. If you hold it down here, she looks terrible, and you've lost her."

The monologue gathered momentum as it rolled along, a stream-of-consciousness performance incorporating slogans, exhortations, memories, tales of glows natural or artificial, rose masks, a hundred and forty-four tubes of hand cream in Michigan some thirty years ago. "Beautiful, the most fantastic fragrance that ever hit the world. . . . Say, 'You know, Mrs. Lauder comes from a family of skin doctors.' . . . There was Germaine Monteil, Helena Rubinstein—all gone. I'm the only one left. . . . Try to walk in in a hat, it makes you look like someone. . . . When I got started, they were selling apples on the street for a nickel, but women came to me, because I touched their faces." She turned, wearing her hat, to the door. "Re-

"Yes, I'm Mr. Edington, but you're probably looking for the nice Mr. Edington over there. I'm the Mr. Edington who's *impossible*."

T*he New Yorker* is not, by any definition, a fashion magazine, but it is—and nearly always has been—a magazine concerned with fashion. The publication's mascot, Eustace Tilley, is, after all, defined by accessories: his gleaming top hat, crisp white gloves, and dandyish monocle are all totems of both persnickety good taste and the febrile effort behind chasing it. He is equal parts fashion critic and fashion victim, squinting at the world through an eyepiece that was already passé by the time he was created. In other words: it is a very good joke, and one that set the enduring tone for the magazine's dual-minded approach to writing about consumer goods. From the start, *The New Yorker's* fashion-and-beauty reportage has walked the thin

runway between seriousness and silliness, enthusiasm and exasperation, respect for lovely things and skepticism about how they're sold.

The beat has passed through many hands, and most who tackled it were not sartorial obsessives but, rather, gregarious generalists. In October, 1925, the magazine's founding editor, Harold Ross, put a recent Vassar graduate named Lois Long in charge of a chatty shopping column called Fifth Avenue. (Within weeks, the name shifted to On and Off the Avenue, presumably to encompass other promenades.) Long, who also wrote a night-life column under the pseudonym Lipstick, had little experience writing about clothing, but she more than made up for it in panache. Her early pieces feature an exuberant cascade of opinions about what constitutes good—or tragic—style. (Good: Deauville sandals, badger-fur collars; bad: perfumed cigarettes, ostrich-feather fans.) Long loved *things*, but never forgot that things cost money, and sought to encourage both appreciation and discernment. Ralph Ingersoll, the managing editor from 1925 to 1930, wrote that Long "combined two rare ingredients: an ability to be perpetually stimulated, blended with an ability to be perpetually critical."

These rare ingredients commingle in all my favorite fashion pieces from the archive. But, if there is one writer's œuvre that I keep returning to, it is that of Kennedy Fraser, a British-born critic who took over the shopping column —then briefly titled Feminine Fashions—in 1970, at the behest of the editor William Shawn. In the course of two decades, Fraser wrote dozens of reviews and profiles, but to my mind her best piece was one of her last, the novella-length opus "As Gorgeous as It Gets," from 1986, for which she embedded at the Estée Lauder company as it launched a perfume called Beautiful.

What makes the piece notable is its exhaustive, generous attention to what might seem—to some—a frivolous subject. The article is a smorgasbord of detail, brimming with characters, including C-suite executives, public-relations staffers, marketing V.P.s, and Lauder herself, for whom Fraser reserves her best descriptions. (Lauder enters rooms like "some splendid insect queen"; at the airport, she waits for luggage "like a terrier at a rabbit hole.") Fraser is a master of the stylish adjective, often inventing her own compound words: "At the ruby-lit, wintery-velvety Christmas luncheon," she writes, "Esteé Lauder presented me with nice, woman-to-woman

quotations as if they were hors d'œuvres." The article is sensually potent; Fraser sniffs "vermicelli-like strings of vetiver" and details a corporate party at which saleswomen, "fragrant from their baths, in clouds of Beautiful," arrive, "rustling like pale water lilies in full-skirted chiffon, silk, or spangled net." This is delectable prose, near-lickable. But Fraser retains her cocked eyebrow, ever aware that the pomp is in service of a product for which demand has been calculatingly manufactured.

Fraser, who is now in her seventies, told me recently that the piece was a bold risk for Lauder, who had never let a journalist peer so far inside the kingdom. Granting access "involved summit-level seriousness and tense discussion." But, Fraser said, she was pleased with the result, inasmuch as the piece captured something vivid about collective desire. "I was always terribly ashamed to be a fashion writer, because everyone else was writing on *serious* subjects," Fraser told me. "Mr. Shawn told me that I would not write about fashion forever, that I could always move on. But I'm sorry now that I ever felt ashamed. Because, as long as fashion is changing, it's a very interesting way of observing society." ♦

Read the original story.

Fiction

- Travesty

Fiction

Travesty

By Lillian Fishman

May 04, 2025

When the conversation with Ruth finally came, Prima was not shocked. She'd had a consciousness, since that first day in Hamilton Hall, of becoming increasingly entangled in the universe, of her name no longer being the name of an innocent, of deliberation and responsibility, of laying down tracks that would determine the direction of decades in her life. This she relished. There was a feeling among her classmates of wanting to remain clean—not sexually clean or physically clean but clean of commitments. The other students wanted to be well rounded; they wanted the freedom to choose, later on, from a variety of paths for which they had prepared; they wanted to have relationships that would ready them for an eventual mate but would not yet tie them permanently to anyone. They wanted more than anything to maintain their neutral goodness. They did not want to appear in articles online or in newspapers, unless they were cast in a glowing light. They loved stories of grotesque misbehavior and ruination; they loved these stories because they felt safe and lucky, and it excited them to live happily in the same world in which other people suffered, people who, they felt, had

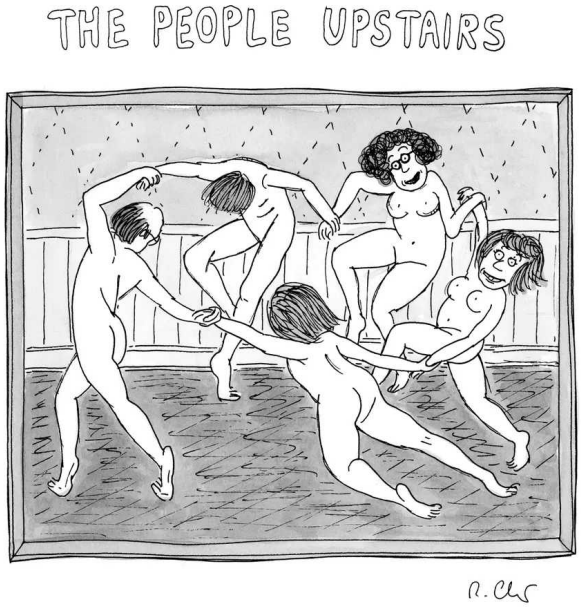
been given all the same tools as they had but had shown themselves to be rapists, or racists, or cheats, or fools. Prima did not fear the vicissitudes of adulthood. Even as a child she had wished gravely to be an adult. She hated being protected; she hated the ugly signs around the campus that instructed her on how to wash her hands, where to store her coat. She knew that adulthood was punishing and ecstatic, that one could not remain clean, that over the years one would go in and out of favor with other people. One's only real responsibility was to remain self-sufficient and stoic, and she felt that, because she understood this, she was prepared for anything.

She was not romantically interested in other undergraduates. Innocence did not attract her. Not that all the other students were innocent, but even if they were eccentric, even if they were ambitious, they had a quality of being untested: they simply seemed young. Sometimes, in her first year, she had met graduate students at the bar on Amsterdam and gone home with them. Even they had not really seemed like adults to her. They'd betrayed their moral anxiety when they commented on her youth. At the time she had always admitted that she was eighteen. This had not stopped the graduate students, and she could tell that it excited them, yet they disliked themselves for the way in which it excited them. They drank heavily in order to disguise their excitement from themselves, and they told her that she seemed very mature, she didn't seem eighteen. She began to worry that adulthood was not what she had imagined, that it was as fearful and strict as adolescence, and that, in order to distract themselves from the fact that their lives remained adolescent, adults resorted to alcohol. She drank very little. She loved a clear head. Her loneliness—and this was what pained her most, this was the element of her loneliness that haunted her—struck her as a particularly adolescent loneliness, because it was the loneliness of feeling that she did not understand people and they did not understand her, and that despite her talent for paying attention she did not have a facility for social happiness.

Read an interview with the author for the story behind the story.

She decided to study philosophy. In the fall semester of her sophomore year she enrolled in a course that was cross-listed in the English and sociology departments, because it seemed to her to be devoted to studying life: a course on marriage, which was taught by Eugenia Heiss. "Marriage" was a word, like "motherhood," like "betrayal," that seemed to Prima to belong

thoroughly to adulthood and to contain inexhaustible intellectual riches. It was one of the great excitements of adulthood to realize that marriage was not always just a response to expectation and convention, as it had been for her parents; marriage could be a complex, intimate architecture, an institution through which all the responsibility and power of adulthood might be expressed.



At the first, introductory lecture, in a classroom high up in Hamilton Hall and saturated in that late-August week with a languid heat, Prima had listened as Heiss spoke about the deceptive quality of the monolith of marriage, the fact that, though we feel it is simply part of the landscape, it is in truth alive and acting on us at all times. The ideological and ethical and logistical forces it exerts, even on those who are unmarried, cause us to construct ourselves and our choices in relation to how we understand it. Prima had the impression that Heiss took nothing for granted. Even the fact that she could not tell whether Heiss was a man or a woman, though she knew that Heiss's first name was listed on the syllabus as Eugenia, helped impress on her the sense that in that lecture room life was like a ball of Play-Doh that could be stretched and smashed into new shapes as one saw fit. Heiss had cheekbones that were elegant and a nose that, although in a different context it might also have looked elegant, was knifelike, almost frightening. Prima pictured Heiss getting into bed and laying that nose down

carefully, gently, so that it would not slice through the pillow. Heiss's bed would be a platform floating in a room, with no clutter around it; the only other objects would be a curved lamp and a cabinet to hold Heiss's linen shirts and trousers. Heiss spoke without notes, and yet clearly according to some preconceived plan. When Heiss's eyes landed on Prima where she sat in the front row, she knew, even with no gesture or evident sign, that Heiss was impressed by her beauty, and further that Heiss was not disturbed by being impressed. She felt Heiss's thumb pressing heavily on the ball of Play-Doh that life had become. She did not speak to Heiss after class, nor did she go to Heiss's office hours until the entire month of September had elapsed. She cleaned her face carefully each morning and, when she wore her hair back, adorned it with some ribbon or charm. She allowed herself to gather, through Heiss's lectures, a sense of the shape of Heiss's thumb, and occasionally, with a torrential sensation of inevitability, she walked out of the classroom and across the lawn to Butler Library, where there was a single-stall bathroom in which she could lock the door and touch herself until her legs trembled.

Ruth was a person whom Prima did not understand, and whom she mistrusted. Ruth was no longer an undergraduate, though she had been enrolled at one point; nor was she a graduate student or a faculty member. She had a part-time administrative role in the English department, as a research assistant for an untenured professor named Thalia Campbell. Thalia paid her for twenty hours per week, but Ruth had taken over the better part of the desk in Thalia's cramped office, and it was Ruth who was visible there every day, while Thalia taught, held meetings in the classroom that was frequently assigned to her, and attended to her three children. Ruth was present in the English-department hallway more often than Daphne, the department's full-time secretary. There was a quality about Ruth of emotional homelessness. She brought her lunch in an aluminum box and wore slippers in the hall. Thalia was known for her feminist leanings and her syllabi that prioritized women writers; when young women who were not enrolled in Thalia's classes passed through the department, Ruth sometimes asked them whether they had read "Nightwood" or "Fear of Flying," and suggested that, if they hadn't yet, they might try Thalia's class. Once, Ruth was watching from across the hall when Prima knocked on Heiss's door during office hours and Heiss, on emerging, said, teasingly, Are you keeping a log on me, Ruthie?

Prima felt that there was something humiliating in Ruth's loyalty to Thalia, and in her unsmiling scrutiny of Heiss. Prima began to avoid Ruth; and, after the end of the fall semester, by which time her relationship with Heiss transpired solely off campus, or occasionally in the empty lecture room on the fifth floor of Hamilton Hall, she no longer had any reason to visit the English department. But, near the start of this most recent semester, a new autumn, a season that now smelled flamboyantly to Prima of the eraser chalk in Hamilton and her own pussy on her fingertips, Prima had written a love letter to Heiss and gone up to the faculty boxes in the English department to deliver it. She had never left anything but her assignments for Fictions of Marriage in Heiss's box; she knew that to leave a love letter there was subtly dangerous, that it might fall open in front of Daphne, or that some other student leaving a paper for Heiss might be overcome with curiosity and open it. To this end, she sealed the letter with a wax stamp, which would require a steamer to undo cleanly. Stationery gave her great pleasure. There was something erotic for her in the melting of the wax, the weight of the seal. It was like a very hard, demanding kiss; it overflowed its bounds. It was excessive and archaic.

Podcast: The Writer's Voice
Listen to Lillian Fishman read "Travesty."

The evening before, Sunday, she had lain on her belly on Heiss's bed, her legs spread wide, feeling herself boundless, her interior expanding to engulf the room, Heiss's hand titanic inside her. In the letter, she had confided to Heiss, for the first time, about the pages she had kept in the back of her red notebook, in which she had described, after two particularly thrilling lectures, what she loved about Heiss's voice and hands. She had never shared this before. Early on she had wanted to witness and receive the language of Heiss's desire without interruption, without collaboration, to learn it as if from start to finish. Yet she felt, that morning in October, that they had passed into a new landscape; she felt herself holding shapes that emerged independently from within her and which she could see delighted Heiss. She wanted to mark the change between the girl who, hiding her arousal, had left essays in Heiss's faculty box a year earlier, and the girl whose body now spoke to Heiss so constantly and brutally of its thirst. Holding the note with its wax seal, she had moved up the steps toward the

department office so quickly that her earrings had seemed to tinkle and laugh in her ears.

In the hallway was Ruth. Ruth knew who she was. Ruth remembered her name.

Was it possible that Ruth knew about her and Heiss? Was it possible that anyone knew? As Prima stood in the hallway speaking to Ruth, her mind moved over the contours of the previous year and reviewed the evidence. Ruth doesn't know anything, she told herself. Ruth is merely acting as Thalia's puppet, gossiping and fearmongering. For Ruth wasn't saying anything to Prima that implied that Prima loved Heiss. Instead, she had accosted Prima and was asking her whether she knew about Heiss's indiscretions, about Heiss's overly warm interest in the students, about what had happened years ago between Heiss and Anne Lucas. During this initial barrage, Prima was overwhelmed with the suspicion that Ruth was saying this to her because Ruth thought that Prima was like this girl named Anne Lucas. Ruth thought that Prima needed some kind of rescue. Unable to help herself, Prima said, sternly, Why are you telling me this? A defensive look came over Ruth's face, then a tender one, a look of condescension that infuriated Prima. Ruth explained that she thought it was important for Heiss's students to know. It was a travesty, actually, that Heiss was still allowed to teach and that Heiss's courses were so popular. Ruth hoped, she added, as if to absolve them both of any implication that Prima loved Heiss, that Prima would inform other students of Heiss's proclivities. It would be better if they knew so that they wouldn't be caught off guard, as Anne Lucas had been. Well, I don't really see why you're discussing this with me, Prima said. It seems as though it's a private thing to do with Anne Lucas. She wanted to shame Ruth. It worked for a moment: Ruth stepped back slightly.

Then Ruth said, You know, I have Anne's e-mail, and I bet she'd be happy to talk to you. Prima stared at Ruth. She felt repelled by Ruth, in her slippers, her hair greasy in its clip. Ruth had no purpose except to meddle. Ruth had no work of her own. Ruth cherished her little belief that other people had thrown away their goodness but that she remained good. Then Prima was overcome by a sudden curiosity that was almost like desire; she had the sensation of being on the verge of discovering a secret, and the same intelligence inside her that ached to understand the terrain of adulthood—

marriage, motherhood, betrayal—lunged toward it. O.K., Prima said, you can give me Anne's e-mail. She could see by the way that Ruth went to her computer and noted down the e-mail on a scrap of paper that this was not really permitted. Ruth had offered this as a bargaining chip that she had not expected Prima to accept. Her attitude reminded Prima of the men at the bar on Amsterdam, who dealt in boasts dressed as revelations, and were almost dazed when a girl took them seriously. As Ruth approached her with the scrap of paper, she said, You remind me of Anne. She used to wear her hair in a braid, too.

Prima discovered when she sat down at a long table in the library that she had in her pocket not only the scrap with Anne Lucas's e-mail written on it but the sealed letter to Heiss, which she had not delivered. In a way that did not make sense to her, the sealed letter, which had previously had an erotic, conspiratorial weight to it, now had a shameful air. Prima felt that it was something she had made alone and that belonged only to her. It was like a diary. This she could not contemplate for too long; she was preoccupied with the scrap of paper. The feeling of perhaps uncovering a great secret, which Ruth's face had given her for a moment in the hallway outside Thalia's office, had deserted her. Now the decision of whether or not to contact Anne was merely a type of responsibility, an intrusion. As she disliked the idea of Thalia Campbell, whom she had never met, she disliked the idea of Anne Lucas. She conceived of them both as censors who tracked across the landscape of the university, like Scantron machines searching for shapes that had been filled in with pen. She realized that during the previous year she had had a sensation, on the campus where she lived, of evading the eyes of these Scantron machines, which moved slowly and in deliberate patterns. If she stayed in any one place for too long, they would happen across her figure darkening a room where she did not belong.

Heiss's classroom was the room she circled. It had belonged to other people in other decades, in other years, but this year that classroom was Prima's; her life was the life that unfolded inside it. Irrationally, she felt it was an offense that she was so often barred from it, and that to make love in that room, an act that was a perfect cognate of the experience she'd had of being taught by Heiss in that room, was dangerous and unprincipled, though on two memorable occasions she and Heiss had done so. At this thought, she slapped the table—it was inconceivable that she was still considered a child

at twenty years old, and she had an explosive feeling that she would never be a free adult, that there was no such thing as free adulthood. All her life, people would limit what was allowed her, as they did with Heiss. She would be forced to learn to enjoy the feeling of harmless transgression, as Heiss did. This was perhaps the part of Heiss, Prima thought, to which Heiss remained deliberately blind. Heiss had admitted to Prima, with relish, what a pleasure it was to be to her both a lecturer and a lover. This made sense to Prima, since it was Heiss's being a lecturer as well as a lover that appealed so much to *her*, too. She did not know what she would have felt about Heiss if they had encountered each other at a deli or on the subway; it was with the composition and the delivery of Heiss's intelligence that Prima had fallen in love. But Heiss was not aware, or did not want to be aware, of the pleasure of loving Prima while avoiding the eyes of the censors. Heiss felt toward the relationship between them a kind of atavistic idealism, which connected the experience to relationships between the Greek *erastes* and *eromenos*. Heiss's course on marriage drew on a personal disgust for the marriage-equality movement and contemporary lesbian and gay politics, which was well disguised and admitted privately to Prima; and Heiss prized the concept of a relationship that had its own, original homosocial tradition. Through these ideals Heiss conveyed both an impression that contemporary sexual mores were prudish and a desire that the relationship between them could be public. Prima had a feeling that Heiss was dedicated to these ideals precisely because they had fallen out of favor. This did not disturb Prima—she respected it, it was this inclination toward trouble that allowed Heiss to speak in such revelatory ways about institutions and concepts that no one else in Prima's life had ever questioned. But she wished that Heiss would own this pleasure in transgression itself. It was to this end that she had composed the love letter with the intention of leaving it in Heiss's box. She had known that finding it in the box would arouse Heiss, and she had wished to assert for Heiss her perception and her sexual intelligence. She had pictured Heiss unsealing the letter, reading it, and realizing, Prima can discern what I truly want. Prima knows what controls me even better than I know it myself.

In the course of that day the name Anne Lucas took on a distinctly talismanic quality. Prima did not reread the scrap of paper; nor did she speak to anyone about Anne Lucas. She had a constant atmospheric awareness of what the name represented, as if it were a piece of news that other people

were thinking about. She went to the place where she most liked to be alone—the top step of St. John the Divine. The cathedral was a two-block walk down from the southern edge of campus. Red double-decker tourist buses driving up Amsterdam regularly stopped in front of it. There always seemed to be rain at the cathedral, though Prima knew this must be because it was only on rainy days that she felt the need to visit.

She pitied Anne Lucas. Anne Lucas was no longer really a person. She had ceded her name so that it could represent how she felt about something she had experienced, which belonged to other people now, in a reduced, hostile form. Prima thought about the possibility that there was a person in the world—perhaps Ruth was this person or would someday be this person—for whom Prima's name was this kind of talisman. But it was really Heiss she felt afraid for, because for Heiss the university was like a family estate. For decades Heiss had trained to understand the laws and values of the university. Prima pictured the elderly, tenured Heiss like an old king who wishes to be buried on the land he spent his life protecting. It was rare that a person travelled far from home and found a place that belonged to them utterly. Her attraction to Heiss was in part an attraction to this solidity, the grace that radiated from a person who wished to be nowhere else. She thought of Heiss, and she thought, I love Heiss. Love is disinterested, the thing that I feel for Heiss is love.

Near where Prima was sitting, on the top step of the cathedral, was a girl who looked familiar to her. The girl was wearing a green-and-red checked coat that was too warm for early October, and which Prima remembered seeing frequently during the winter she'd spent in her first-year dorm. It was ugly in a way that had made Prima scrunch up her face involuntarily. It wasn't expensive to live among beautiful things—they were available everywhere for almost nothing—and Prima felt it was a kind of personal affront to be faced with ugly things that were not just part of the built landscape but had been consciously or carelessly chosen. The girl had a face that was delicate, pinkish and gaunt in some lights. Prima thought she would be suited to a long coat that was navy or dark brown, in very soft wool. Hey, Prima said to the girl, do I know you from Wallach? The girl was lighting what looked like a joint or a spliff. She was trying to make a cave with her body against the edifice of the cathedral for the sake of the lighter. She looked up at Prima. Yeah, she said, I'm Fernanda. You're Prima. Prima liked

Fernanda's name, she felt there was some synergy between the delicacy of Fernanda's face and the name Fernanda. Want some? Fernanda asked Prima when she had lit the spliff. There was a synergy, too, between the spliff and the shelter of the cathedral steps. Sure, Prima said. She took a hit. She loved the spread of the nicotine; her spine felt straighter.

She and Fernanda talked about the things they had in common, what buildings they lived in now, what classes they were taking. Fernanda had skipped her seminar that day. She was anxious, she told Prima, because the man she had been dating had been growing colder toward her. It was an exaggeration to say that they were dating; they had spent two heady, chaotic weeks together, during which time they had barely come up for air. Fernanda had dragged herself from his bed to go to class, but only to class. They'd ordered in from a restaurant around the corner from his apartment on 101st Street, and Fernanda had written her assignments with her laptop perched on a pillow while he lay curled up like a pet between her knees. The man was playful and uninhibited. She liked his unself-consciousness, the way he didn't hesitate to share his toothbrush with her, the way his gestures were catlike, almost feminine. He was a writer; he didn't have to go to work, and it didn't seem to Fernanda that he did much writing, either. Finally, on Friday afternoon, three days previously, he had informed Fernanda that he had an assignment due Monday morning, that she had better go home for the weekend since he would have to get down to work in a serious way. He would message her when he had filed with his editor. But it was past four on Monday, and she had not heard from him.

Fernanda did not want to be comforted or told platitudes about the situation she was in, she said. She knew clearly what it meant; she was not in the habit of wishful thinking or desperation. Prima was relieved to hear this. Her own frankness had sometimes made it difficult for her to form friendships. She agreed with Fernanda that she was in a hopeless situation, which she likely had no choice but to accept, and she admired Fernanda's determination to get on with it. Fernanda said that the thing she could not stop thinking about was whether her willingness to spend two weeks sleeping in this man's apartment had given him the impression that she was needy, or simple, or that rather than a discerning woman she was a hole that begged to be filled. She had given him the benefit of the doubt during those two weeks. She had assumed that he was genuinely smitten with her, and

that his lack of dedication to his work was the result of a temporary setback or a much needed break; she had not interpreted his availability as the product of some set of neuroses that might make him ineligible to become her boyfriend. Why did she have the sense that he had judged her for the speed with which she'd abandoned her little circumscribed set of rooms at the university? Had she not chosen a university in the city in part for this purpose—to be allowed adventures? Fernanda shook her head in disgust.

Anyway, she said to Prima, you don't look like you're suffering romantically. Honestly, you look like you're in love. Prima laughed; this was an idea that thrilled her. In the year that she had loved Heiss, no one other than Heiss had pointed out that she was evidently in love. She had not told anyone anything about her romance, except for a brief confession during a weekend trip she had taken over the summer, to her aunt's house on Cape Cod. On that trip, she had been approached on the beach, while her cousin was swimming, by a boy about her age, gangly and suntanned, who asked to sit in her cousin's lounger. He wanted to know whether she was staying in town and whether he could take her out in the evening. Oh, she said, I shouldn't, I have a boyfriend. The boy had taken this on very mildly. He asked where she was from and what she was studying and how she had met her boyfriend. His friendliness was unusual and refreshing. She told him that her boyfriend had been her professor, and that it wasn't until after the class had finished that they had fallen in love. She had never called Heiss her boyfriend before, and she wondered whether Heiss would be amused by the term. In that moment she had wanted to kiss the gangly boy. He would blush, he would remember the kiss as a shocking event, a gift from the girl with the long braid and the embroidered bikini, the girl who said that she had a professor for a boyfriend. The boy said that it sounded like something out of a book. Yeah, Prima had said, I think so, too.

With Fernanda, on the steps of the cathedral, Prima was again overcome by the wish to admit her love for Heiss. It was against her rules; the fact that Fernanda was clear-eyed about her own disappointment did not mean that she would be clear-eyed about Prima's love. Yet all her instincts had converged in the previous few hours to assert and defend her resolve in her love. She remembered with satisfaction the sudden hostility with which she'd spoken to Ruth.

You're right, she said to Fernanda, I'm in love. Fernanda smiled and dragged on the spliff. She wasn't jealous; she enjoyed existing in a world where at any point a girl could find herself in love. Want to tell me about him? Fernanda said. Oh, it's not a man, Prima said. She wasn't sure what else to say. Heiss was just as surely not a woman, and she had no sense of whether the way Heiss moved in private—the way Heiss spoke, the way Heiss's body was formed, the way Heiss fucked—she had no sense of whether or not women, lesbian women, were like Heiss or did the same things.

Oh, sorry, Fernanda said. I shouldn't assume. Do you want to tell me about whoever it is? It's someone I took a class with last year, Prima said. My professor. She gave Fernanda a confiding look. She was illuminated by the nascent trust she felt toward Fernanda. Fernanda's gauzy face turned squarely toward Prima. Its gauziness seemed to recede, and it became concrete and modern. She said, Is it that English professor, Heiss? Prima nodded. Of course it was Heiss. She had seen the other professors. She shouldn't be surprised that Fernanda had guessed that it was Heiss. Her cheeks felt raw. Fernanda said, You were sweet and straight with me about this guy I've been seeing, so I think I should be straight with you, too. My sister went to school here, and she was good friends with Nicole Mangoula. Nicole and Heiss had a thing. Do you know about this—have you heard about Nicole? It ended badly. For Nicole, I mean. She hates Heiss. She feels like Heiss really manipulated her. She doesn't feel like it was a normal relationship. In my sister's year, Heiss ended up having this weird reputation. That class was popular. I think my sister was jealous of Nicole, honestly. Heiss took her on vacation! Fernanda sucked on the little nub of the spliff and then ground it into the cathedral step with her boot. Listen, I'm not trying to judge you, Fernanda said. I bet it's a whole hot thing. It's just . . . I'd want to know, if I was really in it with someone.

Prima nodded again. She said something that seemed to come from nowhere. She had no idea where it had come from; it was at odds with her love for Heiss. She said, Do you think I'm being stupid? No thought was so devastating to Prima as the thought that she was being stupid, not accidentally, not briefly, that she was ascribing wisdom and seriousness to something that would turn out to be stupid. No, Fernanda said. Why would it be stupid? I'd never turn down a little experience. Obviously, she said, with a stifled laugh. Since I just told you how I spent the last two weeks.

Was she being stupid? Prima asked herself again, once she was back at her apartment. Did she imagine she knew better than other people, when in fact they were simply watching and waiting for her to fail, knowing that she was not intelligent but simply arrogant? She did think she knew better than other people. Not always, not in every case. But with regard to herself she seldom hesitated. She did not look at what other people did and think, That's the way it must be done. She did not look at what other people did and think, Since that was a mistake for you, it might be a mistake for me. Perhaps the loneliness she had felt before she met Heiss had been a result of her not considering other people as fellow-travellers or as people who might teach her something. This was the first time in her life that she had wondered if she had truly misunderstood her situation. Ruth's views did not hold any weight, but the fact that Fernanda's well of knowledge and ideas about Heiss was so potent that at the mere mention of Prima's love affair Fernanda had supplied the name herself . . . Prima flinched. She did not conceive of her relationship with Heiss as original. She knew that it was not the first relationship between a young woman and her professor, not even the first such relationship in Heiss's life. Why should originality interest her? The table Heiss had invited her to had not been set with her in mind, but nor had the university been built for her, or the furniture in her first-year dorm selected for her, the books she cherished written for her.

She conducted an experiment in her mind. A year ago, she had found that it was Heiss who excited her, Heiss's voice, Heiss's energy, Heiss's graceful intelligence. What should have happened then? Should Heiss, when Prima finally presented herself at office hours in the first week of October, have pretended not to find her beautiful? Should Heiss merely have complimented her work and shut the door on her? That afternoon Prima had done something very deliberate, which now, in retrospect, made her blush. During the conversation she had had with Heiss in Heiss's office, in which she had presented two competing ideas for her midterm paper and invited Heiss to comment on them, she had pulled her braid forward over her shoulder and begun to unravel it, very slowly, as Heiss spoke. She unravelled it with the finesse and care with which she usually braided it. While she listened to Heiss she used both hands to separate the three strands, and after each step she ran two fingers through the length of hair that had now been released. Heiss's expression did not change. Heiss watched her unravel her braid while giving thoughtful commentary on Prima's ideas, and even suggested a

book that might help her organize her argument. But at the moment that Prima completed the unravelling of the braid and stroked her fingers through to the ends of her hair, Heiss stopped speaking. Heiss was arrested. It was the most erotic moment of Prima's life.

She conducted the experiment seriously. She tried to think about it as another person might think about it—not Fernanda, not Ruth, but some principled, severe woman, not unlike how she imagined Thalia Campbell. Perhaps Thalia Campbell believed that Heiss should have watched her unravel her braid and thought, That was a lovely moment, which will stand alone. Perhaps Thalia Campbell believed that, when Prima and Heiss walked together down the stairs in Hamilton Hall one afternoon, Heiss should not have asked Prima whether she would like to come to the pastry shop on Amsterdam. Heiss should not have bought her a slice of pie. Heiss should never have entertained an attraction to her, because in relation to Heiss she was a person who was powerless. Heiss understood things about the world, and about love, that Prima did not yet understand; by wishing to love Prima, in her youth and ignorance, Heiss revealed a desire for subtle dominance, an advantage and control that Prima would not be cognizant of as Thalia Campbell might be. Perhaps Thalia Campbell believed that someday Prima's realization that she had been dominated and controlled in ways she did not yet understand would pain her. She would feel that she had been tricked; her

conception of love would be poisoned. This was what she was being warned against by the invocation of Anne's and Nicole's names. These invocations were a piece of knowledge, like a book, with which other women wished her to be in serious conversation. Prima wondered, with pure bafflement, if there would come a time when people did not worry about her innocence and wish to protect her. When would her sense that she was wise be corroborated by her environment? Would people, when she was twenty-five, when she was thirty, when she was forty—would people still harbor fear on her behalf?

She asked for the first time, aloud, standing by the door to her apartment, a spot from which she had not moved in an hour, Why did Anne and Nicole wish they'd been protected? What had happened to them with Heiss? She shook her head. They were not her. She was not in a system; she was in a relationship. She had read enough to know that one day, in some way or another, she would feel that she had been tricked, even if not at Heiss's hands. This would happen to her! She hoped it would happen to her—she hoped that hers would not be a sheltered life. In this surge of feeling, Prima became aware of how alone she was. She was alone in her studio apartment in Harlem. She could not believe that only the previous night she had been in Heiss's apartment, in Heiss's bed, and that she had felt completely fused with Heiss. In a way that she did not understand, and that had nothing to do with Ruth's implications, she now felt strangely abandoned by Heiss. Why was it that Heiss was not going through this with her? Why had Heiss not been frank with her about how hurt Anne and Nicole had been? Why had Heiss not confided to her the pain of being accused of these abuses, and said to her, You and I know that we are in love, you and I know that you are a woman in your own right?

Perhaps Heiss had been afraid that, if Prima knew that Anne and Nicole felt mistreated, she herself would become distrustful. If so, Heiss had underestimated her in a manner that caused her more pain than any of the conversations she had had on this bleak day. She sat in the high-backed chair in her kitchenette. She unlaced her shoes and pulled them off. If Heiss had not confided in her, it had to be because Heiss considered her too young or too fragile to comprehend this wretched history in its context. Did Heiss think that she was just like Anne and Nicole? Did Heiss—loving her, touching her, enjoying her—throughout all this imagine that someday she,

too, would rebuke Heiss for the distortion of her sense of love, and the theft of her innocence?

The next morning Prima went back to the English department, back to Heiss's box. She left a new note, not a love letter but a folded piece of card stock on which she attempted to address Heiss as a teacher, rather than as a lover. She encountered no one in the office.

In the evening Heiss came to Prima's apartment, even though her note had explicitly forbidden it. Heiss knocked heavily on the door, behind which was all of Prima's existence: Prima's clothes and the special teas she had collected, Prima's chair and her box of card stock, and the sealed letter that she had not delivered because she had been accosted by Ruth. It was this impotent letter that disturbed her the most and around which she felt herself curled like a hibernating animal. She had been, in the moment before she was accosted, suffused with the most personal and significant feelings of her life. The letter signified the radicalism of her love. She had not merely given herself to Heiss but understood and embraced Heiss. She had been scrubbed of her awareness of the past—as love must scrub us of our awareness of the past in order to resurrect itself. Now, against her will, the past had torn through her and over her. Her love letter had been a foible, a stupidity. She was stupid to write down things that she would someday disbelieve and disown.

Heiss had a key to Prima's apartment, but Prima did not take things that far. Prima opened the door. What is this, Heiss said, a Christmas card? With the parchment, and the ribbons? You can't write an ugly note to me, Heiss said, even though you want to, because you don't believe any of it. You know that everything between us is beautiful. That's just what I had, Prima said. Heiss shrugged out of a waxed coat and hung it over Prima's chair in the kitchenette. Heiss sat in the chair. What is it that you want to know? Heiss said. What is it that you're afraid of? Prima loved Heiss's strong head and the assertive spread of Heiss's legs in the chair. She wanted to kneel down in front of Heiss. She was clouded by visions of herself in two years, in ten years, looking back with distaste, thinking, You stupid girl, how could you have knelt down in front of Heiss?

Prima said, I don't understand why they hate you now. Am I going to hate you? Is that part of the plan? Heiss laughed with a painful expression. Heiss said that nothing would be so devastating as to have earned Prima's hatred. Heiss did not plan on that. Heiss had never planned to provoke any woman's hatred, but that was a part of life, sometimes people you had loved hated you afterward. If you didn't plan on it with them, if you didn't believe they would hate you, Prima said, what makes you so sure that it will be different with me? Heiss looked very tired. Prima did not often think that Heiss looked old, but she did now. She understood that in five years Heiss would be fifty, and the enormity of those decades seemed to press onto her; it was as if Prima understood that each of the years that separated them had been as full of profound life for Heiss as the previous year had been for her, and she felt as though she would collapse under the weight of the life that existed in Heiss. Please, Heiss said, don't make me condescend to you. I don't want to condescend to you. I want to be truthful with you. I don't know if it will be different with you. It feels different to me. You're different than anyone else. I'm different than I used to be. But it's possible that I'm blind. I'm a romantic person. I can't help the way I'm drawn to you, I can't justify denying it because I'm afraid of something that I don't know will happen and that I don't want to happen. I was younger when I knew Anne and Nicole, and I treated love differently. I wanted to indulge it and grow out of it. I wanted to enjoy it for what it was. Anne, she didn't think of love that way, she didn't understand that it would end, or that the fact that it ended didn't diminish it or mean that I hadn't cared about her.

Prima leaned against the counter. Are you hoping, she said, that I understand that love ends, and that when you end it with me I'll still believe that you loved me? I'm not hoping that, Heiss said. But I believe you know that. It was true, what Heiss said. Prima knew that fundamentally. She did not conceive of loving what she loved now or living as she did now forever. That would be like marrying a person you had known since elementary school, never venturing beyond. Somehow this belief did not interrupt the flood of her love for Heiss. She tried to clear her head, and she said, Does it matter that you misused your power as a teacher? Not with me but with them? Does it matter to you that you were held up as someone to trust, and that you betrayed their trust? That's what they feel. And, in a way, it's true. As Prima said this, she realized that she believed it. She did not wish for Heiss to deny it, to reassure her that no such betrayal had ever happened,

that it had all been part of the normal set of misunderstandings that characterized love. She was afraid to discover that Heiss's authority was not conscious, that Heiss was stubborn and blind.

Heiss stood up beside her. It's a shame, Heiss said, for you to talk to me about teaching, about power and trust and betrayal, as if you believe that you and Anne and Nicole are children in my care, and as if I'm like a father who convinces you that the dirty things I like to do are for your own good when you're too small to know better. I did not take you from your crib, and certainly not from your dorm. It's a travesty that you insist on thinking of yourself as a child, when you have a woman's mind, a woman's freedom, a woman's body. I didn't know that you thought of yourself that way. Forgive me, Heiss said, spitefully, with a down-curled mouth. Heiss took the waxed coat from the chair and pulled it on. From a pocket of the coat Heiss removed Prima's note and her ribbon and tossed them onto the counter.

The quiet that followed Heiss's departure had an almost beseeching quality, like a cat rubbing against Prima's calves. She rethreaded the ribbon through the note, and from the tea drawer she removed the other letter, still sealed, and placed them side by side. Then she added Ruth's scrap of paper. She had a feverish, preternatural sense of the world revealing itself to her, as it had once before, in a stifling room high up in Hamilton Hall, back when she still knew everything. ♦

The Critics

- The Battling Memoirs of The New Yorker
- Why I Can't Quit the New York Post
- Keith McNally's Guide to Making a Scene
- Briefly Noted
- "Caught by the Tides" Is a Gorgeous Vision of Loss and Renewal

A Critic at Large

The Battling Memoirs of The New Yorker

A host of accounts by the magazine's staffers covers a full century of its history, but the trove of recollection is fraught and jumbled.

By Anthony Lane

May 05, 2025

In the beginning God created the Heaven and the Earth. Before doing so, however, he sat around with the boys in the bar and thrashed out what exactly he meant to create. The same is true, pretty much, of Harold Wallace Ross, who begat *The New Yorker*. Until the first issue was published, on February 21, 1925, the magazine was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. Yet the spirit of Ross, aided by his wife and co-begetter, Jane Grant, had been busy. A prospectus for their forthcoming project came out in the fall of 1924. It kicked off with a sturdy pronouncement: "The *New Yorker* will be a reflection in word and picture of metropolitan life. It will be human." As opposed to what? Avian? Venusian? Microbial? Howlingly lupine?

Clearly, the plan was to spread the word, so that the magazine would be under discussion well before it made an entrance. “It would be so attractive, gay, and informative, that it would be an asset on any library table.” Such were the cheerful hopes of Grant, who seems to have trusted that any future readers would, by definition, have a house with a library. There *The New Yorker* would lounge, unfurled, beside the whiskey decanter and the smoldering cigar.

Grant’s recollections are part of her memoir, “Ross, The New Yorker and Me,” which was published in 1968. Note that there is no comma—no Oxford comma, that is, beloved of this publication and often scorned elsewhere—before the conjunction. One shudders to think how Ross, whom Grant divorced in 1929, and who died in 1951, would have reacted to so echoing a lack. “Ross, The New Yorker and Me” is just one in a stack of books about him and about his successor, William Shawn, who, as the magazine’s editor from 1952 to 1987, was a match for Ross in the fastidious management of a text. The entire stack could be crowned with the heading “Fanfare for the Comma Men.”

The magazine is now a hundred years old: not a bad score, though it falls short of that racked up by the actress Eva Marie Saint, who reached her own centenary last July. (What’s more, given that *The New Yorker* played no role in “North by Northwest,” how much do we really have to crow about?) There is no more tempting occasion for the backward glance; what’s remarkable is how many glancers there have already been in the course of decades past. Writers, editors, and residents of varying tenures; the nostalgic, the acidic, and the disturbingly blithe; those who seek to set the record straight and those who prefer it kinked—all have, at some point, leafed through what they recall of their spell at *The New Yorker* and fed the leafings into a book.

New York: A Centenary Issue
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A list would include, in addition to Grant's book, James Thurber's "The Years with Ross," from 1957; Brendan Gill's "Here at The New Yorker" (1975); "About The New Yorker and Me" (1979), by E. J. Kahn, Jr., plus its blockbuster sequel, "Year of Change: More About The New Yorker and Me" (1988); "Remembering Mr. Shawn's New Yorker," by Ved Mehta, which came out in 1998, as did Lillian Ross's "Here But Not Here"; Renata Adler's "Gone"(1999); "A Life of Privilege, Mostly" (2003), by Gardner Botsford; Alison Rose's "Better Than Sane" (2004); and "Let Me Finish" (2006), by Roger Angell—or, as he was credited in his first piece for the magazine, in 1944, Cpl. Roger Angell. (A fine joke, the notion that he was ever of lowly rank.) Janet Groth's "The Receptionist" (2012) brings up the rear in style.

Mention should also be made of "Avid Reader" (2016), by Robert Gottlieb, who edited *The New Yorker* from 1987 to 1992. It's true that, of the book's nine chapters, only one is devoted to the magazine; far more space is consumed by Gottlieb's labors in the publishing trade, at Simon & Schuster and at Knopf. Nonetheless, "Avid Reader" is, thus far, the only memoir by anyone who has captained the ship at *The New Yorker*. Neither Harold Ross nor William Shawn wrote a book about being on board. (The only piece that bore Shawn's name—or, at least, his initials—in these pages was "The Catastrophe," a cursory fantasy, of 1936, in which New York is demolished by a meteorite and consigned to oblivion. Make of *that* what you will.) Even

if they had been so inclined, they wouldn't have had the time, so unflagging was their industry on behalf of the magazine. Who wants to pontificate about the place, let alone reminisce, when there's an issue to close?

What we do have is a eulogistic fragment of Shawn on Ross, tied like a flag to the end of Brendan Gill's book. It's a loyal and fair-minded tribute to a man who, however eccentric, held fast to the cause of fairness, and who took both pleasure and refuge in the solid ground of facts—infinitely more dependable than the shifting scree of ideas. Ross, Shawn reports, "once told me, half seriously, that he didn't want to know what any writer *thought*." A sound principle, I'd say, bettered only by the specific command that Ross gave an assistant: "Never leave me alone with poets."

Landing at *The New Yorker*, in 1993, I stepped into unknown territory, with only a couple of writers to show me the way. One was Pauline Kael, whom I was never to meet but into whose volumes of movie reviews I had often delved, in fearful reverence, trying not to jab myself on the prickles. The trouble was that Kael's work taught you a hell of a lot about motion pictures, and quite a bit about Kael, yet very little about the magazine.

My other guide, "The Years with Ross," was more instructive, not to say daunting. "A man's past dropped away, and his life began anew, when he went to work for the *New Yorker*," Thurber wrote. Not until then had it occurred to me that West Forty-third Street was a tributary of the River Jordan. Thanks to Thurber, I learned that Peter Arno's first captioned drawing had appeared in the magazine in the fall of 1925, and that S. J. Perelman and Ogden Nash didn't show up to the party until five years later. It was also revealed that Ross's worship of accuracy did not extend to his own spelling. "Significance" came out as "signigifance." One other surprise: profane though Ross could be in conversation, his cheek was easily mantled with a blush. He refused to visit Sainte-Chapelle, in Paris, because "stained glass is damned embarrassing," and Thurber once confounded him, on his birthday, by sending a dozen red roses to the *New Yorker* offices. When Ross bridled, Thurber threatened to add a card that read, "In everlasting memory of those Riviera nights."

To my innocent ears, the whole thing had, and retains, the ring of a classic Thurber fable—true to *him*, if not to the historical record. Infectious, too; so

consistently nonplussed is the author by the basic mechanisms of existence that, if we're not careful, we come to forget what it feels like to be plussed. What I picked up, however, from murmurs—never shouts—at the magazine was an impression that there was Something Not Right about "The Years with Ross." Was it warped in its vision of its subject? Awry, perhaps, in not giving credit where it was properly due? I never did plumb the mystery. As late as 2003, it was startling to find Gardner Botsford, in the midst of his otherwise temperate memoir about a lengthy stretch as a *New Yorker* editor, refer in passing to "Thurber's terrible book."

Order might be restored, I reckoned, by switching to a slightly less distant version of events. I opened Gill's "Here at The New Yorker" and was buoyed to discover that his arrival at the magazine, in 1938, had been as flummoxing as mine. Gremlins had infested the very typewriter with which he was supplied: "When one typed an 's,' it invariably came out a 'w.' Thiw led to wingular effectw on my prowe." More baffling was what he called "the total absence of any camaraderie in the office." The custom, Gill added, "was to speak as little as possible, and then as dourly as possible. One never touched another person except by accident." Happily, this was no longer the case in 1993. Not that I skipped down the corridors arm in arm with Joseph Mitchell and Harold Brodkey, but there were no barriers to free speech. The indestructible Gill, still strolling the fairways of the magazine, was more than welcoming to a greenhorn.

Yet his book proved to be no more tolerable than Thurber's. There was Something Even Wronger about it, to judge from a biting review, in *Esquire*, by Nora Ephron, who accused Gill of "smug self-congratulation," deriding his anecdotes as "condescending, snobbish and mean." All in all, Ephron declared, "Here at The New Yorker" was "one of the most offensive books I have read in a long time." Browsing between the lines, I cunningly worked out that she hadn't liked it very much. Could it be that everyone connected to *The New Yorker*—not only employees, or former employees, but staunch subscribers, too—was automatically equipped with an axe to grind? The saga of this allegedly civilized periodical seemed about as tranquil as a Viking smithy.

Mind you, Ephron was a diplomat in fur mittens when set beside Renata Adler, who, in 1980, laid into Pauline Kael (one of her colleagues at *The*

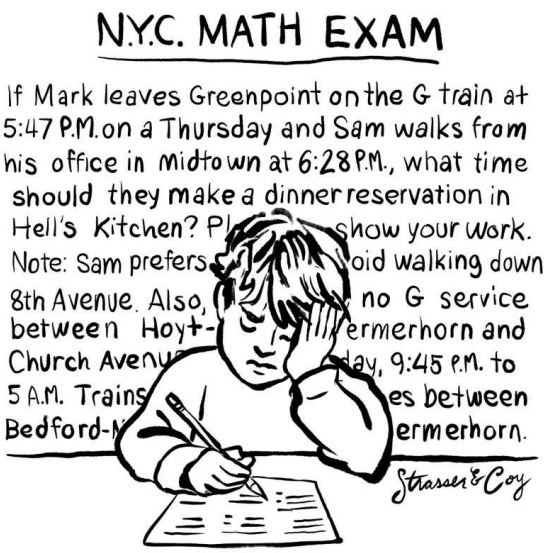
New Yorker, no less) in *The New York Review of Books*, referring to "When the Lights Go Down," a collection of Kael's film criticism, as "piece by piece, line by line, and without interruption, worthless." Almost twenty years later, Adler followed up with "Gone," which, as its subtitle, "The Last Days of The New Yorker," suggests, treats the magazine as a print edition of Pompeii, shortly and deservedly to be immured in ash. Once you add a review of Adler's book by Gottlieb, who described it in the New York *Observer* as "an explosion of pain and anger" and "riddled with errors"—and who took the opportunity for a few sideswipes at Lillian Ross's "Here But Not Here," which he chided for its "vulgarity and mawkishness"—you begin to understand why some folks refuse to go within a thousand miles of Manhattan. Others, taking more extreme precautions, never learn to read.

Lillian Ross was no relation to Harold Ross. Nor was she formally related to William Shawn, although, informally, the two of them were knit as close as could be. The second sentence of "Here But Not Here" reads, "We loved each other." They had, she claims, "an intrinsically normal life for over four decades," and how you react to the book may depend on how intrinsic you think the normality was. Shawn kept a New York apartment with Ross ten blocks from the one that he shared with his wife, Cecile, who was aware of her husband's second existence. Every night and every morning, Shawn and Ross spoke on the phone, and only once did Cecile answer when Ross called. Shawn had just died. "He's gone," Cecile said.

Anybody who deems such an arrangement unique should cast an eye at the home life (or lives) of Wilkie Collins, the author of "The Woman in White." Yet the survival of deep Victorian doubleness into the clear light of mid-twentieth-century America is, nonetheless, a strange phenomenon, never more so than when Ross remarks, "We stayed together as we found and raised a child." More than one reader will be moved to inquire, "Found *where*? In bulrushes?" There is an unmodern melancholy, too, in Ross's depiction of Shawn as someone whose modesty as an editor—lending space and timbre to the voices of his writers, tuning without intruding—shades into chronic self-effacement outside the confines of *The New Yorker*. "Why am I more ghost than man?" he asks. "Who has blotted me out?"

On the other hand, away from the domestic half life, Ross's memoir starts to glide. "My interest in celebrities is always tied to their talent," she writes,

and the famous names are not so much dropped as tossed into the breeze like kites. For those of us whose links to the wider world are narrowing by the week, and who are frankly grateful to be recognized by our own accountants, it can be a source of delight, not resentment, to hear of how things are going, or used to go, up in the stratosphere. "Norman Mailer explained Henry Miller to me," Ross tells us. "Humphrey Bogart and his wife, Lauren Bacall, were very kind to me." "Hemingway and his wife, Mary, were extraordinarily kind to me." "Brando took me to a Chinese restaurant." I hope he was kind.



These creatures, of course, were grist to Ross's mill, and the results—above all, her five reports for *The New Yorker*, published in 1952, on the making and the near-wrecking of John Huston's "The Red Badge of Courage," later gathered into her book "Picture"—show what nourishing value a good reporter can get from the grist. Not all her colleagues were so acute in their milling, although quite a few liked to move in august company and told us all about it in their memoirs. E. J. Kahn, Jr., one of the most prolific figures in the history of the magazine, lets slip in "About The New Yorker and Me" that "I have known many of the celebrated writers of my time—John Hersey, for instance, John Steinbeck, John Cheever, John O'Hara, John Updike." In one insuperable aside, Kahn out-Johns himself: "Kennedy was the president I knew best."

The writing career of Ved Mehta, at this magazine, was as tireless as Kahn's, and his tooth for smart society just as sweet. In "Remembering Mr. Shawn's New Yorker," he reveals, "I went to a grand Christmas party, given by the brother-in-law of Queen Juliana of the Netherlands—Prince Aschwin de Lippe—and his wife, Simone, in the Dakota." By and large, however, the book obeys its title, growing most persuasive at its most persnickety. Needless to say, Shawn is the persnicketer-in-chief. Calling Mehta to discuss the evolution of his first piece for the magazine, Shawn says, "I'm afraid that we are going to have comma trouble," and a ritual is soon established. "I began sitting anxiously by the phone waiting for Mr. Shawn's call, as if I were in love," Mehta writes. Did Lillian Ross know? Did they suavely select their pistols on Bow Bridge, in Central Park, preparing to duel, at dawn, for the heart of the man they both adored?

The best memoirs about *The New Yorker* are the ones that never got written. We have no such book by E. B. White, by A. J. Liebling, or by Wolcott Gibbs, who—or, rather, whose phantom, detectable only in his spirited prose—was loyally commended to me by Lillian Ross. Dorothy Parker, likewise, never wrote a memoir, although by way of compensation she did produce a poem called "Autobiography," which summons up, in a four-line flash, the world from which *The New Yorker* sprang:

> Oh, both my shoes are shiny new,
> And pristine is my hat;
> My dress is 1922. . . .
> My life is all like that.

The swift conjuring of times past is a well-tried *New Yorker* tactic. Frequently, plain facts do the trick. "In New York, we found without difficulty a seven-room apartment at 21 East Ninetieth Street," Gill recalls. "The year was 1938 and the rent we paid was a hundred and twenty-five dollars a month." Elsewhere, the mood of an age rises like perfume—or, more fitting, a whiff of bootlegged alcohol—from a clutch of names, many of them half forgotten. Jane Grant reaches back to the earliest nocturnal prowlings of the magazine:

> Charles Baskerville was the first to combine art and writing in his "When Nights Are Bold," our original night-club column, which he

> signed "Top Hat." Lois Long, already a staffer with "On and Off the Avenue," took over Charlie's stint when he left us a few months later for Europe, and renamed it "Tables for Two."

The gratifying news is that, almost a century later, Tables for Two is still running, now with Helen Rosner in the Lois Long seat. That's continuity for you. Most memorable of all, I would argue, are those moments when the localized fun and folderol in which *The New Yorker* so often traded in its youth meet bigger and graver matters from beyond. Listen to Gardner Botsford, for example, hitherto a reporter at the magazine, who receives his commission, as an infantry lieutenant, in June, 1943, and is sent to Camp Ritchie, in Maryland, to be schooled in dealing with the French Army and the Resistance. First, his linguistic talents need to be tested:

> My examiner was an infantry captain—a tough and burly Frenchman now in the U.S. Army. Somehow, he looked familiar to me, but I couldn't place him. We talked for a bit, and suddenly I got it: he was the former maître d'hôtel at Spivy's Roof, a night club on East Fifty-seventh Street, where Spivy, a French chanteuse of some note, used to sing.

Two worlds touch, like wires, and a spark flies off the page. Many of the sparks are far from festive. Botsford—F Company, 2nd Battalion, 18th Infantry Regiment, 1st Infantry Division—goes ashore on Omaha Beach on D Day. In the fall of 1944, in the German city of Aachen, which has been captured by the Allies, he bumps into David Lardner, who, in the merry wake of Baskerville and Long, used to review night clubs for *The New Yorker*. Leaving the reunion with Botsford, Lardner dies when a land mine blows up his jeep. In the savage winter that follows, Botsford finds himself lying in a snowy ditch, at night, and watching the barrel of a tank, "the size of a telephone pole," swivel round to point directly at him. A guy climbs out of the turret, approaches, and embraces him. "It was Nelson Works, who had sat right behind me in Sociology 102 all sophomore year at Yale," Botsford tells us. Sounds pretty damned sociological to me.

The most important thing about Botsford's "A Life of Privilege, Mostly" is that the privilege sits solidly in second place. Ahead of it, filling the first seventy-five pages of the book and overshadowing everything else, is

Botsford's time in uniform. When you're shipped off to Europe on the Queen Mary with thirteen thousand other men, and your meal disk, as it's called, orders you to eat at 3 *a.m.* and 3 *p.m.*, you leave behind any thought of Tables for Two. Botsford's return to civilian duties, after the war, is no less rough a crossing. "Neither I nor the magazine was the same," he writes. "Everybody in the office was grayer and more serious—especially Shawn."

Given that each of us is possessed, or oppressed, by what Proust calls "a vast structure of recollection," how we choose to organize that structure, when we come to tell our tale, can be a trial of honesty. Many memoirists, for cogent reasons, stick to a steady chronological tread, from childhood to a retrospective calm, yet is that not a reassuring lie? If one chapter of your mortal span—your wartime experience, or a love affair—has pierced you more sharply than any other, why *shouldn't* that chapter go up front? The trove of memory, as Roger Angell says in "Let Me Finish," is "rich and fraught and jumbled," and like Botsford he honors the jumble by shifting around the pieces of his life. By his calculation, there were "ten thousand mornings" on which he went to work at *The New Yorker*, so it's little wonder that the magazine should earn so much of his attention. (He discloses that Shawn was "anxious first of all that the magazine might stop being funny." Indeed.) Yet Angell is all too alive to the perils of an in-house narrative. So, out of the house he goes, off to tour the other habitations of his past.

We hear of Humphrey, a four-and-a-half-foot king snake belonging to young Roger, an ardent herpetologist; of Roger's moviegoing ("the thousands of hours I have spent in the popcorned dark"); of the "shriveled appearance" of New York during the Great Depression; of baseball, naturally, but also of a young woman, unnamed and unforgotten, with whom Angell played a round of golf in 1940; and of his being dispatched, four years later, not to the beaches of Normandy but to a post as the managing editor of a Seventh Air Force G.I. magazine—"*Brief*, a fifteen-cent, slickpaper weekly, published in Hawaii but covering a westward beat of four million square miles." In all the books I have read about *The New Yorker*, the purest expression of its emotional accent, and the most affectionate jest, is uttered not within the offices of the magazine but in church, at a memorial service for E. B. White, known to his intimates as Andy, who spent a lifetime shying away from formal get-togethers. Angell, his stepson, addresses the congregation thus: "If Andy White could be with us today he would not be with us today."

Take any noble institution or any major city and you will find a bunch of mourners who believe that its heyday must, by definition, be long gone. Ruskin thought that Venice had been going down the drain since 1418. *The New Yorker*, likewise, has hardly proved immune to the mongering of doom. In Thurber's estimation, the date that signalled "the end of the *New Yorker* as I had first known it" was 1933. Ninety-two years on, however, there are facets of the magazine that have unequivocally improved, and absurdities that have, thank heaven, been quashed. No longer, for instance, do female reporters on The Talk of the Town hand their work to a rewrite man, who, as Lillian Ross recalls, in "Here But Not Here," "ran our 'notes' through the typewriter and made a few changes so that the voice would be perceived as male." The main rewriter was Gill.

Two late additions to the canon of memoirs, Janet Groth's "The Receptionist" and Alison Rose's "Better Than Sane," lend color to this chronicle of progress, but also a twist. Both women, in succession, observed the magazine in motion from a cubicle on the eighteenth floor. (The actor and writer Wallace Shawn, the son of William Shawn, used to greet Rose over the phone with a cry of "Hello, Eighteen.") It was at once an ideal vantage point and a kind of cage. Rose moved on to The Talk of the Town, whereas Groth remained at her post, unpromoted, from 1957 to 1978, with only a brief interlude in the art department. Rose gave names—Europe, Personality Plus, Mr. Normalcy—to some of her admirers at the magazine. Groth watched the names swing by:

> When J. D. Salinger needed to find the office Coke machine (there wasn't one), I was the girl he asked. When Woody Allen got off the elevator on the wrong floor—about every other time—I was the girl who steered him up two floors where he needed to be.

Rising from "The Receptionist" is an air of someone with a rare gift that cannot be faked: she is a confidee. Hence the discreet lunches that Groth enjoyed with Joseph Mitchell, during which, being fellow-Joyceans, they ruminated on mortality and faith. Was her failure to ascend through the ranks a black mark against *The New Yorker* or a sign that she had become, in practice, indispensable where she was? Her book leaves the question nicely hanging. You half expect an aria of remonstration, instead of which her tales of the magazine resound with generosity and wit, and Groth concludes by

admitting that, given the benefits that came her way, "it is not clear to me who was exploiting whom." She finally left the magazine, fifteen years before I stumbled in. My loss.

What lessons, then, are handed down by all these recollective books? What links the mythical era of Thurber and Ross to the age of Mr. Normalcy? Well, unmistakably, the first rule of *The New Yorker* is: you do not write about *The New Yorker*. It's like Fight Club, with Oxford commas instead of black eyes and cut lips. And the second rule is: nuts to the first rule. Gloves off.

On the other hand, if precision is your racket, and if you happen to think that English sentences can always use some tender ministration, there's still no better place to hang out. Testimony to this effect is situated not merely in book-length memoirs but also in scattershot tributes from those who have been, as it were, grateful guns for hire. As John Updike puts it in the foreword to "Picked-Up Pieces," a 1976 collation of his writings, "The fabled care *The New Yorker* takes with the texts it prints presides like Providence over most of these reviews. Many the untruth quietly curbed, the misspelling invisibly mended." Very lightly camouflaged as *The Beau and the Butterfly*—a nod to the monocled character on the masthead—*The New Yorker* flits into Vladimir Nabokov's last completed novel, "Look at the Harlequins!," as "the kindest magazine in the world."

Kindness, it goes without saying, has a habit of tipping into fuss, and the level of care that was enjoined by Ross, in particular, would strike many sensible souls not as fabled but, more simply, as infuriating. Not even the poor old definite article was safe from his scalpel. As Ben Yagoda points out in "About Town: The New Yorker and the World It Made," "The word *the* was queried when it preceded a noun whose existence had not previously been established." The crucial thing was to shelter the unprotected reader, at all costs, from being struck by the bombshell of a fact, no matter how mild; according to Gill, Ross "did not want a writer to say that a character took off his hat unless it had been established that the character was wearing a hat." Would that Ross had lived long enough to confront the work of Oliver Sacks, a noted contributor to the magazine, whose most celebrated work surely begs for Rossification—"A nameless Man who, having a Wife, Mistook her, for Reasons that are at present Obscure, for a Hat, although

whether it was his Hat (if he had a Hat) or a Hat belonging to Another Person, also Unidentified, has yet to be Confirmed."

There are, without doubt, more books to be written, and to be quarrelled over, on the subject of this magazine. Those who have edited and written for it since the departure of Gottlieb have yet to pronounce. For what it's worth, my own memoir is already nailed down, and what it lacks in comprehensiveness, and in righteous disputation, it makes up for in brevity:

> Oh, last week's piece is overdue,
> And shedding is my cat;
> My phone is 2022. . . .
> My life is all like that.

What we can state, with some confidence, is that to hit one's hundredth birthday is no more than a promising start. All being well, *The New Yorker* can be expected to provoke any future historians with its mettle, its range, its vexing quirks, and the fizz of its curiosity. Long may it remain, as Harold Ross would say, signigifant. ♦

The Wayward Press

Why I Can’t Quit the New York Post

The city’s least self-conscious, Rupert Murdoch-owned daily newspaper sticks to its story, new information be damned, yet holds real clout in liberal New York.

By Vinson Cunningham

May 05, 2025

Last fall at the Philharmonic, I was seated near a guy reading the New York *Post*. As often happens when I see the notorious tabloid in public, I tried to read it discreetly, out of the corner of my eye. The header said “Israel Under Attack.” The two articles below—flagrantly contradicting the banner under which they appeared—were about Israeli air strikes on Lebanon and Iran. I squinted and tried to skim both pieces until the lights went down.

That page was pure *Post*: New York’s most dastardly, least self-conscious daily newspaper chooses heroes and villains and sticks to its own story, new information be damned. The paper deals in overstatement and unsubtle deception, and its bold headline fonts make it a kind of small-scale, endlessly serialized work of public art. It’s meant to be read, sure, but also

seen. You glimpse it on a newsstand or on the train and become sickly intrigued by some ingenious pun or awful image.

Like its longtime owner, Rupert Murdoch, the *Post* is right-wing and gleefully biased. It casts students protesting Israel's war in Gaza—where more than ten thousand children have now been killed—as apologists for Hamas and has cheered on President Donald Trump's crackdown on activists and college administrators. It has crassly opposed the influx of asylum seekers to the city, which crested between 2022 and 2024. A story of malfeasance with an immigrant near its center gets a sensationalist spin. A street fight in Gerritsen Beach, Brooklyn, for instance, became a "Bloody Migrant Brawl." Any uptick in crime, real or perceived, is an occasion for the paper to declare New York—according to a favorite page-header—a "*CITY IN CRISIS*."

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Democrats, generally, get hammered by the *Post*. (In April, a front-page story about the former governor Andrew Cuomo headlined "*CREEP TRICK*"—not its best—was about how state taxpayer money has been used

“to settle Handsy Andy’s sex-harass suit.”) But if a Dem is sufficiently conservative, especially on crime, he might get a pass. Eric Adams, now tarnished by petty corruption, probably owes his mayoralty to months of good press in the *Post* during his 2021 campaign. “Having been a police officer for 22 years, Adams understands the crisis,” the editorial board wrote in its hearty, heavily pro-cop endorsement. “He articulates a clear, firm and common-sense route to cleaning up our streets.”

And yet the paper holds real clout in notionally liberal New York. It editorializes on perennially important local issues—mass transit, real estate, the ever-fluctuating fortunes of the Knicks—and leads substantive political investigations. No other outlet in the city has as thoroughly covered the struggle between Governor Kathy Hochul and Donald Trump over the construction of the new Penn Station, or their ongoing political fight about New York’s congestion-pricing law, which took effect in January, or the recently—and quite dubiously—dropped federal corruption case against Mayor Adams, the *Post’s* former golden child.

The *Post’s* dedication to this kind of fisking, oppositional metro reporting is rarer than ever, if hopelessly slanted. Its tabloid archrival, the *Daily News*, is still kicking, but its circulation has steadily fallen, and its staff has radically shrunk, after its parent company was acquired by a hedge fund with a reputation for gutting newsrooms. The *Times,* meanwhile, has become a colossus, raking in money in large part because of its cooking app and its arsenal of addictive games, casting a large shadow over an imperilled industry. But when it comes to the home front the *Times* has—shamefully, I think—retreated. Last year, it was announced that the paper would no longer issue endorsements in local elections, and the ambit of the excellent Metro section has narrowed considerably.

Here’s a big urban problem: How do you speak to an entire city using only one loud voice? Most politicians can’t pull it off. The *Post* has an answer: make a daily billboard so neon in its message, so portable in its form, that citizens will volunteer—or, better, pay—to carry it around on your behalf.

The paper works as a way to broadcast your own identity, too. During the program at the Philharmonic, one composer gave an evangelistic speech about how her concerto had been inspired by the climate crisis. Many

audience members erupted in applause. But my neighbor, impassive, lethargically tapped his forefinger against his *Post*. I felt I could read his mind: he'd come for the music, not this Greta Thunberg routine. I didn't know him, but for a moment, if only archetypally, I sort of did. Rudy Giuliani—a sadist, yes, but our sadist—knows passages from Verdi's "Rigoletto" by heart.

One minor tension of my life is that I can't bring myself to hate the *Post*. I find its politics detestable but its voice irresistible. I read the famous gossip section, Page Six, and skim the horoscopes. I whiz through the local politics and government coverage—often well reported, spin notwithstanding—and try to read the articles on national and international affairs as a fun-house mirror of the reality I usually inhabit. On one page, the entertainment critic Johnny Oleksinski cracks me up with his staccato phrasing and his uncareful way with celebrity self-regard. ("The Rocket Man keeps crashing," he once wrote of Elton John. Recently, he so badly peeved the Broadway producers of the Denzel Washington-led "Othello"—having kvetched about high prices—that the show's publicist yanked the customary offer of free critics' tickets.) A few pages later, the neocon columnist Michael Goodwin inverts the truth so egregiously, and with such smug certainty, that I want to set the whole rag on fire. The *Post* and me: it's a bad relationship I can't figure out how to leave for good.

Worse, I'm not sure I want to. If I'm away and something big happens, I usually ask a friend if he can stop by a newsstand so I don't miss the hard copy of a good front-page headline. If I'm somewhere with a critical mass of vacationing New Yorkers, I set out on foot, knowing there's likely a *Post* nearby. In August, 2022, just after the F.B.I. raid at Mar-a-Lago, in search of allegedly mishandled classified documents, I rushed into a liquor store on Martha's Vineyard and scored a copy. On the cover was Trump, cheeks ablush. The headline: "*YOU COULDA JUST ASKED*."

Maybe I'm simply interested in that voice, that loud, familiar sound—the demotic tone, the direct address, the sense of a great organ yelling into power's ear and being overheard everywhere, from Dyckman to Dyker Heights.

The *Post*, the oldest daily newspaper in the United States, was founded in 1801 by Alexander Hamilton. With a group of his fellow-Federalists, Hamilton had scrounged together the money to establish the upstart broadsheet, then called the *Evening Post*, in order to express the group's disapproval of the newly elected President, Thomas Jefferson, and his party of populist libertarians, the Democratic-Republicans. That year, Jefferson avoided giving an annual state-of-the-nation speech to Congress and, instead, delivered a message in the form of a letter. Hamilton—taking his new paper for a spin like a Ferrari through the backstreets of a small town—wrote a series of acidic articles refuting, one by one, the "strange absurdity" of his adversary's arguments. The President's message, he wrote, was "a performance which ought to alarm all who are anxious for the safety of our Government, for the respectability and welfare of our nation." Anxiety asserted as a kind of duty, high stakes made existential, personal vendetta masquerading as the news—it was lurid overstatement from the start.

Through the decades and editorships that followed, the *Post* took up many causes, including abolitionism, collective bargaining, opposition to central banking. (One strain of continuity is its interest in the performing arts: it has almost always employed a theatre critic.) In 1939, the finance heiress Dorothy Schiff bought the paper and transformed it into a largely liberal tabloid, especially popular among the Jewish upper-middle classes. Socially conscious journalist heroes such as Murray Kempton and Pete Hamill worked as columnists. By the seventies, a comfortable sleepiness had set in; the paper was more respected than read. In 1962, Schiff had declared herself editor—according to Nora Ephron, a *Post* alumna, she "changed the focus of the paper from hard-hitting, investigative, and liberal to frothy, gossipy, and woman oriented"—but she resisted spending the money necessary to compete in a crowded tabloid market.

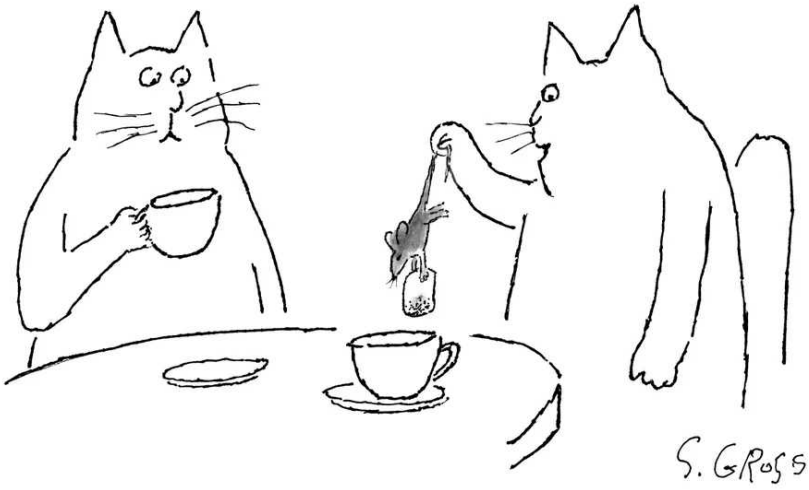
The popular narrative tends to be a bit unfair to Schiff, focussing too much on the late decline and ignoring the real excellence to which her *Post* often rose. Kempton and Hamill were icons of their era, and in 1975 Schiff hired Frank Rich, who turned out to be one of the finest drama critics of the late twentieth century. Under Schiff's watch, the paper even showed up in great works of art. In the poem "The Day Lady Died," a potent ditty of avoidant grief, from 1964, Frank O'Hara name-checks the *Post* as having informed him of the death of one of his heroes, Billie Holiday:

> then I go back where I came from to 6th Avenue
> and the tobacconist in the Ziegfeld Theatre and
> casually ask for a carton of Gauloises and a carton
> of Picayunes, and a NEW YORK POST with her face on it

"Paper of Wreckage: An Oral History of the New York Post, 1976-2024" (Atria Books), by the former Posties Susan Mulcahy and Frank DiGiacomo, picks up at the end of the Schiff era. The book is a fun pile of quotations from *Post* employees and other voices on the paper's past half century. By the end of Schiff's tenure, the *Post* "needed a shot of adrenaline," the former City Hall bureau chief David Seifman says.

That adrenaline was injected in the form of Rupert Murdoch, who bought the paper in 1976. He was a big-spending, baldly ambitious Australian, and, like Schiff, an heir: his late father had bequeathed to him a newspaper, the beginnings of an empire. Then in London, cutting his teeth on quasi-journalistic acquisitions such as *News of the World* and the *Sun*, Murdoch developed a diabolical, swashbuckling tabloid style.

Many of the *Post's* current practices—a lax attitude toward accurate attribution, a habit of placing a scantily clad woman on page 3, an emphasis on photography over lengthy text—were imported from the U.K. Along with Murdoch came a cadre of troublemakers, Aussies and Englishmen who terrorized their female colleagues and, if the anecdotes in "Paper of Wreckage" can be trusted, drank their way through the seventies and eighties.



The change in sensibility made the *Post* more fun, if also less scrupulous. The paper chose sides, helping the conservative-leaning Democrat Ed Koch into Gracie Mansion before devoting its advocative energy to conservatives, including Giuliani. Its reporters covered the city ferociously and with an adversarial edge. One of Murdoch's first moves was ramping up the paper's photos in both color and size. In 1979, when Carmine Galante, the head of the Bonanno crime family, was killed, the photographer Hal Goldenberg hoofed it up onto a roof in Brooklyn to get a shot of the gangster's cooling corpse. "There's Carmine," he says with evident glee, in "Paper of Wreckage," "with his cigar in his mouth and his eye blown out. I start making pictures." On the day of Galante's funeral, a reporter was "jostled and menaced" and a photographer punched. The paper made big characters —the kinds that populate operas in the same swaggering, dramatic way— feel bigger.

It was those huge front-page pictures which first grabbed me as a kid. I'd ride the downtown A train with my mom, scrutinizing with a sociological interest my fellow-riders' reading material. Guys in dress shoes and trenchcoats toted the *Times*, folded into tight businesslike rectangles. Among the visibly working class, the tabloids were more popular. *Daily News* readers skewed female, Blacker and browner. The *Post's* readers tended to be men, often white guys in jeans frosted with grit and paint.

My mother, like many of the adults I knew—Black people who worked to live, idealized education, and held up reading, especially, as aspirational for their kids, a way to make the future more free—joked about the *Post* being fodder for people with low literacy levels. The *News* was O.K. by her lights, if you didn't have much time and needed to skim. But, on afternoons after church, she made a point of picking up the Sunday *Times. That* was a paper.

I agreed then, and I still do. The *Times*, chock-full of facts, shows up on my steps every morning. But, on those long-ago train rides, I always peeked at the *Post*, snickering at the wordplay of the headlines and the gruesome frankness of the pictures. The *Post* addressed itself to the berserk and unreasonable city I was starting to love, whose textures I couldn't always feel in the *Times*. At some point in my thirties, I started sneaking copies of the *Post*, reading the rag outdoors and then throwing it away, like a smoker hiding his habit.

At the *Post's* old headquarters from 1970 to 1995, near the South Street Seaport—in its early days, a time-forgotten area teeming with gang activity—interestingly malicious characters tended to wash up. One such figure, a subject of ambivalent fixation in "Paper of Wreckage," is the columnist and editor Steve Dunleavy, a favorite Murdoch lieutenant whose tactics, personal and journalistic, were particularly wicked.

As one legend goes, Dunleavy pretended to be a grief counsellor in a ploy to get an exclusive interview with the mother of Stacy Moskowitz, the final victim of the serial killer known as the Son of Sam. Usually a half-drunk, shameless flirt, Dunleavy dressed in his nice-boy best and insinuated himself with Moskowitz's mom, with whom he grew so close—even after admitting his dishonesty—that she refused to talk to reporters from the *Daily News.* In another anecdote, Dunleavy had sex—outdoors, atop a snowdrift—with the fiancée of one of his colleagues. In the book, the cuckolded party, an editor, just laughs it off, chalking it up to the crazy old days.

Dunleavy was in many ways the true embodiment of the Murdoch regime. He knew how to find a good story and stretch it across weeks, even years. He was also openly and casually bigoted. His racism—like the consistent racism of the Murdoch *Post*—is well documented in "Paper of Wreckage." Once, Dunleavy, aggrieved by attempts to diversify the reportorial ranks,

griped to a Black colleague, Gregg Morris, that, in his estimation, "there are too many niggers in the newsroom." Another Black writer, Ramona Garnes, had to calm Morris down, as Morris recalls:

> I could hear Ramona screaming at me, "Gregg, don't! Gregg, don't!" I had cornered Dunleavy in the elevator, and I guess it looked like I was getting ready to beat the shit out of him. I backed off, and . . . everybody sort of did a nervous laugh.

"I'll say this about the Brits and Aussies," Garnes says, "they were upfront. There was no smile in your face and stab you in the back." Pamela Newkirk, a widely respected reporter, states that, for the Post, "crimes against Blacks, no matter how heinous, were not considered newsworthy." Conversely, if a Black person was so much as suspected of a crime, the *Post* could turn its citywide volume up to a perilous decibel, with sometimes terrible consequences. Following the infamous case of the Central Park jogger, in 1989, in which a twenty-eight-year-old woman was brutally raped and beaten into a coma, the *Post* published the confessions—later confirmed forced—and the names and addresses of the young men known today as the Exonerated Five, exhorting on a daily basis that they be found guilty of the crime. Yusef Salaam, one of the Five, who now serves on the New York City Council, has summed up his experience with the paper with more sang-froid than it deserves: "The *Post* has been one of the most unforgiving in terms of its negative coverage of the *Black* community."

Other disgraces abounded at the *Post's* office. We talk a lot these days about the follies of the contemporary H.R. department, but any one of these stories ought to give a sensitivity trainer an on-the-spot stroke. There was, for instance, a guy named Alan Whitney, who "wore devil horns and sent panties to female staffers through interoffice mail." "Psycho" is one of the *Post's* favorite words for villains, as is "creep." As it turns out, Posties know whereof they speak.

"Paper of Wreckage" details how the *Post's* reporters often came from reputable local outfits such as *Newsday,* on Long Island, but the tabloid's reputation made it hard for them to get jobs in "straight" journalism after their tour of duty at the Seaport, even though more upscale publications often mined the *Post* for ideas. "The glossy magazines at Condé Nast would

get a gossip pack," one reporter says, "where the interns would Xerox tabloid stories, staple them together, and distribute that to all the editors in the morning so that the editors could steal the stories and assign think pieces."

It's easy to understand the allure of those grubby items, ripe for long-form elaboration. The writer and historian Garry Wills, in his great Pulitzer-winning book, "Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words That Remade America" (1992), persuasively argues that the economy and the power of Lincoln's language was partly a reflection of the rising technologies of his time: "the railroad, the telegraph, the steamship." Lincoln's terse, repetitive strands of simple syntax—"we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground"—had something to do with his society's new fetish for speed. The *Post's* language, by contrast, borrows from the sonics of violence: it sounds like weaponry, mowing down its targets with unmerciful percussion. The nonagenarian gossip writer Cindy Adams's syntactically demented, Borscht Belt prose is the perfect distillation of the *Post's* style. Here's a recent Adams reverie—equal parts nostalgia and reactionary sneer—about old New York:

> In 1860, weeks before I came to be: A Gilded Age. Growth, industrialization, society. Rice—7 cents a pound. Coffee? 21 cents. To scrub a shmatta cost the scrubee 11 cents. Soap? 8 cents. And walking? No nighttime terror. We're talking it was heavy-duty hardship. Our mayor then? Fernando Wood whom nobody remembers except maybe Mrs. Wood. Also maybe if their marital loins produced any Wood splinters.

Magazine editors weren't the only highfalutin New Yorkers who fetishized the *Post*. Sonny Mehta, the much heralded editor of Knopf in the late eighties, "published Nobel Prize winners, and never missed a day of the *Post*." And the finance crowd, ferrying from gala to gala, stayed abreast of the paper's doings. "The *Post* loves that Upper East Side, monied, philanthropist crowd," the reporter Jennifer Fermino says. "That's their base in a lot of ways." Spike Lee, on the other hand, has joined protests against the paper's racist cartoons and refused to talk to reporters affiliated with the outfit.

New York is often called a newspaper town. That was once indisputably true. The enterprising newsboy used to be a trope. In 1912, the reformist photographer Lewis Hine captured an exhausted boy in Harlem, wearing a cap and dusty boots, asleep atop a pile of papers. Gordon Parks, in 1943, photographed a Black kid in a rough flannel jacket, with an ad for an article about "The Negro on the Home Front" behind him. Now, though, the chill of extinction is in the air. Besides the weakened *Daily News* and the negligent *Times*, the *Village Voice*—which covered the New York counterculture of the sixties and seventies and the hip-hop-fuelled youth Zeitgeist of the eighties and nineties with an unrivalled vigor—has been desiccated. Its website is a sloppy bin of its archives.

The *Post* keeps standing, filling space emptied out by more ethical actors. It's just one example of a larger American problem. The people who insist on making sense speak in small, prim voices, trusting their listeners to understand subtleties of tone. After all, everybody's off carving out his own personal city, made up of small but real impressions. Why try? The *Post* screams on, and—by the evidence of our last national election, in which almost every demographic in the city veered right, toward Donald Trump, whose profile was created, in part, in Murdoch's pages—New York keeps hearing it out.

Maybe I read the *Post* because, as Ramona Garnes said, it leaves its malice naked and, therefore, shows me a more complete picture of where I and people like me really stand. Or, less flatteringly, maybe it's because the paper plucks at a string of violence—or, worse, nihilism—that runs through the quiet places in my personality. Maybe I just like to be scandalized or gossiped to, and I'll stop to hear out any old body who'll stoop to scratch the itch.

It certainly helps me see the city I was born in more clearly. One of my favorite relationships is the one I share with a certain man at a little storefront in Brooklyn, near the intersection of Flatbush and Nostrand Avenues. When he sees my face, he smiles faintly. He beckons me to the counter, letting me skip the line of sixtysomethings waiting to play their lottery numbers. I stick two bucks into his palm. Neither of us speaks. He knows why I'm there. ♦

Books

Keith McNally's Guide to Making a Scene

The Manhattan restaurateur's new memoir shows a canny instinct for the finer aspects of dining.

By Molly Fischer

May 05, 2025

In recent decades, as food has claimed pop-culture status, culinary autobiography has become a familiar genre. It tends, for example, to include a tour of formative foods. Julia Child's revelatory taste of sole meunière, Anthony Bourdain's first oyster—these experiences initiate gourmands and shape their obsessions. By contrast, the New York restaurateur Keith McNally's new memoir, "I Regret Almost Everything," is light on memorable meals. What it has instead are memorable walls.

The walls belong to the playwright Alan Bennett, whom McNally met in 1968 as a young actor in the West End production of Bennett's play "Forty Years On." Bennett enlisted the teen-age McNally to scrape old paint off a

plaster frieze in his sitting room; when McNally returned a year later, he was astonished to see the walls' transformation. Bennett, he writes, "had stripped them of decades of wallpaper, then rubbed a mix of colored waxes and paints onto the hundred-year-old plaster until it turned an extraordinary deep mustard color." It was, McNally continues, "the same color I've been trying—mostly unsuccessfully—to reproduce on my restaurants' walls for almost fifty years."

Since 1980, McNally has opened a series of stylish, bustling Manhattan restaurants—the Odeon, Balthazar, Schiller's Liquor Bar—that helped to define their moments. Several have grown into New York institutions. Almost all have offered a combination of painstaking aesthetic nostalgia, classic bistro food, and nonchalant service—a well-honed formula heavy on steak frites and subway tile. Perhaps the apex of McNally's success has been Balthazar, a SoHo brasserie in a cavernous space that once contained a leather warehouse. The inspiration for the restaurant was a century-old photograph he'd found at a Paris flea market showing a zinc bar flanked by caryatids, in front of a wall of liquor bottles twenty feet high. From this sepia-toned image sprang Balthazar's clattering dining room, which opened in 1997 to celebrity crowds, then matured into a local fixture and even a bit of an empire, with an outpost in London and a wholesale bakery operation.

"In describing how Balthazar came about, I'd like to recall an early family holiday in the south of France where I experienced my first taste of foie gras," McNally writes, in an introduction to the restaurant's 2003 cookbook. "I'd like to, but it'd be a complete lie." Born in London in 1951, McNally grew up in the East End neighborhood of Bethnal Green. His father was a stevedore and his mother an autodidact who aspired to something better than the prefab house where her family lived. Her son recalls it as a place of "cheap linoleum" with walls that "were made of a material so thin you could punch a hole through it."

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"I Regret Almost Everything" follows McNally's path from Bethnal Green to New York City, where he became, as the *Times* once put it, the "Restaurateur Who Invented Downtown." (Though he grumbles extensively about food media, he does seem to like this headline, which appears on the book's first page, as well as its cover.) Initially, he had hoped to direct movies. He eventually made two: a psychological thriller called "End of the Night," which screened at Cannes, in 1990, but was never distributed in the U.S., and "Far from Berlin," which he described in a recent Instagram post as "a TOTAL FLOP."

It's not hard to see, in McNally's restaurants, evidence of a thwarted Hollywood sensibility: the splashy guests they courted, but also the lavishly realized lighting and scenery. Over the years, his irritation with critics has often concerned their tendency to fixate on appearance and ambience—and to be, on occasion, less than effusive about the food. "Just as beautiful women have a hard time being taken seriously, so it is with restaurants," he observes. Yet, in his view, neither food nor design is enough to guarantee a restaurant's success. "Nothing does," he writes, "except that strange indefinable: *the right feel*." He and his critics seem to agree, in fact, on his true business—making a scene.

Fittingly, McNally's ascent began with the crank of star-making machinery. After leaving school at sixteen, he was working as a bellhop at a London Hilton when an American film producer asked him to audition for a part. In due course, he was cast as an urchin in a movie about Charles Dickens, and soon a black Bentley was ferrying him to the set.

McNally's career as an actor was brief—a few years onstage and onscreen—but it was enough to sand off his working-class accent. It was also an introduction to a wider world: Alan Bennett became his friend and later his lover, and McNally used the money he earned from acting to travel. (Inspired by Hermann Hesse's "Siddhartha," he set out for Kathmandu, following the Zeitgeist across India.) After a period of backpacking abroad and menial labor in England, in 1975 he moved to New York, where he found work first as a busboy and then as an oyster shucker at a restaurant downtown called One Fifth. Staff turnover and personal charm allowed him to climb the ranks quickly. "Customers could be surprisingly forgiving once they heard my English accent," he notes.

By 1977, *New York* magazine declared the twenty-six-year-old McNally "the youngest of the important maître d's" in the city. At One Fifth, he began assembling the cast who would join him in his later endeavors. He hired Lynn Wagenknecht, an aspiring painter, as a waitress (they soon began dating), and his older brother Brian as a bartender. Anna Wintour was a pretty One Fifth regular for whom McNally once ducked behind a stove to cook eggs after the kitchen had closed. They became friends, and when she started dating a Frenchman she flew McNally and Wagenknecht to Paris to keep her company. There, McNally's fascination with archetypal French brasseries and bistros took hold. "I loved the smell of escargots drenched in butter and garlic, the look of the red banquettes, the scored mirrors, the handwritten menu, the waiters with starched white, ankle-length aprons," he writes evocatively of his favorite, Chez Georges. He began to entertain the possibility of running such a place himself. Aside from describing Wintour's crucial intervention, he betrays little introspection about this turn. "Lynn and I decided to open our own restaurant," he writes nine pages later—and so, along with Brian, they did.

Tribeca, not yet a destination for dining, was the only downtown neighborhood they could afford. The third space their real-estate agent

showed them was on a corner of West Broadway, beneath a big red neon sign that read "*TOWERS CAFETERIA*." This became the Odeon—named, at Brian's suggestion, for the theatre where the brothers grew up watching movies.

With a handful of investors (among them Bennett, who'd remained a friend), the McNallys and Wagenknecht signed a fifteen-year lease. Features too expensive to replace, like terrazzo floors and globe lights, turned out to be assets; the trio added a neon clock and a Bakelite frieze of the New York skyline. The Odeon opened in 1980 and swiftly became a late-night destination. Lorne Michaels, another regular from One Fifth, moved the "Saturday Night Live" cast after-parties from there to the Odeon. The McNallys and Wagenknecht had hired Patrick Clark, an ambitious and well-regarded nouvelle-cuisine chef, but the crowds came as much for the ambience as for the food. It had *the right feel.* "The glittering, curvilinear surfaces inside Odeon are reassuring," Jay McInerney wrote in "Bright Lights, Big City," his 1984 novel of yuppie hedonism, whose cover showed the restaurant's neon sign. "The place makes you feel reasonable at any hour, often against bad odds, with its good light and clean luncheonette-via-Cartier deco decor."

McNally seemed to enjoy occupying a place in New York's cultural landscape; he describes McInerney asking for permission to use the restaurant's image and giving him a manuscript to read. "My instinct told me the book was going to be a turkey," McNally writes. "Feeling sorry for the unknown McInerney, I let him use the image for free." McNally has told this story over the years with varying degrees of diplomacy. "He made some terrible jokes that were very unfunny," he explained, in 2005. "I just thought he was talentless." In the memoir, McNally concludes on a self-deprecating note ("So much for my instinct"), but, even so, he reveals a fondness for tweaking his clientele. "When customers ask me where the bathroom is, I often say we don't have one," he writes, of his "minor subversiveness."

Keeping people lightly off balance kept them coming back for more. Nell's, the night club he and Wagenknecht opened with a friend, the Australian actress Nell Campbell, in 1986, demonstrated this principle. The door policy was ostensibly democratic—a five-dollar cover for all, regardless of fame—but, given that the capacity inside was two hundred and fifty, it was also

subject to the imperious choices of Campbell and her deputies. Cher was famously turned away. For those who gained entry, the experience presented an alternative to the discos and vast dance clubs that had until recently dominated New York night life. There was a full dinner menu and live music in an intimate atmosphere of overstuffed Victoriana. (Patrick Bateman was a fictional habitué.) A *Vanity Fair* story described it as looking "like an old-fashioned gents' club. Or a dilapidated English country house." The boy from Bethnal Green had invented an ancestral estate on West Fourteenth Street.

"To want to own a restaurant can be a strange and terrible affliction," Bourdain writes in "Kitchen Confidential." The economics are daunting, the odds of success bad. "What causes such a destructive urge in so many otherwise sensible people?" Bourdain asks. A desire for sex, he hypothesizes, and for life-of-the-party panache; would-be owners want "to swan about the dining room signing dinner checks like Rick in 'Casablanca.' " In Bourdain's assessment, restaurant ownership holds the illusory promise of easy pleasure—but it's also the perfect venue to work through whatever baggage you've got about your family. After all, a restaurant is a place where *you* provide the sustenance, *you* decide who belongs, *you* make the rules.

Take Danny Meyer—a prolific restaurateur who, like McNally, emerged in nineteen-eighties Manhattan. Meyer builds sleek marvels of efficiency for power lunchers, and, in his book "Setting the Table," he lays out a Boy Scout-ish ideal of hospitality. His vision of codified institutional niceness seems tailored to impress his forebears, prosperous Midwestern businessmen who had doubted his choice of career. Gabrielle Hamilton's 2011 memoir, "Blood, Bones & Butter," tells how she came to open the beloved East Village restaurant Prune. After a chaotic childhood in the Pennsylvania countryside, Hamilton found that running her own place was a way of cultivating comfort and control. (Her formative food memory is the lamb her bohemian parents would spit-roast for parties, before their divorce ended the family's rural idyll.)

"As a child, I never ate in a proper restaurant," McNally writes. "For people like my parents, entering a white-tablecloth restaurant was like being pushed on stage without knowing their lines." He explains that he left England in

part to escape his constant awareness of its class hierarchies. In New York, he found himself working in a field that was still rigidly hierarchical, but where status was up for grabs. His restaurants were places where his own taste reigned supreme. He could adopt the élite trappings that appealed to him, and choose who made up the in-house aristocracy.

Francophilia, a time-honored ticket to worldliness, became McNally's governing principle, whether at Café Luxembourg (which he and Wagenknecht opened on the Upper West Side, in 1983), Lucky Strike (SoHo, 1989), or Pastis (the meatpacking district, 1999). He made forays into a fantasy version of Soviet Russia (with Pravda) and Italy (Morandi), but the French classics remained his template. When his effort at a pizza place on the Bowery, Pulino's, shut down, in 2014, he reinvented the space as a spot for foie gras and frogs' legs called Cherche Midi.

People wanted to feel like they were in France, McNally recognized, but also to feel right at home. They wanted, for example, to be able to order a hamburger—an item he insisted Balthazar's menu include, despite the chefs' reluctance. His restaurants conjured a cinematic Paris with their zinc bars, leather banquettes, old tiles, and, of course, those yellowing walls. By the time his flagship opened, in SoHo, McNally had arrived at his own method for achieving the effect he'd first seen in Bennett's sitting room. "I glaze the walls—I don't use paint—with a mixture of pigment and decorator's glaze, several layers of it," he explained, in 1998. "Then a coat of varnish that gives it the slightly nicotined appearance." He'd perfected an atmosphere of smoky dissolution just as actual smoking disappeared from New York's dining rooms.

Celebrities populated McNally's realm—Jerry Seinfeld proposed to his wife at Balthazar; "Sex and the City" and Woody Allen both filmed at Pastis—and civilians were drawn to the frisson of exclusivity. Once past the door (or the secret reservation phone line), anyone could be beautiful. Lighting, as a rule, was soft, warm—hospitable. "If you didn't look good at Café Luxembourg, then you probably should have gone home immediately and not come out for two days," Hal Rubenstein, a former waiter there who became a founding editor of *InStyle*, once said. "People used to call up to find out what kind of bulbs we used."

In 2008, Richard Price published “Lush Life,” a literary crime novel centered on a Lower East Side restaurant with a resemblance to Schiller’s Liquor Bar, whose blurry photograph appeared on the cover of the book. Price describes the establishment he calls Berkmann’s as a “restaurant dressed as theater dressed as nostalgia”; its owner, modelled loosely on McNally, is named Harry Steele. An impresario with “dour, baggy eyes” like Serge Gainsbourg’s, Steele is a sharklike figure whose taste for picturesque decay has a somewhat ominous cast: he embodies the money and power poised to transform the neighborhood inexorably. “Inventing downtown” is perhaps the same thing as gentrifying it.

“Lush Life” ends with Steele building a Berkmann’s replica in an Atlantic City casino. In his memoir, McNally discusses turning down a proposal in 2000 to reproduce Balthazar in Las Vegas—but in recent years he’s proved more receptive to such opportunities (even if the developer who paid him to build Balthazar London, whom he calls “the integrity-free Richard Caring,” is the subject of an extended diatribe). A Pastis opened in Miami in 2023, followed the next year by one in Washington, D.C., which is now also home to a duplicate of Minetta Tavern, McNally’s Greenwich Village “Parisian steakhouse.”

Wagenknecht and McNally divorced in 1994, after having three children. (She bought out his shares of the Odeon, Café Luxembourg, and Nell’s.) By the early two-thousands, he’d remarried and had two more children. “I needed to open more restaurants and put some bread on the table,” he writes, of this period. Business remained steady, even if his restaurants had ceded their cultural dominance to usurpers in the far-flung territory of Brooklyn.

In late 2016, McNally had a stroke that paralyzed the right side of his body and impaired his ability to speak. His second marriage ended, and four months after that he attempted suicide. This tumultuous part of his life frames the memoir: he looks back over his triumphs as he despairs of replicating (or even enjoying) them. The rigors and disappointments of physical rehabilitation swing abruptly into real-estate deals and restaurant gossip. Convalescence makes sense as a time of personal reflection—McNally explains in the book that he began writing while teaching himself to type with just his left hand. But a more useful context in which to understand his story might be the period that followed. In February, 2020,

McNally joined Instagram—and so, just as restaurants shut down, he discovered a new sort of scene to cultivate.

By then, the heyday of celebrity impresarios and their dining empires had passed. The internet had changed New York restaurants, especially image-conscious ones like McNally's, which the public increasingly experienced through screens. An establishment's gravitational pull now manifested in location tags more than in Page Six mentions. McNally saw an opening for a showman-like restaurateur. His book recounts, in disarming detail, the enthusiasm with which he seized it. Ninety-eight people liked his first Instagram post, he reports: "Getting carried away with myself, I immediately posted ten more."

In this medium, too, McNally quickly grasped the charm of rough edges—instead of stained walls, there were pixelated screenshots, which appeared on the grid alongside family photos, pop-culture musings, and, in time, end-of-day reports from his restaurants. Social media rewarded what looked like authenticity, which he was ever willing to provide. His posts "dealt with subjects normally taboo on Instagram," he writes. "Among others, these included regular support for Woody Allen, my vasectomy (with photos), a hatred for the film 'Barbie' and the humiliation of my post-stroke physical condition." The tone could be faintly Trumpian: whimsically capitalized, emphatic, obsessive in the pursuit of nemeses. McNally's puckish combativeness had found a ready outlet. "James Corden is a Hugely gifted comedian, but a tiny Cretin of a man," he wrote in a 2022 post calling Corden "the most abusive customer to my Balthazar servers since the restaurant opened 25 years ago." The result was an outpouring of delighted indignation and anti-Corden sentiment, complete with an extended tabloid news cycle. McNally was intoxicated. "I felt like I'd hit the jackpot of a slot machine and thousands of gold coins were spilling out in front of me," he recalls. (He now has a hundred and forty-six thousand followers.)

His online life has, at least for some audiences, overshadowed his restaurants. When I told people I was writing about Keith McNally, they were more likely to mention recent posts than recent meals. Reading the memoir is a bit like scrolling through his feed: he's not really a raconteur, but he's an energetic collector of rants, vignettes, and curiosities. This isn't

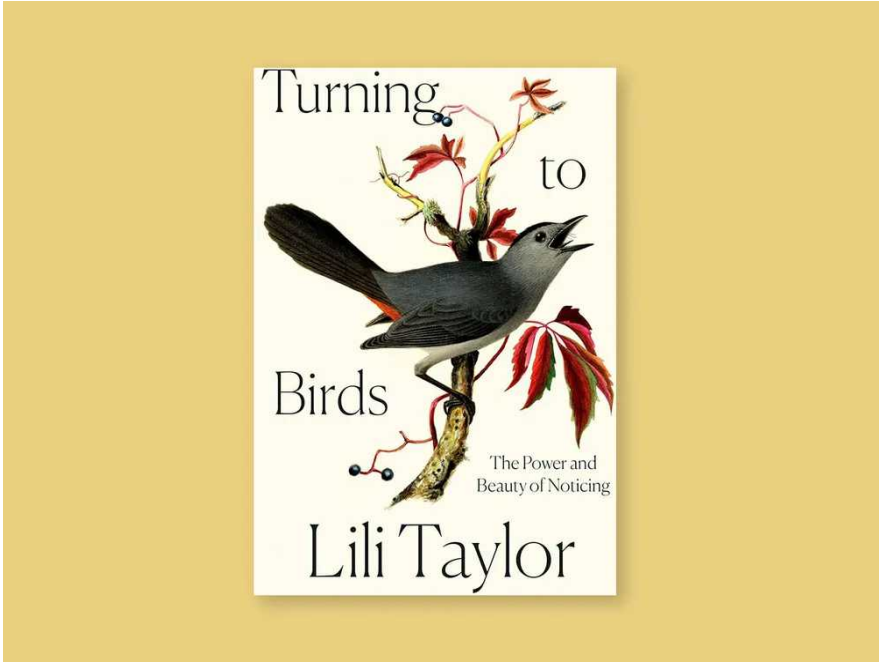
necessarily a strike against the book. If anything, he's found a new way to give the crowd what it wants. ♦

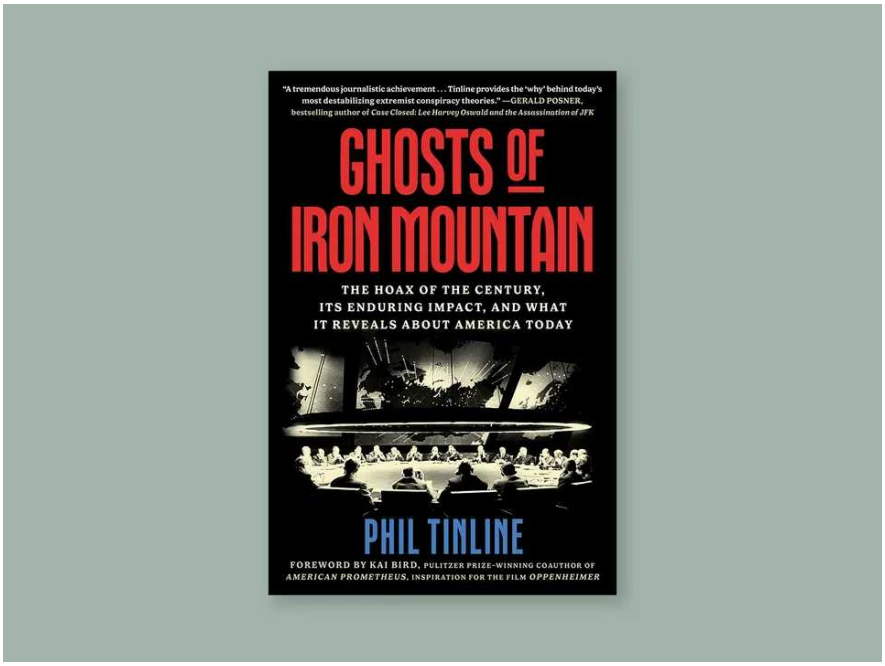
Books

Briefly Noted

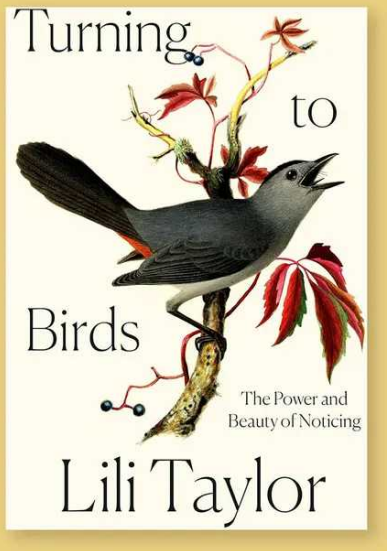
“Ghosts of Iron Mountain,” “Turning to Birds,” “The Imagined Life,” and “My Name Is Emilia del Valle.”

May 05, 2025





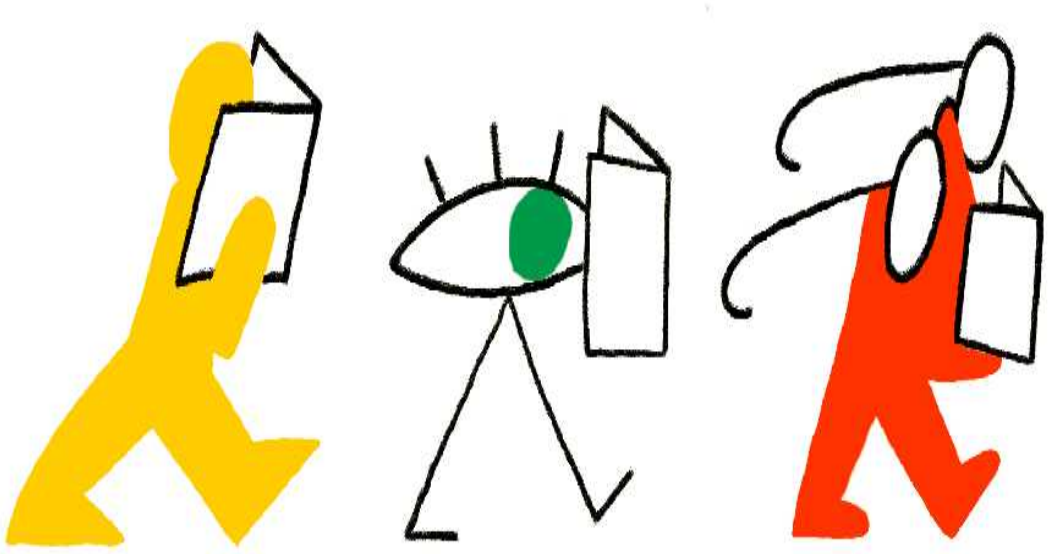
Ghosts of Iron Mountain, *by Phil Tinline (Scribner)*. In 1967, a top-secret government report stating that achieving peace "would almost certainly not be in the best interests of a stable society" was leaked. The document was a hoax—the work of a political satirist—but, as Tinline shows in this riveting history, it was taken seriously by numerous news outlets and by readers, even after it was exposed as a sham five years later. Delving into the circumstances that primed the American public to believe that shadowy élites at the heart of the federal government were conspiring against them, Tinline traces how the report helped fuel various conspiracy theories over the coming decades, from the "CIA plot" to assassinate John F. Kennedy to the rise of QAnon.



Turning to Birds, *by Lili Taylor (Crown)*. Some fifteen years ago, Taylor, while upstate on an "emotional sabbatical" from her acting career, discovered birds. What she noticed first were the many and varied sounds these "flying dinosaurs" make. "During that time of personal quiet," she writes, "I entered a world of sound outside myself—and I've never left." Embracing the startlingly intense subculture of birding, Taylor attends festivals, makes pilgrimages to places like "the Warbler Capital of the World" (northwestern Ohio), and savors the consciousness-altering power of "bins," the birder term for binoculars: they "facilitate an experience outside

reality. I don’t do drugs; I do bins.” By turns introspective, inquisitive, and funny, the book is a love letter to nature and the solace it can provide.

What We’re Reading



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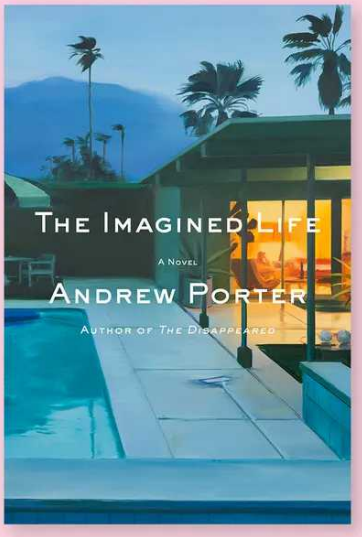
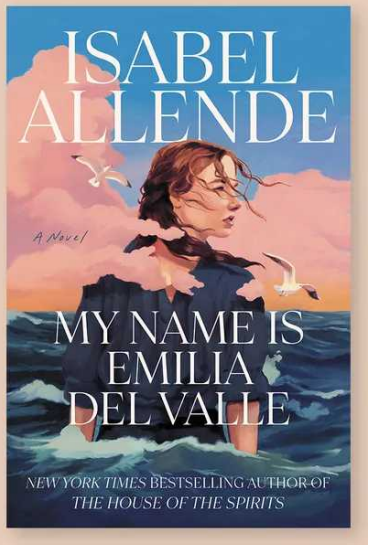


The Imagined Life, *by Andrew Porter (Knopf)*. This meditative novel takes the form of an investigation that the narrator, Steven, conducts into the mental breakdown and disappearance of his father, a professor whose life fell apart during his bid for tenure at a Southern California college in the nineteen-eighties. Dual time lines juxtapose the events of that pivotal period, when Steven was eleven, with his efforts as an adult to figure out why his father, "someone who seemingly had everything, would go to such lengths to destroy those things he had." Hanging in the balance is Steven's own family life; during his inquiry, he neglects his wife and son. Porter deftly combines a bildungsroman with the story of a midlife crisis to deliver a cathartic resolution.



My Name Is Emilia del Valle, *by Isabel Allende, translated from the Spanish by Frances Riddle (Ballantine)*. Allende, a doyenne of historical fiction, once again ventures to her native Chile with this engaging novel, set in the late nineteenth century. Emilia, the product of an ill-fated liaison between an Irish nun and a dissolute Chilean aristocrat, lives contentedly in San Francisco. But her love for writing—first as a dime novelist, then as a journalist—draws her to Chile, where she reports on the nascent civil war. There, she experiences both heartbreak at the violence she witnesses and the deep sense that she's found her place in the world: "one day in the far future I will return, because I belong to this landscape."

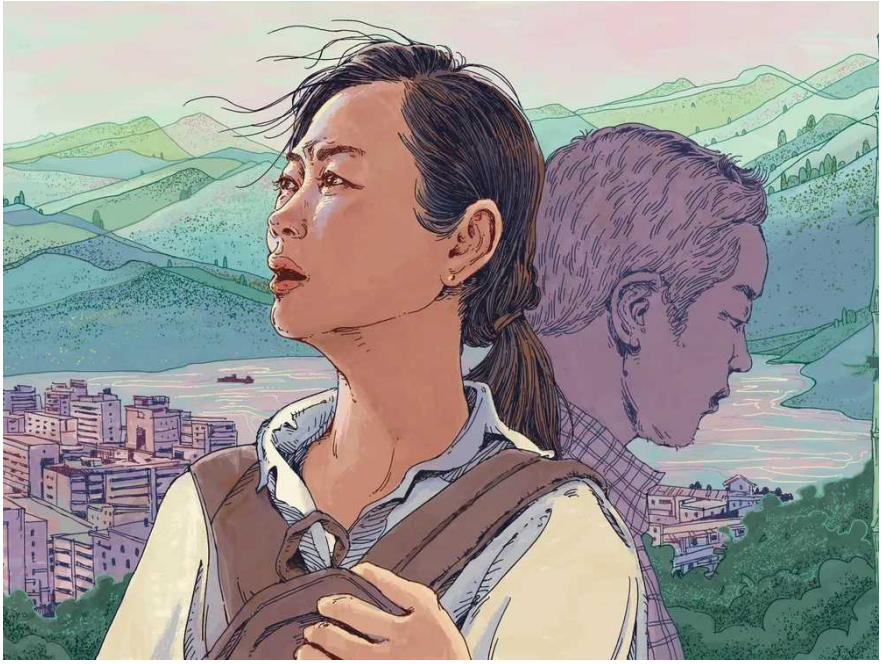
The Current Cinema

“Caught by the Tides” Is a Gorgeous Vision of Loss and Renewal

More than two decades in the making, Jia Zhangke’s mostly archival film embodies the sweeping transformations of modern China in its very construction.

By Justin Chang

May 02, 2025



Early on in Jia Zhangke’s “Caught by the Tides,” a woman in her twenties, Qiaoqiao (Zhao Tao), tries to escape her boyfriend, Guo Bin (Li Zhubin). Lord, how she tries. It’s 2001, and the two are alone on a bus, parked somewhere in Datong, a coal-mining city in northern China. Whenever Qiaoqiao tries to get up and bolt for the exit, Bin hurls her back down into her seat—up and down, up and down, eleven times in a row, until Qiaoqiao, in tears, finally breaks free on the twelfth attempt. You may wonder how the director and actors choreographed this wordless clash of wills: How many throwdowns would suffice? Did Jia, a master of on-the-fly realism, instruct

Zhao and Li to improvise—to run through the action again and again, in take after exhausted take, until they were finally ready to get off that bus?

In any event, Jia's longtime admirers will recognize that this oddly repetitive scene is itself a repetition. The footage first appeared in his film "Unknown Pleasures" (2002), a jaundiced snapshot of aimless Datong youth; Zhao played a dancer and Li a loan shark. In "Caught by the Tides," the particulars of the grubby racket that Li's character is running are a little sketchier than before, though not by much. Jia is a spinner of drifty, desultory narratives, with a loose style to match. His dramas, rarely built on tightly interlocking shards of plot, are instead propelled by ambient forces: blasts of music, gusts of chatter. Sometimes they're carried along on glum motorcycle rides, meandering downriver journeys, and great leaps forward in time. Jia, a social panoramist, also likes to tug your attention sideways, away from the fictional foreground and toward the nonfictional background; there, he suggests, the real story often lies.

Over the years, a staggering human parade has passed before his camera, and a monumental subject has emerged and reëmerged: the upheaval of individual Chinese lives amid ceaseless social, cultural, economic, and technological change. "Caught by the Tides" is hardly the first Jia movie that could have borne that title, but it represents something new in his œuvre, a dynamic repurposing of the old. The project came together during the pandemic, when Jia began sifting through footage he had shot, dating back to 2001. Working with several editors (Yang Chao, Lin Xudong, and Matthieu Laclau), he pieced together some two decades' worth of material—unused outtakes and greatest hits—into a feature-length collage, along with roughly thirty minutes of new scenes. (The film credits two directors of photography: Yu Lik-wai and Éric Gautier.)

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The result plays, fitfully, like an archival documentary, with a host of small, disconnected vignettes, some of which glance back to an earlier Communist era. A group of laughing female laborers takes turns singing; a music-hall manager proudly shows off a faded poster of Mao Zedong. Remarkably, though, the film is something altogether more unusual: an archival drama. Jia and his co-writer, Wan Jiahuan, have ingeniously cobbled together a new story from earlier ones, capitalizing on the fact that Zhao, Jia's wife, has starred in almost all his films, including four that also feature Li. Following the duo's characters from youth to middle age, "Caught by the Tides" draws most heavily on "Unknown Pleasures" and "Still Life" (2008), Jia's film about the incalculable toll of the Three Gorges Dam project. Structurally, though, it reminded me more of "Mountains May Depart" (2016) and "Ash Is Purest White" (2019): it's a turbulent melodrama, told in three parts, in which love really does shift as convulsively as the tides.

The first act, the most buoyant and free-form of the three, might as well be a full-blown musical. Jia, summoning an air of post-millennial optimism, unleashes a dizzying cascade of pop. Qiaoqiao jams in a night club to the bubblegum beat of Smile.dk's "Butterfly" and performs at a liquor-promotion event set to Koreana's "Hand in Hand"; she's a merry mascot for state-sponsored capitalism. Elsewhere, though, anxiety permeates the dilapidated bars, karaoke clubs, and music halls into which Jia pokes his

camera. As we amble along a mellow street in Datong, an Omnipotent Youth Society tune nails the mood of a once thriving town that has fallen on bleak times. When a choir of women sings for an audience, their warm grins cannot quite conceal the downbeat tenor of their lyrics: “Life races ahead, love runs deep / All things must pass.”

Indeed they must, and a second act begins. Sometime after separating from Bin, Qiaoqiao finds herself on a long journey south, sailing down the Yangtze toward the city of Fengjie, where the mass displacement and demolition necessitated by the building of the Three Gorges Dam is under way. Love flickers among the ruins, in the form of a brief, fruitless reunion with Bin. Another such reunion, gentler but sadder, is still to come in the third act, which is set in 2022, mostly in Datong, under strict *covid*-19 protocols. This section consists of the only new material in the picture, and it’s one of the most moving and dramatically sustained passages of Jia’s career. Having spent so much time poring over the past, he seems rejuvenated by the possibilities of the present and future.

Eventually, you may notice that Qiaoqiao hasn’t uttered a word of dialogue, and that it could scarcely matter less. Zhao has a silent-film star’s affecting eloquence; even when behind a surgical mask, she can make her eyes dance with mirth and churn with melancholy. It was dispiriting, if not remotely surprising, that neither she nor Jia won an award when “Caught by the Tides” premièred at last year’s Cannes Film Festival. The formal complexity and poignant quietude of Jia’s filmmaking haven’t endeared him much to previous Cannes juries, and for some this latest entry, with its dizzying chains of intertextuality, must have seemed imposing to the point of being indecipherable.

Rest assured that “Caught by the Tides” is neither of those things, and that it can be enjoyed—and, in fact, blissfully surrendered to—without an advanced degree in Jiametry. To be able to identify, say, exactly when a shot from “Ash Is Purest White” suddenly enters the “Still Life” slipstream may deliver a gratifying auteurist thrill, but it is of no emotional consequence in this intensely emotional movie. More than one Cannes critic, at pains to emphasize the picture’s accessibility, invoked Richard Linklater’s “Boyhood” (2014)—another incrementally assembled long-arc movie that immortalized the passage of time. But “Boyhood,” for all its beauties, was a

methodically planned experiment; “Caught by the Tides,” a film retroactively willed into being, demonstrates a more spontaneous and expansive kind of mastery.

What Jia has captured here is the aging not of an individual but of a country—a transformation measured in changing fashions and hair styles, in the shift from chunky computers and “Counter-Strike” to smartphones and TikTok, in the pileup of rubble along the Yangtze and the proliferation of gleaming towers in Zhuhai City, where Bin makes a quick third-act detour. But “Caught by the Tides” cuts deeper still. Through the strange miracle of its existence, it shows us that the art of the motion picture is aging, too. Aspect ratios and film formats are in flux; the grainy film stock and low-grade digital video of Datong give way to the high-definition crispness of Fengjie. The movie is, paradoxically, both artifact and construct; the instability of the image is precisely what holds it together. Jia’s sense of the ephemerality of the medium, and of the world that the medium reflects, has seldom been more stirringly profound.

One of the sadder ironies of the third chapter is how sharp and crystalline the images look, and how worn down the characters appear by comparison. Bin has visibly aged; he hobbles about on a cane, tries in vain to ingratiate himself with new colleagues, and is befuddled by the rise of influencer culture. Qiaoqiao, for her part, seems to be faring better in her job as a cashier. She’s lonely and wistful, yet notably unembittered by the strange new world she now inhabits, where friendly robots roam supermarket aisles and the streets are somewhat, though not entirely, devoid of life.

In one wrenchingly simple scene, the two former lovers are out walking on a chilly night when several runners suddenly surge past them—and Qiaoqiao decides to join them. She is at peace, but not at rest; as she keeps pace with the crowd, life courses through her, and you feel her stubborn, determined refusal to let the world pass her by. And what are we to make of Bin, forlorn on the sidewalk, watching as she recedes into the distance? Only that Jia has told this story before, about a man’s fecklessness and a woman’s perseverance, and I see no reason for him not to tell it again. Qiaoqiao keeps going, this time with no one standing in her way. She gets off the bus. ♦

Poems

- her disquietude absorbed.
- What Happened to New York

Poems

her disquietude absorbed.

By C. D. Wright

May 05, 2025

By an attendant memory she is walking

alongside the child on his cycle

obeying the familiar path that curves toward

the gaslit entrance before reaching

the broken birdbath and the markers

of Blythe, Horsfall, and Potter

whose stone is hard to read

for the gargantuan hydrangea.

  Dispelled

by a continuous shuttling back and forth

downstairs sound of water being drawn.

Wet-headed;

seated on a metal chair

holding an extension cord

her clothes swarm the floor.

Be the shoulders dusted as shoulders can glare

commotion of morning grows insistent.

Be the credits opened boldly.

Be the air expanding at supersonic speed.

Be the windows let up and the centenarian tree dependably there; be

—C. D. Wright (1949-2016)

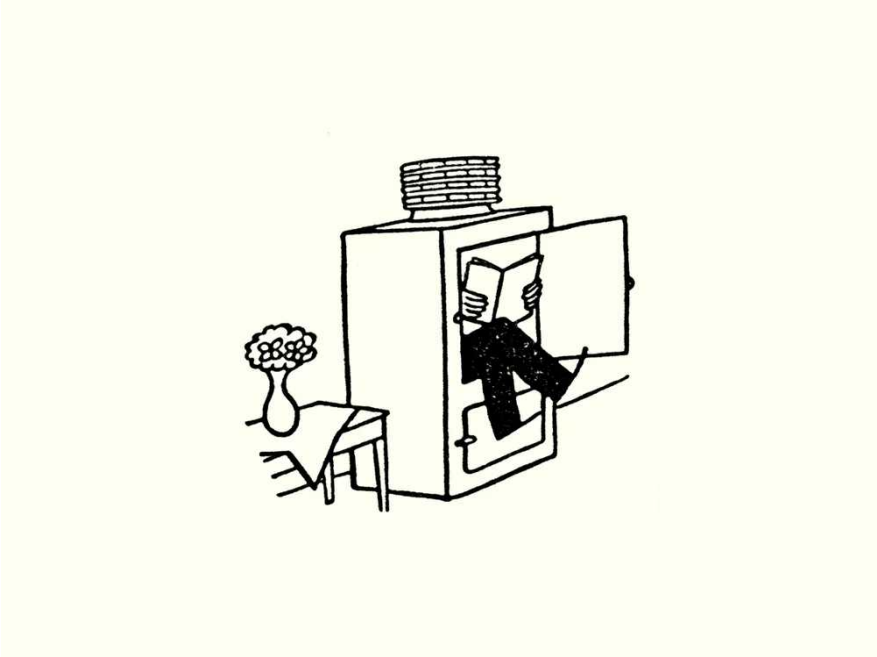
This is drawn from "The Essential C. D. Wright."

Poems

What Happened to New York

By Anne Carson

May 05, 2025



On the table in my room, cigarettes, knife, notebook, 7 *P.M.* I sit down to write so my head don't blow up. Perhaps you know my things, my little song. Well, we got this far, now we're going to have to wait till the memories die off to start again.

Days, the wind is your enemy. You get disconnected from your building, wind gonna flip you over. Wind more than 25 m.p.h. you don't go up. Feel that wind, think about your family. Without wind it's heaven up there, just you and the windows, you don't hear nothing, the quiet is, the quiet is a new city. I prefer to be up there looking in at people all day inside *tipatap tipatap tipatap*. I had a partner fell nine hundred feet—his cable broke. That's not supposed to happen.

Cockroaches. Nest in your coffee filters. Ever alert. Do they like you? In light, they shock then shoot like stars. In dark, they nonexist. You know the big hotels have a nondisclosure agreement with their exterminators.

Once I was seated next to Rudolf Nureyev and squeezed his thigh, which felt like marble. Andy snapping flash pictures of everyone, then Andy and the queen at the next table got in a debate about whose boyfriend had bigger pecs. They bet the meal on it. Buttons were loosed. Andy won. All those girls are dead now. It was a giddy planet, not enough oxygen.

I used to hammer my own meat hooks when we first got the shop—it's a beautiful thing, a properly made meat hook—and the metal canopy too, to shield our meat from sun. There were packing houses all up and down this street. Here's a joke: I came here 1968 when Soviet tanks rolled into Prague and guess who's throwing me out of my building now? A Russian developer!

We were technically squatters. Howard said "orchid of intimacy." Howard was writing a poem a day then, I seemed to bring it out in him. I'd had crushes before but this was falling stars and jellyfish for me. We took turns showering by emptying buckets of water on each other. Howard was having trouble giving up Rick but he said I looked like Jane Bowles. Later he couldn't shower standing up, I had to find a wooden stool with arms.

I come into your life as a flash, I'm gentle, polite and versatile, an historian and man of letters and albeit I've created a vital new literary form and written some things will last as long as the English language, it's also true I smell and when I visit Knopf they have me sit on the windowsill so I don't get lice on their chairs. Genius isn't contagious, I tell them.

The unbearable boredom of animals. Tracing the meaning of horsepower. Four or five horses placed one each side of the boat on a circular treadmill turned by cogs and wheels to which they were hitched. By forward movement of their feet they'd turn the wheel, propel the boat, facing always the same direction, let's say they live seventeen or eighteen years. They do not laugh or weep or see the Hudson plunging past. They do not scoff to hear someone on deck talking about his consciousness, the problem of consciousness.

I'm afraid now. New York don't help me. David Byrne don't help me. Traffic control don't help me. Cupcakes don't help me. My hybrid vehicle don't help me. Six to eight glasses of Icelandic glacier water per day don't

help me. The insane sanctity and maddened madness of ungodly godlike Ahab don't help me. The clear eyes of pigs don't help me. The gift of fire don't help me. Rock 'n' roll don't help me. Alas, O my soul! Rock 'n' roll don't help anyone anymore.

December sun going down, a little dark on the street but coming in the daytime you get off the train, you follow directions, you're fine then at night there's something different, out of place, you could be anything, you could be a cop, a target, you could be anything. Go past our old building, visit the doorman, his name is Claude. Everybody loved Claude. What we do as human beings, we're constantly finishing ourselves, that's why when I hear some Jeremiah wail on about *vanishing New York*, I'm like, Dude, that's the way it is, this is the bargain we made. It's ever of us. They were saying the same in the eighteen-forties. It's pain and joy and high and low and soft and hard and rats and cupcakes and boom boom boom boom *hello dusk*. What is dusk? Dusk reinstates the vague; redistributes your contemplation; resolves matter into phantasms that rove your mind; estranges you from your present self into a hush, into a hustle, into a darkness you can lean on.

Puzzles & Games

- The Crossword: Monday, May 5, 2025

Crossword

The Crossword: Monday, May 5, 2025

Today’s theme: City blocks.

By Kate Chin Park

May 05, 2025

The Mail

- Letters from Our Readers

The Mail

Letters from Our Readers

Readers respond to Manvir Singh's article about growth curves, Adam Iscoe's investigation of the wedding website the Knot, and Adam Gopnik's piece on Jesus' life.

May 05, 2025

What Counts as Normal?

In Manvir Singh's piece on one-size-fits-all health metrics, he writes about how his South Asian infant daughter fell outside the "normal" range of a W.H.O. growth curve, even though she seems to be growing and developing without any issues ("Beyond the Curve," March 31st). For many years, doctors have been advised to use lower B.M.I. cutoffs for South Asian adults, with the understanding that there is a higher prevalence of diabetes for this group at a lower B.M.I. when compared with other ethnicities.

Research has shown that South Asians have lower lean mass and higher fat mass. It is important to note that this pattern of fat storage does not spring up suddenly in adulthood. Yet South Asian babies are often classified as small for gestational age, or S.G.A. Frustratingly, misguided efforts to achieve "catch-up" growth to fit W.H.O. standards can lead to these babies being overfed, increasing their risks further. Until we can be more precise, growth curves should always be just one piece of data we use to discern how a child is developing, and clinical judgment is paramount.

Bina Valsangkar
Geneva, Switzerland

Bride Transparency

Adam Iscoe's piece about the wedding website the Knot, which helps connect couples with venders such as florists, d.j.s, caterers, and venue managers, was a fascinating behind-the-scenes look at a lucrative industry

("The Marriage Plot," April 7th). As Iscoe explains, the site has been accused of generating false leads in order to keep charging steep fees for advertising. (The Knot has strenuously denied this.) Some of these venders have attempted to track down the identity of the people the website sends to them to check if these leads are real or not. It is worth pointing out one limitation to this method: in the past few years, bridal forums have been encouraging Knot users to create fake e-mail addresses to avoid having their personal accounts spammed with wedding content.

Emily Anderson
Pawtucket, R.I.

In the nineteen months between my engagement, in October, 2022, and my wedding, in May, 2024, I basically lived on the Knot. I admit that I did ghost venders after reaching out for more information. Perhaps more gracious or tactful brides, or those without a full-time job or interests outside of wedding planning, would have found a way to kindly reply to each business when its quote was well outside their budget, but I was not that bride. Up-front pricing transparency on the venders' Knot profile pages could potentially eliminate some of these leads that go nowhere and this mutually assured destruction of one another's time.

Helly Schtevie
Queens, N.Y.

Spreading the Word

There is no reason to assume, as Adam Gopnik does in his review of Elaine Pagels's recent book, "Miracles and Wonder," that Greek was "a language that Jesus and his disciples would not have known" ("Do You Know Jesus?," March 31st). Koine Greek—the dialect of the New Testament—was then the lingua franca of the eastern-Mediterranean world, although, of course, familiarity with it ranged from erudite scholarship to learning a few words for the sake of haggling in the marketplace. Jesus spoke Aramaic, but it is also likely that he and his disciples would have known some Greek. How much, however, is unclear.

Richard Smoley
Winfield, Ill.

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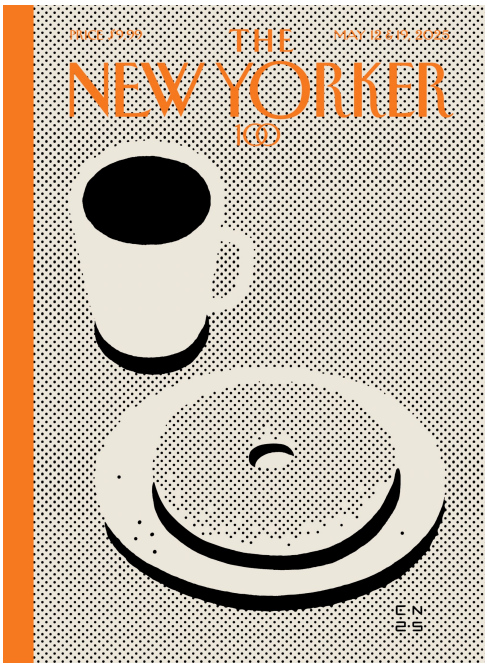
THE
NEW YORKER
NOV 2020

Table of Contents

Goings On
- Disco Balls and Roller Skates, at Xanadu
- Our Favorite "Only in New York" Spots
- The Caribbean Restaurant Reinventing the Momofuku Empire

The Talk of the Town
- The Promise of New York
- Kathy Hochul's Turf War with a Reality-TV Star
- Ed Helms Dives Into Disaster
- The Man to Call When You Need a Cimbalom. (A What?)
- Great Moments in the Papacy

Reporting & Essays
- Pity the Barefoot Pigeon
- Why Can't New York Have Nice Mayors?
- If the Mets Are No Longer Underdogs, Are They Still the Mets?
- How Lorna Simpson Broke the Frame
- My New York City Tour of Tours
- Why I Broke Up with New York
- Twelve Migrants Sharing a Queens Apartment
- No-Parking Zone: The Perils of Finding a Spot in N.Y.C.
- Power Houses

Takes
- Michael Schulman on Lillian Ross's "The Shit-Kickers of Madison Avenue"
- Rachel Syme on Kennedy Fraser's "As Gorgeous as It Gets"

Fiction
- Travesty

The Critics
- The Battling Memoirs of The New Yorker
- Why I Can't Quit the New York Post
- Keith McNally's Guide to Making a Scene
- Briefly Noted
- "Caught by the Tides" Is a Gorgeous Vision of Loss and Renewal

Poems
- her disquietude absorbed.

What Happened to New York
Puzzles & Games
The Crossword: Monday, May 5, 2025
The Mail
Letters from Our Readers