PLAYBOY

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2017

With

THE WAR ON DRUGS

JHENÉ AIKO

VIC MENSA

CHUCK D

BØRNS

BARBI BENTON

PATTON OSWALT

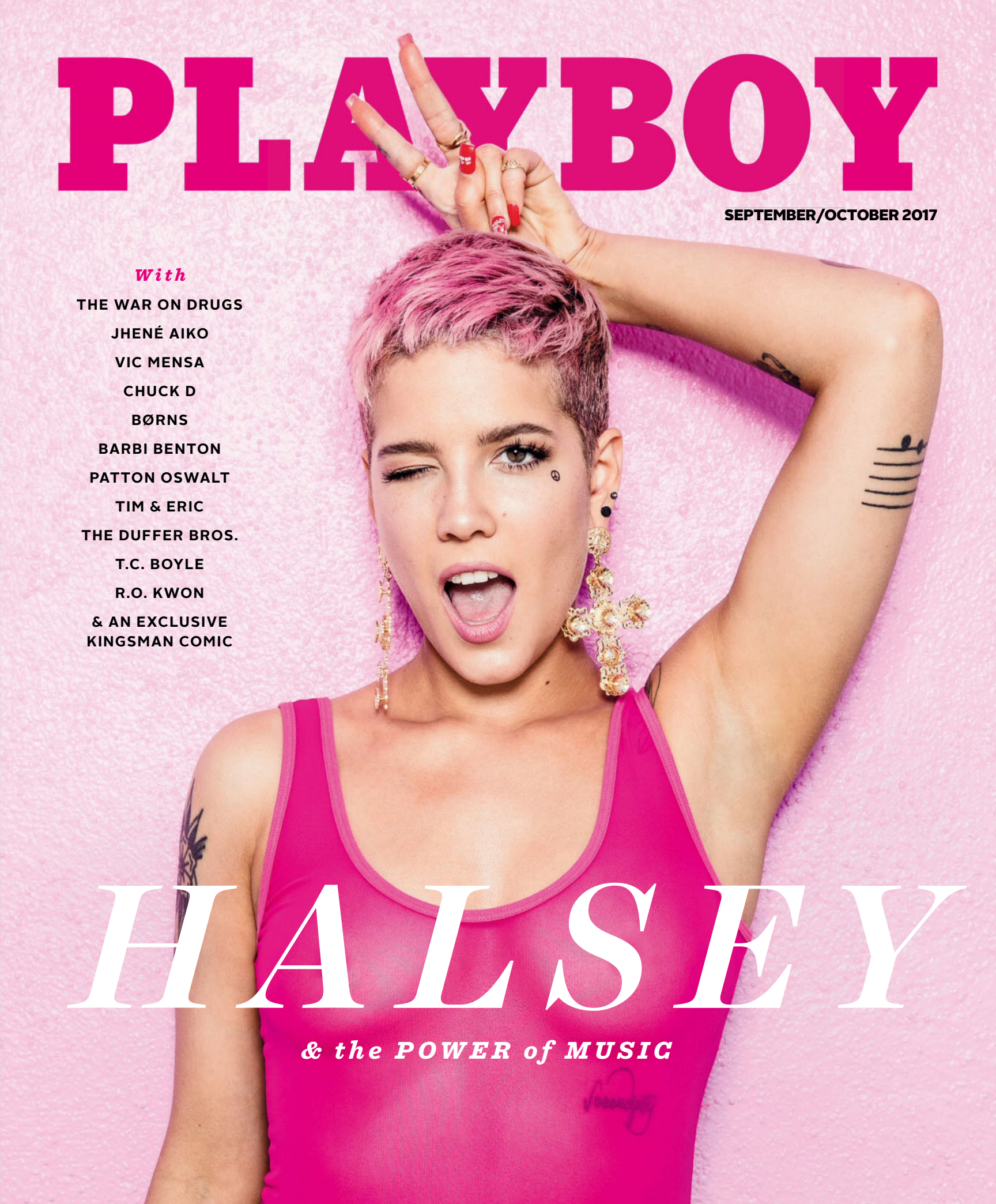
TIM & ERIC

THE DUFFER BROS.

T.C. BOYLE

R.O. KWON

& AN EXCLUSIVE KINGSMAN COMIC



HALSEY

& the POWER of MUSIC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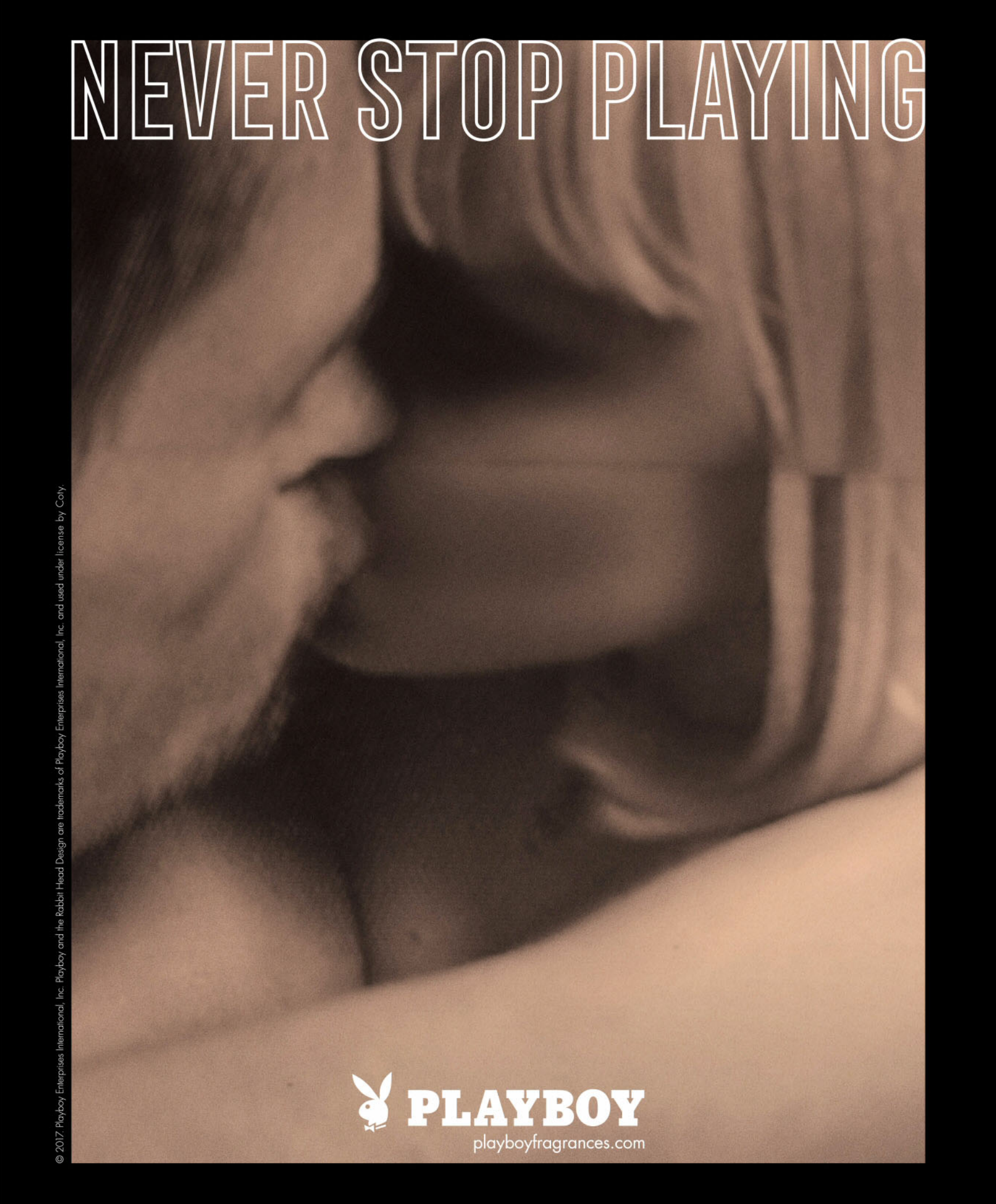
REBEL AT HEART
BY
Thomas Sabo

#rebelatheartbyTS



BODY SPRAYS FOR HIM

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T.C. Boyle

In *Subtract One Death,* the 20-time PLAYBOY contributor launches protagonist Riley on an existential roller coaster that, in Boyle's words, "weds high comedy and tragedy in an attempt to get at what life is all about." (Riley has appeared in our pages before: See the July/August 2013 issue.) Boyle's *The Relive Box and Other Stories* is out in October.

Timba Smits

Music facts and Halloween stats come to life in the Berlin-based illustrator's *Drawn Data.* Smits's penchant for pop culture began early, he says. "I won a sixth-grade competition for my super-rad-to-the-max illustration of Raphael, my favorite Ninja Turtle." That passion for drawing never left Smits and eventually enabled his thriving career.

Rebecca Haithcoat

Most only dream of sharing sushi with RZA or doing shots with Lil Jon, but Haithcoat has made a career of parlaying candid moments into thoughtful portraits. In this issue she profiles R&B singer Jhené Aiko for *Let's Play* and goes deep with our cover girl for *20Q.* "She's tough but dropped her guard almost immediately," she says of Halsey.

Kelley Ash

We'd be surprised if Ash didn't set some kind of record with this issue: The stylist lent her touch to five of its six pictorials. From jamming at Electric Lady Studios to skinny-dipping in Woodstock to developing a girl crush on September Playmate Jessica Wall, Ash was "a kid in a candy store," she says. "My next goal is to style an entire magazine!"

Millicent Hailes

Featuring everyone from Lil Yachty to Amber Rose, Hailes's portfolio reads like a who's who of pop culture. Her glowing, candy-colored portraits are as fresh and original as her subjects. Capturing the yacht-rock vibe of *Tim & Eric at 10* tested the photographer-director's willpower. "I had to keep leaving the studio because I was laughing too much," she says.

R.O. Kwon

In *Safeword,* her PLAYBOY debut, the Bay Area–based writer casts an unflinching eye on one couple's kink. "Fictional accounts of sadomasochism are often irresponsible," she says. "Sadists are portrayed as traumatized and masochists as abused. I wanted characters who find joy in pain." Kwon's first novel, *Heroics,* is forthcoming from Riverhead.

Özgür Yildirim

The Istanbul-based artist provides the smart and cheeky visuals for *Kingsman: The Big Exit,* written by Rob Williams. Our original, exclusive six-page comic from the Millarworld team puts British superspy Eggsy in an adventure you won't see anywhere else. Eggsy will, however, be on the big screen this September in *Kingsman: The Golden Circle.*

Graham Dunn

We asked the Ojai-raised, L.A.-based photographer to tap into his Cali roots for *Touch-Tone,* a sunny pictorial with September Playmate Jessica Wall. "I normally shoot clothes, so that element was obviously different," says Dunn of his PLAYBOY debut with the brunette bombshell. "The focus shifts to context and story."

CREDITS: Cover and pp. 106–111 featuring Halsey, photography by Ramona Rosales, styling by Maeve Reilly for Only.Agency, hair by Joseph Chase for Exclusive Artists Management using R+Co and GHD Tools. Photography by: p. 6 courtesy Kelley Ash, courtesy Rebecca Haithcoat, courtesy Timba Smits, courtesy Özgür Yildirim, Colin Campbell, Michael Dawson, Neil Favila, Jamieson Fry; p. 20 courtesy Moschino (3); p. 21 Isaac Brekken/Getty Images for Playboy Enterprises, Amanda Brian, Don Bronstein/Playboy Archives, David Hume Kennerly, Kevin Martin/@kvn.mrtn, Playboy Enterprises; p. 24 Andrew Kuykendall; p. 31 courtesy Universal Pictures, Art Media/Print Collector/Getty Images, Culture Club/Getty Images, Gie Knaeps/Getty Images; p. 37 courtesy Netflix; p. 65 courtesy Marijke Dixon; p. 167 Playboy Archives; p. 168 Gai Terrell/Redferns/Getty Images; p. 169 Amanda Brian, Playboy Archives (2), Trinity Mirror/Mirrorpix/Alamy; p. 170 Henry Diltz/Corbis via Getty Images, Playboy Archives; p. 171 Richard E. Aaron/Redferns/Getty Images; pp. 172–184 Playboy Archives. Pp. 76–83 *Subtract One Death* © T. Coraghessan Boyle, 2017 (from *The Relive Box and Other Stories,* Ecco, October 2017). P. 27 styling by Sebastian Hull and Xochitl West, hair by Jazmin Holmes, makeup by Felicia La Tour; pp. 45–52 grooming by Daniele Piersons for Exclusive Artists Management using Sisley Paris; pp. 54–61 model Daria Savishkina at MSA Models New York, styling by Kelley Ash, hair and makeup by Bree Collins; pp. 68–75 model Tsanna LaTouche at Wilhelmina, styling by Gabriela Langone for Kramer + Kramer, hair by Tony Kelley for Kramer + Kramer, makeup by Raul Otero for ABTP; pp. 84–98 model Jessica Wall at Ford Models, styling by Kelley Ash, hair and makeup by Karolina Bernat; pp. 100–105 model Tess Jantschek at Wilhelmina, styling by Kathryn Typaldos, hair by Andre Gunn for Honey Artists, makeup by Tsipporah Liebman; pp. 112–119 model Jordy Murray at Next Model Management, styling by Kelley Ash, hair and makeup by Vassilis Kokkinidis for Next Management, set design by Jonathan Qualtere; pp. 126–140 model Milan Dixon at Photogenics Media, styling by Kelley Ash, hair and makeup by Adrienne Herbert for Art Department; pp. 142–146 styling by Mindy Le Brock, hair and grooming by Christina Guerra for Celestine Agency; pp. 158–166 model Carmella Rose at No Ties Management, styling by Kelley Ash, hair by Heather-Rae for the Rex Agency, makeup by Matisse Andrews.

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ON THE COVER Halsey, photographed by Ramona Rosales. Cover typography by Alex Trochut
Opposite: September Playmate Jessica Wall, photographed by Graham Dunn.

VOL. 64, NO. 5—SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2017

THE NEW FRAGRANCES FOR MEN AND WOMEN

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Playboy (ISSN 0032-1478), September/October 2017, volume 64, number 5. Published bi-monthly by Playboy in national and regional editions, Playboy, 9346 Civic Center Drive, Beverly Hills, California 90210. Periodicals postage paid at Beverly Hills, California and at additional mailing offices. Canada Post Canadian Publications Mail Sales Product Agreement No. 40035534. Subscriptions: in the U.S., $38.97 for a year. Postmaster: Send all UAA to CFS (see DMM 707.4.12.5); nonpostal and military facilities, send address changes to Playboy, P.O. Box 62260, Tampa, FL 33662-2260. For subscription-related questions, e-mail playboy@customersvc.com. To comment on content, e-mail letters@playboy.com. • We occasionally make portions of our customer list available to carefully screened companies that offer products or services we believe you may enjoy. If you do not want to receive these offers or information, please let us know by writing to us at Playboy Enterprises International, Inc. c/o TCS, P.O. Box 62260, Tampa, FL 33662-2260, or e-mail playboy@customersvc.com. It generally requires eight to 10 weeks for your request to become effective. • Playboy assumes no responsibility to return unsolicited editorial or graphic or other material. All rights in letters and unsolicited editorial and graphic material will be treated as unconditionally assigned for publication and copyright purposes, and material will be subject to Playboy's unrestricted right to edit and comment editorially.

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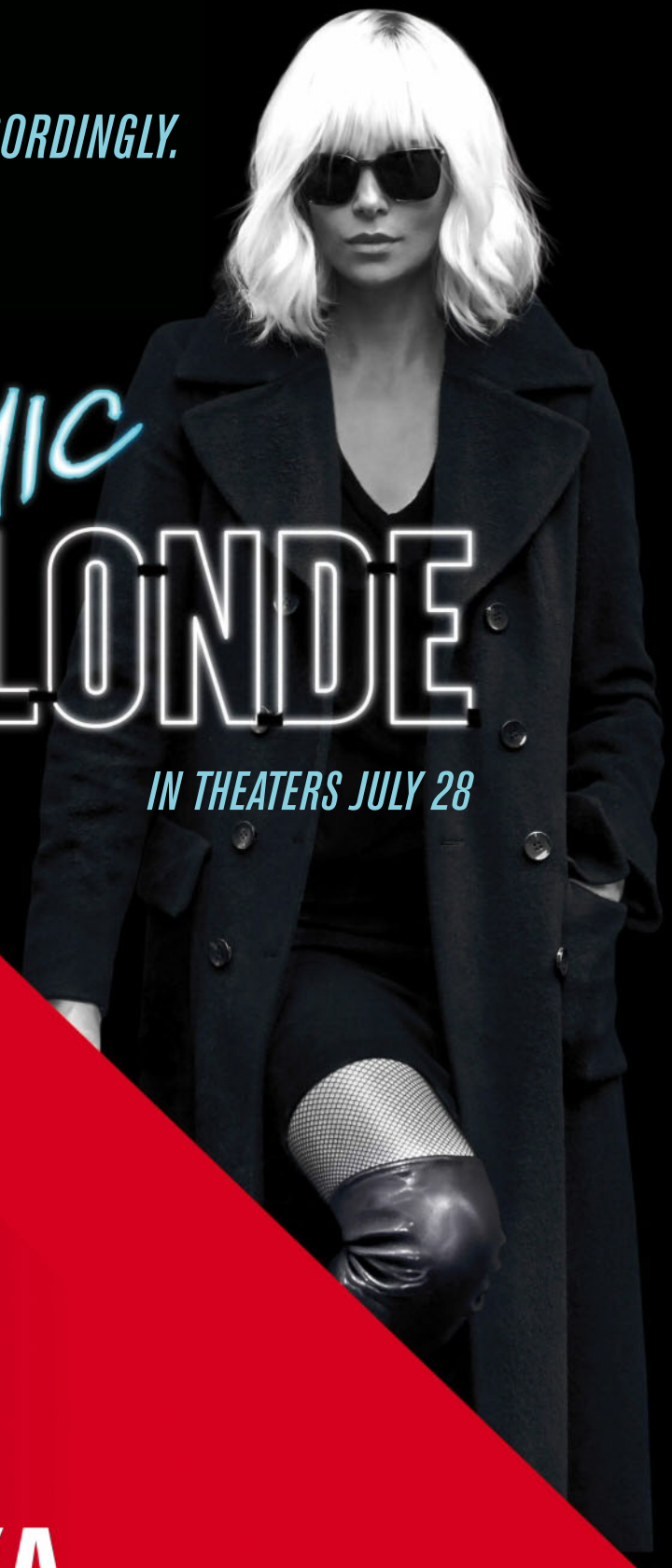
THE MOVIE. THE VODKA. MIX ACCORDINGLY.



ATOMIC BLONDE

IN THEATERS JULY 28

Stoli

THE VODKA

ESTD 1938

Dear Playboy

Our globe-trotting August Playmate Liza Kei.

STRANGER THAN FICTION

As a subscriber, I've read a number of good short stories in PLAYBOY over the years, but Frank Bill's *The Disgruntled Americans* has to count among the best (July/August). It is the perfect story for Trump's America. It captures the legitimate grievances of many Trump voters while also revealing the destructive effects of their anger. Whether or not he meant to, Bill has written a political allegory for our time.

Michael Gallen
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

PLAYBOY PATRIOTS

A few years back I read that Hugh Hefner served in the military, so I took an educated guess and assumed he was in the Marines. While reading the July/August issue I discovered he was actually in the Army (*The Illustrated Hefner*). Congrats to Cooper Hefner for joining the California State Military Reserve (*World of Playboy*). Would that be something like the National Guard? If so, like father, like son.

Bob Losse Jr.
Eastampton, New Jersey

The California State Military Reserve is the state's official defense force whose mission is to augment the National Guard if disaster strikes.

A BIT OF A MIX-UP

I immediately recognized August Playmate Liza Kei as your March 2013 cover model. What took you so long to make her a Centerfold? She has been a clear candidate for Playmate of the Year from the jump. I even recall readers writing in to the May 2013 issue, asking that you reveal her identity. What can I say? I'm a bit of a Playboy historian, and as a self-appointed fact junkie, I would appreciate it if you would clarify one thing for me. In the May 2013 issue, Liza is identified as a Ukrainian model, but in her latest bio (*A Global Girl,* July/August), she is described as Russian. Which is it?

Josh Fehrens
Toronto, Ontario

Quite a memory you have. We were wrong the first time around. We asked Liza the same question when we spoke to her more recently, and she tells us that she is indeed Russian.

COME AS YOU ARE

For decades many men and women have written to the Playboy Advisor about the problems they have achieving orgasms this way, that way or any way at all. The Advisor has always offered creative advice with a nonjudgmental attitude. In the July/August issue, however, a reader asked for help with his inability to climax while wearing a condom. After belittling him as an "amateur in bed," the Advisor responded with "You're not entitled to an orgasm." Besides being completely unhelpful, this is a very sex-negative message from a magazine with such a storied history of being sex-positive. You owe that reader an apology and a better answer.

Patrick Rodgers
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

The Playboy Advisor responds: "I will concede that I was a bit hard on Can't-Orgasm-With-a-Condom, but it's not because I'm 'sex-negative.' Quite the contrary. I'm so sex-positive that I take safe sex extremely seriously, and for that I will make no apologies. The question the reader asked wasn't about the difficulty he has reaching orgasm while wearing a condom but more specifically about how he should explain this problem to his sexual partner. To that I say: There's nothing to explain, because casual sex without a condom is not an option. Condoms are a necessary part of responsible sex, and everyone should learn to deal with them. I offered several practical solutions to the actual problem he needs to address—learning to orgasm with a condom, not how he should tell a woman that he can't. As for my reminding the reader that having sex isn't all about his orgasm, well, on behalf of women everywhere, I make no apologies for that either."

THE POWER IS BACK ON

Where did you find Brook Power (*Playmate of the Year,* May/June)? I loved being introduced to the granddaughter of Barbi Benton—now, don't tell me they aren't related. They look so much alike it's almost pure genetic "power."

Donald Hodgins
Wixom, Michigan

DISTURBING THE PEACE

In *High-Speed American Dreams* (July/August), Adam Skolnick points out that the Southern Poverty Law Center has recorded 1,863 bias-related incidents between Election Day 2016 and March 31 of this year. The director of the SPLC claims that this is due to

CHRISTOPHER VON STEINBACH

AFTER A 350-MILE RUN, DEAN KARNAZES CHOOSES A VERY SPECIAL SHOE

Being an ultra-marathoner can be tough on your feet. Fortunately, slipping into a pair of Hubbards is pure heaven. To Dean, Hubbard is simply the world's most comfortable shoe—crafted from the world's finest leathers and gently padded at every touchpoint. If you love comfort, run to your nearest Hubbard retailer or visit us online at samuelhubbard.com.

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the political discourse peddled by Trump and his supporters. I can't understand how your journalist would allow that comment to pass or be included in an article without pointing out the facts. The fact is that the violence breaking out across this country is coming from the left. Liberals are rioting and shutting down free speech from New York City to Los Angeles. These snowflakes didn't get their way, so they are acting like toddlers. Trump and his supporters, including me, are *not* the problem.

Frank Fautas
Plant City, Florida

Adam Skolnick responds: "First, thanks for your note and for reading, though you seem to have missed the point of my story. More than anything it is about immigrant engineers from India who were embraced by both Republicans and Democrats in their respective communities thanks to their drive to innovate and their singular belief in the American dream.

"When it comes to post-election violence, the overwhelming evidence suggests you couldn't be more wrong about its origins. Hate-crime statistics continue to climb, and Trump's divisive campaign rhetoric is partially responsible. (I attended a September 2016 Trump rally in North Carolina and saw this firsthand.) The whole country would benefit if Trump supporters such as yourself would focus their anger on fellow travelers who espouse hate rather than on those who exercise their constitutional right to oppose an agenda you support."

PLEASE ACCEPT THIS NOMINATION

Thank you for returning PLAYBOY to its former glory. The May/June issue is what brought me back because it contains the most beautiful woman I have ever seen: Jessi M'Bengue (*Court and Spark*). Who decided that she should not be a Playmate? If Jessi were a Playmate, she would hands-down win the title of 2018 Playmate of the Year.

Chad Van Wagoner
Kinross, Michigan

I know it would be unprecedented for someone who isn't a Playmate to compete for Playmate of the Year, but I'm starting a write-in campaign for Jessi M'Bengue.

Steve Brown
Bowie, Maryland

DEAR DANA

"Breathtakingly gorgeous." Those are the words that come to mind when I see July Playmate Dana Taylor's pictorial (*Paradise Found,* July/August). Her beauty is unmatched. I think I have found the frontrunner for 2018 PMOY.

Andrew Bejarano
Las Cruces, New Mexico

July may be my favorite month. Playmate Karen Christy plunged into famous symmetry

In the Bahamas with July Playmate Dana Taylor.

on the July 1973 PLAYBOY cover. Now, 44 years later, bold adventurer Dana Taylor fills your Adventure issue cover with her own stunning symmetry. Your *Heritage* section is also a terrific idea. For millennials, it's a delight from long ago. For me, it's a delight from yesterday.

Ken Crockett
Austin, Texas

I've finally seen the "girl from Ipanema," and she's your July Playmate and July/August cover model, Dana Taylor.

Mark Bazoian
Burbank, California

DEEP CONDOLENCES

I am so sorry for your loss. Janet Pilgrim was the kind of Playmate (*World of Playboy,* July/August) who made me get—and keep—my first PLAYBOY subscription. Apparently 1955 was a great year.

Charles H. Phillips Jr.
Boston, Massachusetts

WHO RUN THE WORLD? GIRLS

In the July/August *Playboy Philosophy,* Cooper Hefner writes about feminism and the sexual revolution, stating that the "problem is less about the definition of feminism and more about how we interpret sex today." He also claims that for almost 64 years PLAYBOY has made a point of proving that women are not sex objects. While I appreciate Hefner's effort in covering the subject, I think the real problem is that men continue to try to define women's sexuality. He discusses feminism as if it has to do with sex, because "we all like sex." But feminism isn't about getting naked and having "human desires." Feminism is about social, economic and political equality. If PLAYBOY really wants to promote feminism, I suggest you bring a woman's voice to the forefront and be open to criticism. If you want to speak for women, first you have to listen, because women will gladly speak for themselves.

Cathy Summer
Santa Clarita, California

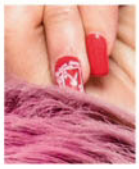
TOO MANY MATTHEWS

Our July/August *Playboy Interview* with Christopher Nolan incorrectly states that a photo of Stanley Kubrick's director's chair was given to Nolan by Matthew McConaughey. It was, in fact, a gift from actor Matthew Modine, who worked with Nolan on *The Dark Knight Rises*.

BLUE NOTE

Due to an editing error in Norm Stamper's essay *Fix the Police* (July/August 2016), the death of Freddie Gray was characterized as murder—a position the author strongly disagrees with. Our sincere apologies to Mr. Stamper.

COVER STORY



With a flourish, Halsey sets the beat of the Music issue and directs our attention to her guest star. Mr. Rabbit nails his solo.

DEREK KETTELA

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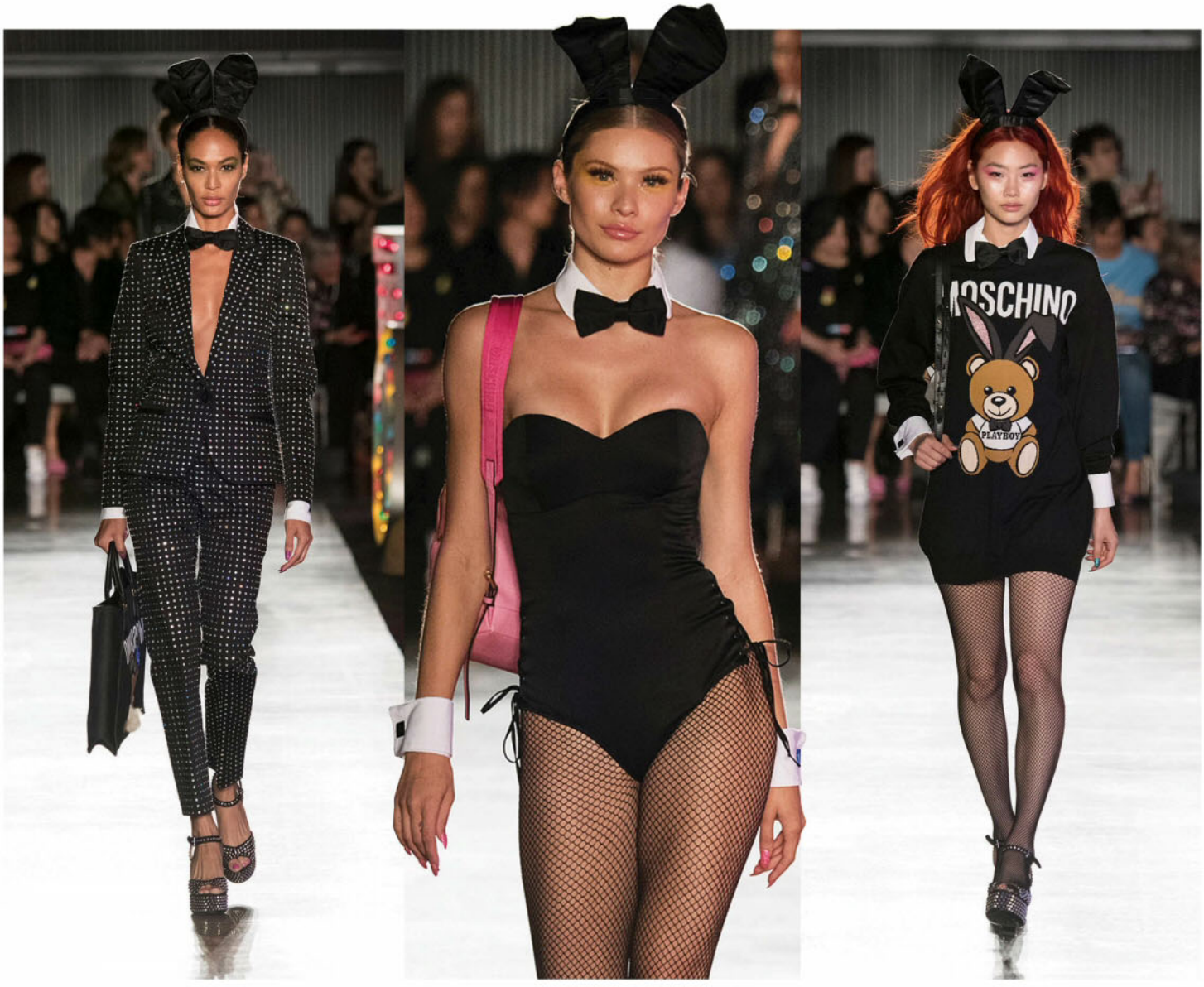


The Bunny Wears Moschino

The Italian fashion house reimagines our Bunny suit for the runway—and receives high marks

The catwalk at Hollywood's Milk Studios was overrun with Bunnies this June as Moschino revealed its first collaboration with Playboy. The pieces were part of the label's 2018 resort collection, which celebrates classic Americana and the starry-eyed women who chase the spotlight from Los Angeles to Las Vegas and back. Modeled above by Joan Smalls, June 2016 Playmate Josie Canseco and HoYeon Jung and lauded by *Vogue* as "baldly sexy," the collection represents "a mixed-up celebration to the nation we all adore." (Playboy icons Bettie Page and Marilyn Monroe also served as inspiration for creative director Jeremy Scott.) A-list fashion stars Ashley Graham, Fergie and Courtney Love sat sideline. *Che bella!*

Remembering Reg Potterton

In June we lost former PLAYBOY editor Reg Potterton, who covered the front lines of Vietnam and other far-flung locales for the magazine. "Hef told me I could go where I liked [and] spend what I liked, so long as I turned in half a dozen decent lengthy pieces each year," Potterton once said. "I had a ball."

Midsummer Night's Dream: Double Vision

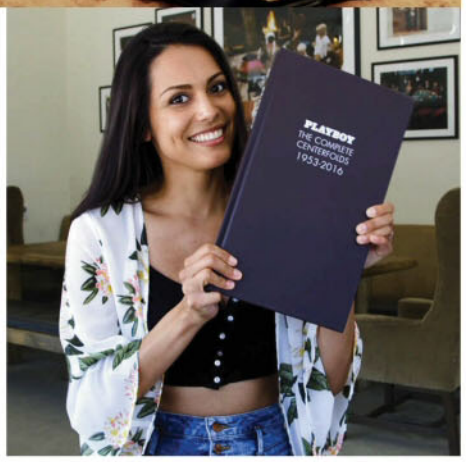
Our annual Midsummer Night's Dream celebrated its second year as the country's hottest lingerie party unfolding across two cities. Guests from all over the world flooded the dance floor at Marquee Nightclub in the Cosmopolitan of Las Vegas; at the Mansion, Chief Creative Officer Cooper Hefner welcomed Playmates and friends of Playboy. See galleries from both racy, lacy nights at Playboy.com.

'Cause We Never Go Out of Style

We already told you how chic it is to wear the Rabbit, but not everyone can pull off a Bunny suit like Josie Canseco. Fear not: On PlayboyShop.com you'll find a range of new couture from our latest line—including the graphic T-shirt ($38) below—all of it saluting the world of Playboy.

THE ONLY COFFEE-TABLE BOOK YOU NEED

Since 1953 PLAYBOY has been the ultimate collector's item for men—thanks in large part to the indelible Centerfolds of women such as June 1960 Playmate Delores Wells (above) and 2013 PMOY Raquel Pomplun (right). Now you can own every Centerfold through 2016 with our new book, *The Complete Centerfolds: 1953–2016* ($75). Visit PlayboyShop.com to get yours.



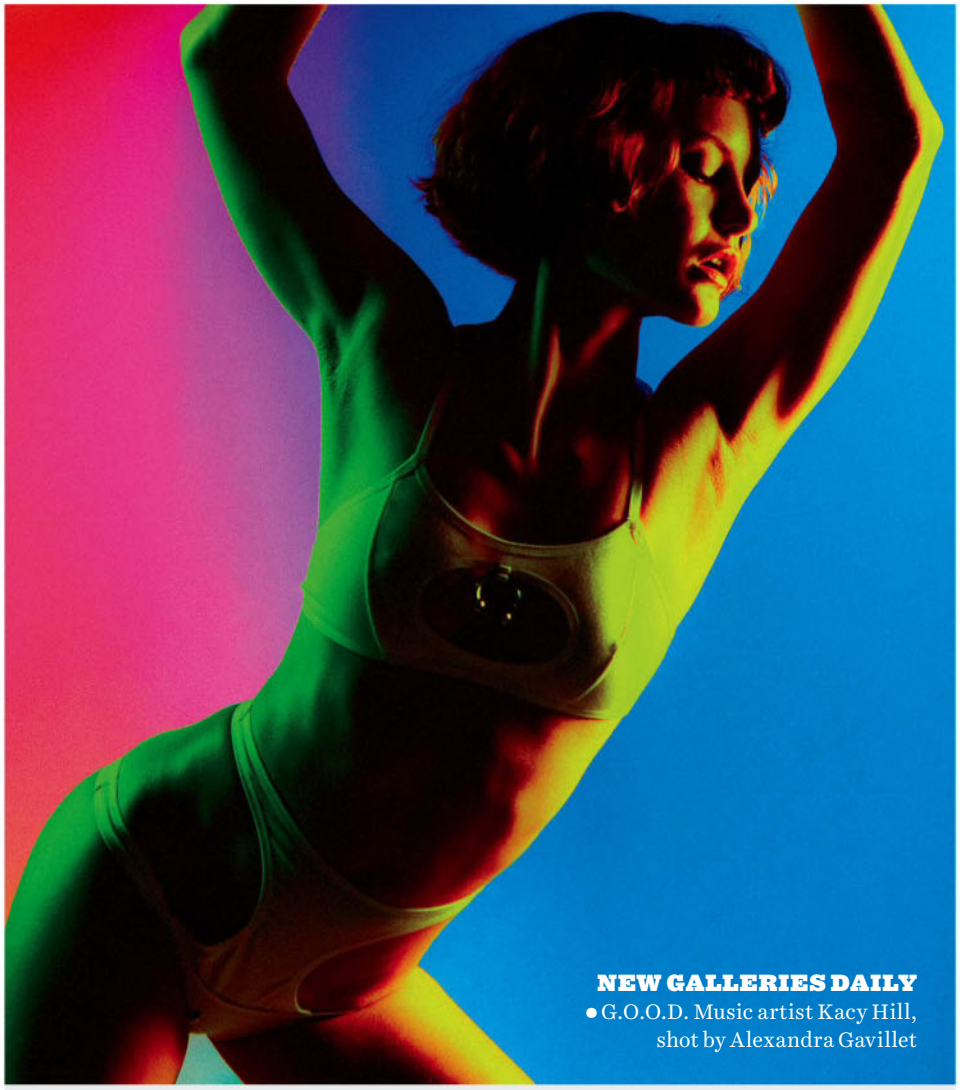
Get acquainted with **Cherie Noel,** whom we met this summer at our Discover & Be Discovered talent search at TAO Beach. She's on Instagram here: @cherienoel.

TOP LEFT PHOTO BY DAVID HUME KENNERLY

MUSK

JŌVAN

It's what attracts



NEW GALLERIES DAILY
• G.O.O.D. Music artist Kacy Hill, shot by Alexandra Gavillet

BONUS MAGAZINE CONTENT

• **Patton Oswalt** takes a break from his *Playboy Interview* shoot to discuss his groundbreaking new stand-up special, *Annihilation.*
• Cover girl **Halsey** talks childhood heroes, ghost encounters and more.
• **Jhené Aiko** defines sexiness circa 2017.
• Playmates **Milan Dixon** and **Jessica Wall** reveal their turn-ons and turnoffs.

ON SOCIAL

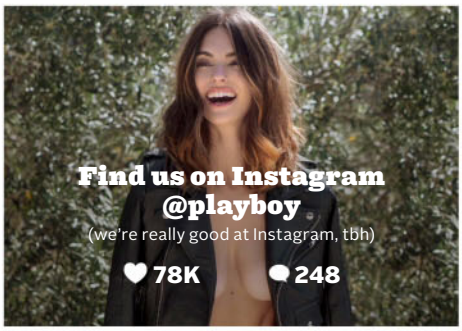
• Catch up with **Aubrey Plaza** and **Elizabeth Olsen** as demented Instagram influencers in the new film *Ingrid Goes West.*

THE BEST OF OUR ARCHIVES

• A look back at when Emmy queen **Julia Louis-Dreyfus** (pictured right) dished for her 1996 PLAYBOY *20Q.* Spoiler: The definition of "sponge-worthy" is revealed.
• Classic *Playboy Interviews*, from **Joyce Carol Oates** to **JAY-Z.**

CULTURE, POLITICS & MORE

• Infamous inmate turned advocate Amanda Knox looks back.
• Film's most mysterious critic talks the dangerous lack of big-screen eroticism.
• The Playboy guide to having sex in college.
• How to get a great drink in a tourist trap.



Add a comment...

"I, for one, am so over discussing whether women are pretty enough, sexy enough, thin enough, ad nauseam. Rather discuss if she is a good actor, [or] whether she will be a good president, engineer, doctor, teacher, attorney, parent, etc. Almost as if women are full-on people, and not items for male consumption!"

—comment on *Yes, We Live in a World Where Jennifer Lawrence "Isn't Pretty Enough"* by Bobby Box

Reply · Share · *Like* ·

"All fashion is conditional. Time, place and who is wearing it is all that matters."

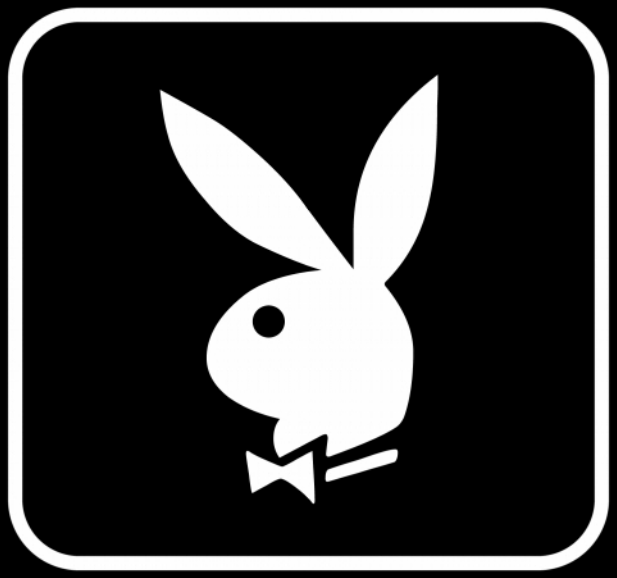
—comment on *Women Discuss Clothes They Don't Understand* by Anna del Gaizo

Reply · Share · *Like* ·

When it comes to our love of Julia Louis-Dreyfus, there are literally no words.

GREG GORMAN


SKECHERS
PERFORMANCE



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CachetBoutiqueNYC.com

JHENÉ AIKO

Three years ago, Jhené Aiko released her debut album, the candlelit *Souled Out,* and helped usher in a new age of sexual exploration with the line of the year, from her verse on Omarion's "Post to Be": "I might let your boy chauffeur me / But he gotta eat the booty like groceries." The following year, the singer's delicate purr curled into R&B tracks by everyone from Vince Staples to Nick Jonas, but since last spring's *TWENTY88,* her joint project with Big Sean, she has moved beyond the spotlight and into the sunlight. "I'm a bit of an escape artist," says the 29-year-old Los Angeles native. "I like to take myself out of my element and create. I went to Hawaii by myself and hiked. When you connect with nature, you connect with yourself." She was so inspired by her travels, in fact, that she turned her upcoming album, *TRIP 17,* into a map. Where does it lead? That's for you to find out. "It's inspired by every type of trip you could imagine: mental, physical, even psychedelic," she says. "I'm at a point where I put it all in the music. It's a puzzle I want people to put together." *—Rebecca Haithcoat*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **JEN SENN**

SIGNIFICA, INSIGNIFICA, STATS AND FACTS

ANOTHER QUALITY FEATURE

ILLUSTRATED BY TIMBA SMITS

Dramn Data

Hard Times

Ooooo! Professor

A U.K. survey found that some **31%** of polled university students would sleep with someone in exchange for a free education—if they were attracted to the benefactor; **16%** would make the trade with someone they weren't attracted to.

Size Does Matter

3,564 FEET: length of the world's longest walk-through horror "house" as of 2010—really a limestone cave in Lewisburg, Ohio. **80 FEET:** depth of the cave. **30,000:** number of bats estimated to live there.

Spellbound

THE MOST-SEARCHED "HOW TO SPELL" WORD, BY STATE, ACCORDING TO GOOGLE:

California **BEAUTIFUL**
Maryland **SPECIAL**
Nevada **AVAILABLE**
Pennsylvania **SAUERKRAUT**
South Dakota **COLLEGE**
Wisconsin **WISCONSIN**

21: number of letters in the longest word in the Scripps National Spelling Bee. (The word was *electroencephalograph*, and the contestant got it right.)

Born to Run 101

Real courses and the universities offering them this year:

Rutgers University
SPRINGSTEEN'S AMERICAN VISION
University of Michigan
FAKE NEWS, LIES AND PROPAGANDA
Harvard
THE REAL GAME OF THRONES: From Modern Myths to Medieval Models

The Halloween Splurge

$8.4 BILLION: estimated amount Americans spent on **HALLOWEEN** candy and costumes last year (up nearly 22% from 2015).

Pumpkin Power

1.8 BILLION: pounds of pumpkins American farmers produced last year

7,000 YEARS: age of the oldest pumpkin seeds discovered to date

2,261.5 POUNDS: weight of the largest pumpkin ever grown in North America

WTF?

Damn

Median monthly pay of an intern working at...

Facebook: **$8,000**
Microsoft: **$7,100**
Amazon: **$6,400**
Google: **$6,000**

Average monthly American income: **$4,280**

The U.N. of Clowns

35-PLUS: number of countries represented in the World Clown Association. Lectures offered at the 2017 WCA Convention:

"Balloon Hats," "Pocket Magic" and "Clowning in Disaster Areas"

Styles and Stans

Emerging musical genres, according to Spotify:

WITCH HOUSE, BAILE FUNK, DANGDUT, HOERSPIEL, SPEED GARAGE

17: years it took the word *stan* to enter the *Oxford English Dictionary* after Eminem and Dido released "Stan," a song about a lonely superfan, in 2000.

fan (fan) n.
1. an enthusiastic devotee, follower, or admirer of a sport, pastime, celebrity, etc.
stan (*n., informal*) an overzealous or obsessive fan of a particular celebrity.
Oxford English Di

The *OED* *says*

Private Dancers

34 percent of men refuse to dance in public.

ADMIT ONE

Cleared for Takeoff

CAPTAIN OF THE SWIPE

Tinder says that pilots get the most right swipes of any profession.

Bingeing Blues

NEARLY 90% of millennials binge-watch TV shows; almost **40%** of them do it on a weekly basis. But the shows may not have their full attention:

BATFLIX

99% of millennials say they multitask while watching TV.

Phone Home

70: percentage of women who believe smartphones negatively interfere with their main relationship.

82 average number of times 18-to-24-year-olds check their phone each day

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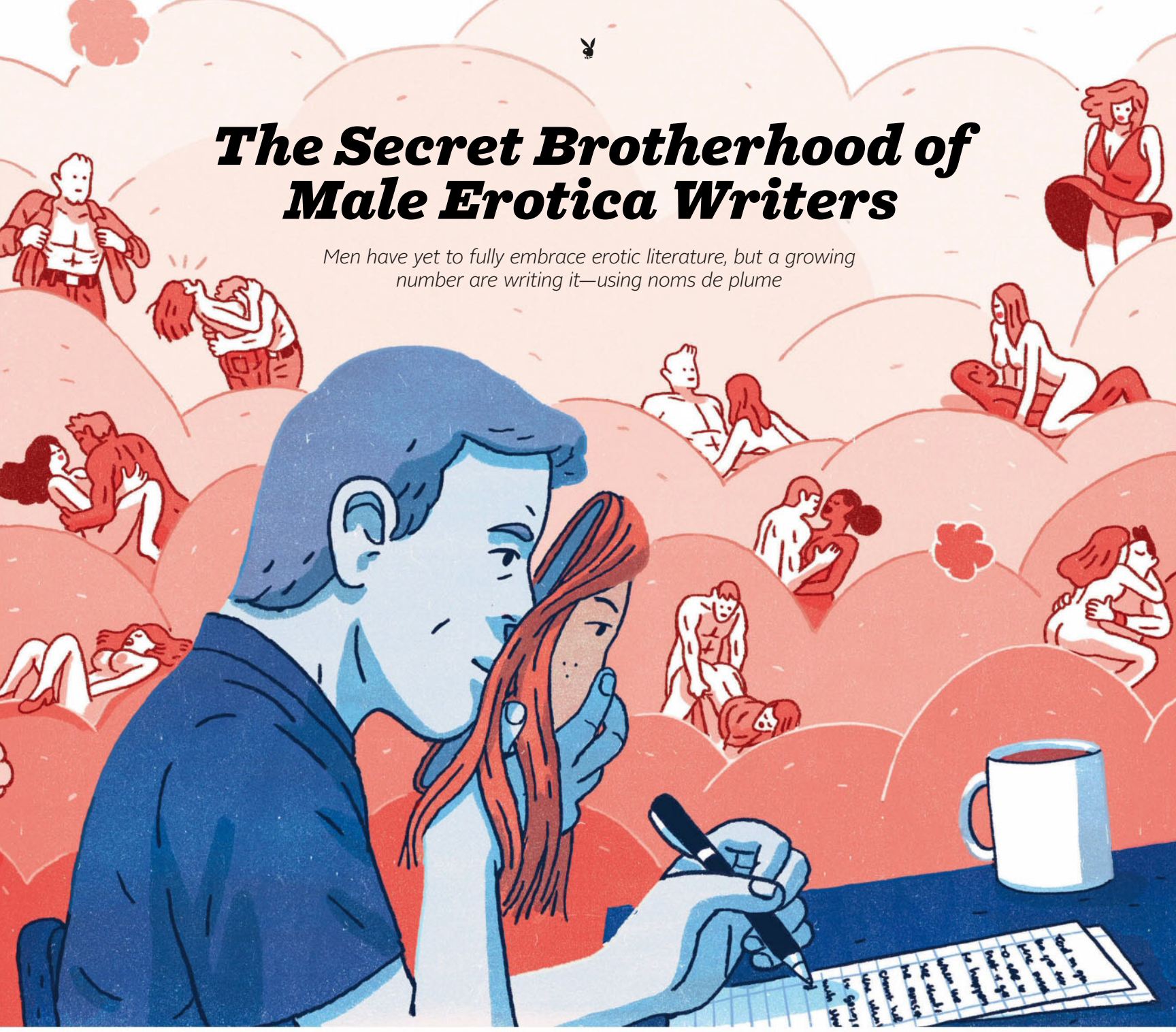
The Secret Brotherhood of Male Erotica Writers

Men have yet to fully embrace erotic literature, but a growing number are writing it—using noms de plume



BY **JENNIFER BILLOCK**

Before Chance Carter, 36, wrote the best-selling book *Bad Boy Daddy,* he'd published erotic stories for two years under a female pseudonym—until a female erotica writer reportedly accused him on Facebook of misleading readers. She claimed that men working in the genre under women's names were cowardly and immoral. So Carter adopted a new pseudonym, one undeniably male, and found stardom. According to Carter, he has regularly ranked among the top 100 self-published writers on Amazon ever since. *Bad Boy Daddy* boasts more than 2,500 reviews and spent a week on top of the online retailer's list of best-selling self-published e-books.

It has been suggested that women prefer female authors when it comes to erotica because men don't understand how to craft a good, sexually charged story. That theory is based, in part, on the fact that men don't consume such writing. A 2014 Nielsen survey for Romance Writers of America, for example, found that only 18 percent of romance-book readers are male.

Ogi Ogas, a computational neuroscientist and co-author of *A Billion Wicked Thoughts: What the Internet Tells Us About Sexual Relationships,* believes this may be because of fundamental differences in the male and female brains. "One of the most basic differences is that the male brain responds to any single sexual stimulus. A nice chest, two girls kissing, older

ILLUSTRATION BY **TIM PEACOCK**

women," Ogas told Time.com. "Female desire requires multiple stimuli.... For a guy, the most common form of [masturbation material] is a 60-second porn clip. For a woman, it can be a 250-page novel.... Stories have greater flexibility to offer a greater variety of stimuli."

Carter's reason for originally adopting a female name is akin to the reason J.K. Rowling's abbreviated name appears on the cover of the *Harry Potter* books: Her publisher reportedly didn't think young men would want to read a book about a boy wizard written by a woman. "For centuries, female writers in male-dominated genres had to take male pen names to get published," says LN Bey, a male erotica author who publishes under a gender-neutral name. Bey thinks doing so is only fair, as do other male writers. Carter says he runs a 400-person group for romance and erotica writers that is an even split of men and women; the authors' pen names are 99 percent female-sounding.

"This is still a socially risky and stigmatized business, perhaps even more so for men," Bey says. "Many women won't read male authors because of the perception that their work will be misogynistic, 'get on your knees, bitch' stories that lack a deeper psychological aspect."

Gender aside, erotica writers tend to be hush-hush about their work for a variety of reasons. Robert Fleming, who describes himself as the first editor to compile an anthology of erotic short fiction by African American male writers (*After Hours*), adopted the pen name Cole Riley to distance his creative writing from his work as a journalist with bylines in *The New York Times* and *Essence*. Like many others, Fleming fell into erotica by chance: He says he got his first job in the genre after talking with the editor in chief of *Oui,* a magazine of nude photography (and former Playboy publication), in an elevator. "It introduced me to an entirely different world," he says. "I was having the time of my life."

M. Christian, who has been published in *The Best American Erotica,* writes in the genre to expand his palate. "I can experiment with all kinds of storytelling techniques," he says. "I've learned that it's essential to stretch yourself so you don't get stale creatively—or personally." Christian doesn't use a pseudonym to protect his reputation; he uses one simply because he doesn't like his real name.

According to Carter, fake names help create an author's brand. "If I wanted to write a Western, I'd slap a name on it that sounds vaguely Western," he says. "Without pen names, your entire writing career would be discoverable whenever someone looked you up. No one reading my erotica is interested in the law essays I wrote 10 years ago."

For now at least, erotica is one of the very few industries in which men are at a disadvantage. "It's hard putting a man's name on a sexy novel when the charts are filled with books by women," Carter says. "It's like riding a bicycle to a Harley convention."

A LONG STORY SHORT

These three passages will give you a rough sense of erotica's quality spectrum

THE GOOD *New York Times* best-selling novelist Alessandra Torre makes even us blush in her 2013 book *Sex Love Repeat:* " 'You are mine,' he grunts out, pumping into me, the length and level of his arousal brutal.... He doesn't slow the movement, giving me full, hard thrusts, my breasts bouncing from the top of my dress, the mirror above the sink giving me a full view of my slutdom. Paul, in worn jeans, a white T-shirt, light hair mussed, mouth open, intensity over his face."

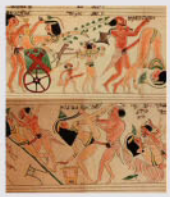
THE BAD Erri De Luca, author of *The Day Before Happiness,* won *Literary Review*'s Bad Sex in Fiction Award thanks to this excerpt: "With a swerve of her hips, she turned me over and I was on top of her. She opened her legs, pulled up her dress and, holding my hips over her, pushed my prick against her opening. I was her plaything, which she moved around. Our sexes were ready, poised in expectation, barely touching each other: ballet dancers hovering en pointe."

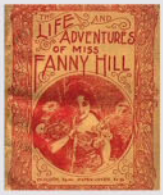
THE WEIRD Chuck Tingle turns Bernie Sanders into a sex symbol named Bernie Sambers in *Feeling the Bern in My Butt:* "While most politicians craft messages that tug at my heartstring, these seem to go even farther. He's tugging at my butt.... I have to admit, all of this political positivity is getting to me, the message of progress and social reform causing a pleasant tingle to slowly form around the trim of my anus. It's a strange but welcome sensation, something of a burn, but in a warm and inviting way."

Erotica's CHECKERED PAST

Revisiting the form's peaks and troughs throughout history

ca. 1150 B.C.
Egyptians create the Turin Erotic Papyrus, dubbed the "world's first men's mag," long housed at Italy's Museo Egizio.





1748
John Cleland publishes *Fanny Hill,* one of the earliest examples of a pornographic novel written in English.

1819
Merriam-Webster cites the earliest known use of the word *erotica,* derived from Eros, the Greek god of love.

1921
For its passage on masturbation, James Joyce's *Ulysses* is banned in the United States for 12 years.

1992
Madonna releases *Erotica* alongside her book *Sex.* The album has sold some 6 million copies worldwide.

2015
Fifty Shades of Grey breaks records worldwide, ultimately raking in $571 million at the global box office.

MUSIC

Live Through This

*Young rapper **Vic Mensa** has already cheated death more than most of us will in a lifetime, and his debut album tells a thrilling story of survival*

BY **JEFF WEISS**

By most actuarial metrics, Vic Mensa shouldn't be alive. He shouldn't be collaborating with Pharrell, Kanye West and Weezer. And JAY-Z, his Roc Nation label boss, shouldn't be raving to roomfuls of industry VIPs that the 24-year-old from the South Side of Chicago is an "incredible once-in-a-lifetime artist."

But Mensa, born Victor Mensah, isn't supine in a pine box, as stiff as the Joey Ramone leather jackets he sports. He's vibrantly alive, prone to swift, panther-like movements and spasmodic festival-crowd incitement. He's passionate enough to publicly indict YouTube star DJ Akademiks for mocking the violence that has plagued his hometown of Chicago. After half a decade of hype, the biracial son of two educators is finally on the verge of stardom, and his debut, *The Autobiography,* chronicles the obstacles that nearly caused permanent derailment.

"I don't feel lucky as much as I feel predestined," Mensa says. "I've been putting energy into the universe for some time from an honest place, and I've done it with good intentions and a lot of determination."

The South Side native's talent has taken him further than almost anyone could have predicted back when the teenage Mensa formed the SaveMoney Crew alongside childhood friends Chance the Rapper and Joey Purp. But whether you call it destiny, providence or just random chance, Mensa survived a streak of freak accidents that could have laid Rasputin to rest.

At 17, the skateboarding and graffiti-writing rebel attempted to sneak into Lollapalooza, only to fall off a 30-foot bridge and land on a fence charged with 15,000 volts. As he raps on the elegiac "Memories on 47th St.," "The doctor said I should be dead, still alive and still ain't scared / In the hospital bed, writing these rhymes in my head."

Two years later, when he was the lead singer for Kids These Days, Chicago's much buzzed-about genre-straddling ensemble, Mensa totaled his mother's car on the expressway after he clipped a pole and sent the vehicle spinning out of control. With their debut album slated to be produced by Wilco's Jeff Tweedy, the group subsequently broke up just as they were about to sign a lucrative major-label deal.

Then there was the toxic relationship that came to an unusual end when, Mensa says, an ex-girlfriend broke into his Los Angeles house, went after another woman who was there, destroyed property and had to be escorted out by police.

"It was a soap opera, 100 percent," he says.

Mensa spun the incident into *The Autobiography*'s "Homewrecker," whose refrain "I should've known better / But who'd've ever thought you'd be the wifey and a homewrecker" uses the titular word in the most literal sense. The song features Rivers Cuomo crooning a hook that lends the feeling of a

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **JESSE LIROLA**

Love & Hip Hop version of *Pinkerton*. Raised on 1990s alternative rock and rap, Mensa counts Weezer and Kurt Cobain among his most prominent inspirations—hence the Nirvana tattoo on his arm.

"When I played Rivers the original demo, his reaction was,'Wow, I need a girlfriend like that,' " Mensa says, laughing.

None of this accounts for the most crucial biographical statistic working against Mensa: He's a young black man raised amid the internecine street warfare and political hysteria of Chicago. During this past Fourth of July weekend alone, more than 100 people were shot—nearly all of them people of color living on the city's West and South sides.

"This album deals with the trauma of losing people in the street," Mensa says. "Chicago violence is sensationalized and used as a headline for everyone's benefit except the community itself. Our people are depicted as animals. I was trying to humanize us."

The numbing body count takes the form of Mensa's slain friend Cam, a.k.a. DARE, on "Heaven on Earth." The ghost of another murdered friend, Rodney Kyles Jr., casts a similar pall over the record. But what helps give the album its power isn't merely these canticles for the deceased but the way Mensa depicts the subtle ramifications on his psyche.

In an effort to cope with fame, industry pressures and grief, Mensa developed a debilitating drug addiction. Switching from psychedelics to MDMA to Adderall, he became dependent on illicit substances to fuel his creativity and ultimately burned out. Last year he went clean.

His debut record strikes an equilibrium between the roiling chaos of those first 23 years, the sober focus of the past 12 months and the madness and tensions engulfing the zeitgeist. After innumerable brushes with the end, Mensa is finally ready to begin.

"People often misinterpret me as being mean or angry all the time—or maybe they think I'm a thug," he says. "But honestly, I'm just trying to put as much of myself down on record so I can be interpreted for the man I am. Sure, I'm angry sometimes about what's going on around me, but I'm angry for a reason. I'm a product of my environment. And I'm trying to make that environment better." ■

TOP FIVE

Vic Mensa on his favorite albums of 2017 (so far)

Radiohead, *OKNOTOK*
OK Computer was already one of my favorite albums, but to hear songs like "Man of War" and "Lift" from those original sessions is just incredible. I've been singing them all on repeat.

JAY-Z, *4:44*
I've been a fan of Hov for about 12 years, and *4:44* is revealing in a way that he's never been before. He's always been so veiled with fast hand movements and slick talk, but this album is less coded and a lot more personal and honest.

Ho9909, *United States of Horror*
Just a dope-ass hardcore rap band. Their album is powerful, energetic, honest, political and strong. I went to the live show and was in the mosh pit. Love these guys.

Kendrick Lamar, *DAMN.*
Kendrick's albums hit you like an extended-release pill: You take it, and after however much time it takes, you really start to understand it. It's interesting how much it unfolds and spreads and starts to take shape as you keep listening.

Vince Staples, *Big Fish Theory*
I wasn't expecting the electronic production, but I think it's really strong. It's dope how he takes his stories—which are always from the perspective of a Long Beach Crip—over that type of musical backdrop.

THE CHANGING TUNE OF PROTEST MUSIC

In the age of Twitter and Trump, can a politically charged song still make a difference?

BY **ERIC SPITZNAGEL**

Chuck D is shouting at me, and it's making me want to set a cop car on fire.

I'm driving through the north side of Chicago, blasting "Hail to the Chief." The song is from the new self-titled record by Prophets of Rage, a supergroup consisting of the former Public Enemy frontman, Cypress Hill's B-Real and three fourths of Rage Against the Machine. It isn't just a great excuse to drive too fast while pounding the steering wheel; it feels like a gasp of oxygen during a politically suffocating time.

But a funny thing happens when you sing along to songs that demand you fight back: You start to wonder if we've entered a new golden age of protest music or if we're just stuck in our little bubbles, each with its own scathing soundtrack. "What the fuck are you waiting for?" the Prophets ask in "Unfuck the World." Good question.

Whatever your political leanings, there are pop songs out there to prop you up. Most of them are anti-Trump, from Jack Johnson's "My Mind Is for Sale," which rails against "paranoid 'us against them' walls" to Fiona Apple's relatively self-explanatory "Tiny Hands." The pickings are slimmer on the support-our-president side, but you can sing along to Joy Villa's summer hit "Make America Great Again!" while wearing any of the pro-Trump T-shirts being peddled on Kid Rock's website. (And given the fact that the Devil Without a Cause announced, just before press time, that he's running for the Senate, we might be in for a patriotic rap-rock album any day now.)

Chuck D is hopeful that Prophets of Rage can be more than just a reason for young men to mosh righteously. "You listen to Roy Orbison's 'Pretty Woman' and it makes you want to get with some fly girl," he explains. "Why can't it be the same with protest music? If a song speaks to your soul and mind and body, then it can change you."

I love his conviction—I grew up singing along with it—but in 2017 it seems almost quaint. During the 1960s and 1970s, when music was a countercultural force in the civil rights and anti–Vietnam war movements, "more people were involved in disseminating the message in ways that the music bolstered," says Eric T. Kasper, a political scientist and co-author of *Don't Stop Thinking About the Music: The Politics of Songs and Musicians in Presidential Campaigns*. That's not happening today, he says, thanks mostly to the internet. We all stay in our respective trenches, surfacing only to lob rage-bombs at others. A protest song that doesn't preach to the choir doesn't have a chance. When Bob Dylan wrote "Masters of War," he didn't have to worry about being dismissed as fake news.

"In the 1960s, I believed rock music was the most powerful communicating force in human history," says Wayne Kramer, founding member and lead guitarist for MC5, a Detroit punk band so radical that FBI director J. Edgar Hoover allegedly told President Gerald Ford its members "breathe revolution." Kramer's opinions have softened in recent years. "I don't really believe that music leads to political change anymore," he says. "Politics and the building of civilization is serious business. It's immune to troubadours and poets." It's a little disconcerting to hear this from a guy who performed outside the 1968 Democratic National Convention at the request of notorious "yippie" Abbie Hoffman, playing for eight hours before the gathering devolved into a police riot.

He's right about politics being serious business—but then, so is politically charged music. When Compton hip-hop artist YG released the single "FDT (Fuck Donald Trump)" in 2016, it didn't get much attention other than a call from the Secret Service. But after the election, the song jumped 435 percent, to 3.1 million U.S. streams, and sold more than 4,000 downloads in a matter of days. Villa had a similar sales bump for music with a different sentiment. After she walked the Grammys red carpet in a dress with MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN and TRUMP bedazzled across it, the Amazon sales rank for her EP *I Make the Static* jumped from number 543,503 to number one in a single night.

Villa tells us that "Make America Great Again!" (which was released over the Fourth of July holiday) is meant to "encourage people to reach across party lines." Okay, but naming a song after a slogan from a historically divisive campaign seems less like an olive branch than a "we won, so shut your loser hole" sing-along. Then again, was "Yes We Can," will.i.am's 2008 tribute to Barack Obama, really all that different?

Kramer, who once thought music could spawn a revolution, today thinks that's asking too much. "It can be like a town hall," he says of protest rock. "It's not going to change any minds. It's just a way to come together and voice our frustrations, and I think that's plenty." Chuck D echoes the sentiment. The man who once told us to fight the power also hopes his music can be "a beacon for people, to let them know, hey, you don't have to be afraid."

"What country music do you mean—my country or your country?"

So maybe there is power in pumping our fists along to Prophets of Rage as they tell us to "Stand up and rise like the tide!" It doesn't make me join an angry mob and storm the White House; it just makes me feel a little less crazy and alone. Sometimes that's enough. ■

ILLUSTRATION BY TOM TORO

STONE COLD FOX

So good-looking...heads will turn. So unbelievably-priced...jaws will drop.

Every once in a while a timepiece comes along that's so incredibly good looking, masterfully equipped and jaw-droppingly priced, that it stops us stone cold. A watch that can take you seamlessly from the 18th hole to the board room. A watch that blurs the line betweens sports watch and dress watch. We're talking the ***Blue Stone Chronograph***, and it sits at the top of the discerning gentleman's watch list.

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The watch's handsome steel blue dial seamlessly blends an analog watch face with a stylish digital display. It's a stopwatch, calendar, and alarm. Plus, the ***Blue Stone*** resists water up to 30 meters, making it up for water adventures.

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YOUR STRANGER THINGS SURVIVAL KIT

With season two around the corner, creators ***Matt and Ross Duffer*** *and star* ***David Harbour*** *reveal the show's lesser-known influences—and drop a few hints about where it's headed*

David Harbour's first days on the *Stranger Things* set felt like a real-life trip to the Upside Down. He thought the script for the pilot was the best he'd read in 20 years of film and television work, and he was ecstatic when the show's creators, twins Matt and Ross Duffer, cast him as Jim Hopper, the chief of police in the show's fictional Hawkins, Indiana. But at first, Harbour was a little too much like the neurotic lawman he plays.

"I got into shooting and I was like, Oh God, I'm the worst! It's going to be a nightmare. I'm never going to work again," says Harbour. "My neurosis going in was that we'd be the first Netflix show to not have a second season."

BY **STEVE PALOPOLI**

Two years later, *Stranger Things* has 18 Emmy nominations and is one of the most popular shows on the streaming network. And it most definitely *does* have a second season, premiering October 27. Meanwhile, Harbour's reward for his breakout work on season one—which earned him one of those Emmy noms—is an even more bonkers story line in this new nine-episode run.

And that's saying a lot. (Season-one spoilers ahead, in case you spent last year living under a rock.) We've already watched Hopper break into a local government facility where operatives perform secret experiments; there, he discovers they've opened a portal into an alternative dimension, which fugitive kid Eleven (Millie Bobby Brown), who has escaped from the same lab, calls the Upside Down. Hopper also helps Joyce Byers (Winona Ryder) find her son Will, who has been kidnapped by an Upside Down monster nicknamed the Demogorgon by Will's ragtag group of Dungeons & Dragons–playing friends.

So yeah, stranger than that.

"Any ball you throw at him, he knocks out of the park," says Matt Duffer of Harbour. "So we just started throwing him crazier balls."

For fans, that first and foremost promises a resolution to the first season's cliffhanger, which sees Eleven seemingly disintegrate after a final battle with the Demogorgon. Later, Hopper leaves her favorite snack of Eggos in the woods.

"As you can see from the Eggos in the box, there will be a pairing of Hopper and Eleven," Harbour says, adding that the reunion "will really peel the onion back on what both of them struggle with."

The last episode of season one sees Hopper making a mysterious deal with the lab's head bad guy, Dr. Brenner, that will surely be key to Eleven's fate. "Because of his involvement with the lab and Brenner, and the deal he makes, Hopper has some understanding of what happened to her, how she still exists in some form out there," says Harbour. "And his savior complex, which was awakened when Will was saved, sort of goes into this new other realm."

Whatever's in store for the next season, it will be grander—and creepier—than the first. "From the first five minutes of reading the script for season two, I was like, 'Okay, you guys are really opening up the world,' " Harbour says. "It's bigger. It's darker. There's a relentless pace that I don't feel we had so much of last year."

"I felt we could push a little bit with some of the horror elements," says Matt. "I thought it could be a little scarier."

"At the same time," adds Ross, "what I love about the show that we tried to keep is that we can jump from a scene of pure terror to a scene of fun or romance. I love the juxtaposition of those tones, as opposed to having one big dark tone the whole way. In one scene, someone's crying; in the next, they're laughing."

The second season opens a year after the events of the first, which gave the Duffers a chance to take a different approach with the story. "You don't have a kidnapping within 15 minutes," says Ross. "So in some ways it has slightly more build up-front, and then it just goes crazy. Which is what we wanted, because we felt that in the first season, because it started with everyone on such high alert, it was hard to sustain that for as many hours as we wanted."

David Harbour as Jim Hopper.

This second visit to Hawkins may give fans the opportunity to soak up more of the wide range of film influences and references the Duffers have brought to *Stranger Things.* Last season, the media focus was almost entirely on the show's most obvious allusions—Stephen King, Steven Spielberg and John Carpenter. But most fans don't know that the scene in which Hopper tears apart his apartment looking for a bug is an homage to Gene Hackman's final descent into paranoia in Francis Ford Coppola's 1974 classic *The Conversation.*

"It's funny, because the only influences people talk about are the 1980s stuff," says Matt. "But we're just movie nerds, and *The Conversation* is one of my favorite movies."

In fact, the golden age of 1970s paranoia films—Alan J. Pakula's *The Parallax View,* John Schlesinger's *Marathon Man,* William Richert's *Winter Kills*—is a major touchstone for the Duffers.

"We fell in love with those in high school," says Matt. "I love the aesthetic and the storytelling. A lot of it's about the mood and this sense of dread that permeates every frame."

The Duffers also drew on everything from spooky video games such as *Silent Hill* to anime titles *Akira* and *Elfen Lied.* (The latter's story line has some eye-opening *Stranger Things* parallels.) One scene in the first season is a shot-by-shot remake of a scene in *Witness,* just because the brothers are huge fans of director Peter Weir. They discovered composers Kyle Dixon and Michael Stein, who wrote the show's uncanny synth score, while watching director Adam Wingard's 2014 throwback thriller *The Guest.*

Incredibly, *Stranger Things* owes perhaps its biggest debt to director Denis Villeneuve's *Prisoners.* Like *Stranger Things,* the 2013 film's jumping-off point is a child kidnapping. "*Prisoners,* the pace and the tone of it, we thought could have lent itself well to an eight-hour story," says Ross. "This was around the time we started to see ads for *True Detective* and television was becoming more and more cinematic. That led to this idea: What if you had a child who went missing? And obviously then we added our childhood sensibilities to it."

"We married that with an interdimensional-monster idea we had," adds Matt. "That started to get us excited, and then it went from there. But yeah, *Stranger Things* would 100 percent not exist without *Prisoners.*"

Nor, it seems, would it exist without a widespread longing for a type of storytelling that once ruled the movies but succumbed to franchise fetish and CGI spectacle. Whether it's the fear films of the 1970s or the coming-of-age tales of the 1980s, there's a reason the Duffer brothers reached back into the cinematic past for inspiration, and a reason they struck a cultural nerve almost instantly. For countless viewers, the strangest thing is that the Upside Down feels like home. ■

ILLUSTRATION BY **TULA LOTAY**

REINVENTING THE GREAT AMERICAN ROCK BAND

The War on Drugs has proven that rock and roll can be epic and humble, classic and brand-new all at once. Can the band's reclusive frontman survive its major-label debut?

There's only a faint whiff of weed in the air when Philadelphia rock band the War on Drugs takes the stage at New York's Bowery Ballroom. Adam Granduciel, the band's stoic mastermind, mostly keeps his eyes closed, opening them only to navigate his winking pedal boards. Sharing the cramped stage with a crew of longtime friends—bassist Dave Hartley, keyboardist Robbie Bennett, drummer Charlie Hall and multi-instrumentalists Anthony LaMarca and Jon Natchez—he conjures the aural equivalent of a riptide in slow motion. Somehow the six of them dive headlong into the rawness and romanticism of the AM-era rock-and-roll canon with the precision and restraint of a chamber ensemble.

BY **SARAH GRANT**

It's a far cry from the band's early days, when Granduciel shared the stage with former member Kurt Vile. Back then, he sometimes played whole sets on his knees, slinging beers while wailing on his guitar. Tonight Granduciel speaks only when necessary—such as when he introduces a Warren Zevon song that could easily be mistaken for one of his own.

"I sometimes don't understand how our songs get so long," the 38-year-old musician says two weeks earlier at a secluded Bushwick café. His casual appearance onstage and off—T-shirt, black pants, dark messy hair to his clavicle—belies a thrum of anxiousness. Talking about his coming weeks, which include a spot on *The Late Show With Stephen Colbert,* he taps the metal table incessantly. You get the sense he's still adjusting to his life circa 2014, when the Drugs album *Lost in the Dream* debuted at 26 on the *Billboard* 200 albums chart. Charting is a rare feat for any rock band in a world where popular music overwhelmingly favors more digital-friendly strains. Acts like Twenty One Pilots, Imagine Dragons and Ed Sheeran have kept rock visible, at least, by blending it with rap, EDM, dancehall and other metronomic styles. But with a few exceptions, the only rock outfits competing with bona fide pop stars such as Adele, Beyoncé and Drake are either knighted or dead.

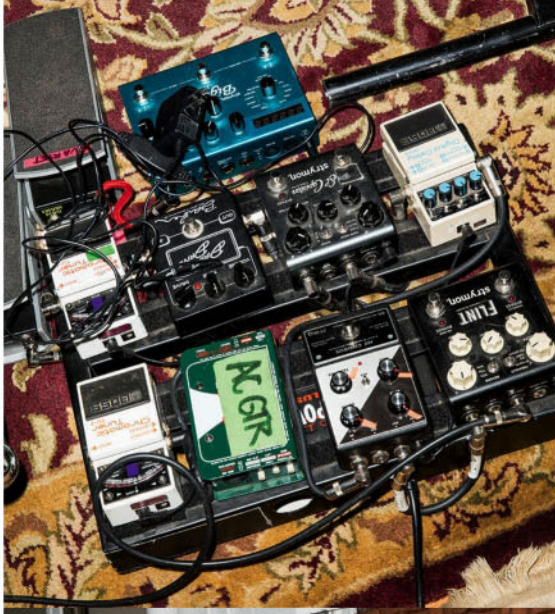
That the War on Drugs made it upstream at all—let alone with instrumentals blooming well past the three-minute mark and musical touchstones including Dire Straits, Pink Floyd and Bruce Springsteen—is in itself noteworthy. But the band's 2013 single "Red Eyes" didn't just dine on novelty; it struck a nerve. Seemingly overnight, backyard gigs turned into national television slots on *Kimmel* and *Fallon.* To date, "Red Eyes" has more than 47 million streams on Spotify. The band's spike in popularity is still jarring to its gentle-spirited frontman. "We don't really have the time to grow into the rooms we're playing," Granduciel says. "Now it's like, *boom,* 6,000 people." And with its new record, *A Deeper Understanding,* the group is in line to take on the mantle of Great American Rock Band. The War on Drugs might just prove that serious album-oriented rock groups can grow as organically on streaming services as they once did via stadium tailgates and record stores.

"THERE'S NO MORE MYTH. WE'RE JUST OUT THERE DOING WHAT WE DO."

These days, Granduciel lives with his girlfriend, actress Krysten Ritter, in her Greenpoint apartment. While she films season two of *Jessica Jones,* a leisurely day for the man of the house begins with a carefully prepped cup of coffee ("I may or may not have a fancy setup," he says) and a walk with Ritter's Chihuahua terrier around the park. Ritter was at the Bowery show, leaning against the balcony in an oversize tank top, her ink-black hair drawn up in a high ponytail.

In the nearly two years it took to make *A Deeper Understanding,* Granduciel worried that his peripatetic new life—living in Los Angeles and then Brooklyn, commuting to Philadelphia, booking studio time in all three places and beyond—would compromise his work. But in hindsight, the physical distraction of moving around seems to have tempered Granduciel's obsessiveness. He once allegedly holed up in his house for months, and tales abound that the aptly named *Lost in the Dream* nearly cost him his sanity. Today, he only occasionally summons those monastic instincts. He's healthier, happier, maybe even in love (he smiles but stays mum on that point), and he appears to be at peace—as much as one can expect a perfectionist to be. Consider the new album's encyclopedic credits. "If it says I play synthesizer, that usually means I recorded 10 different synths on that song," he says. He smiles. *Understanding* was recorded in nine studios across L.A., New York, Philadelphia and elsewhere.

Can serenity coexist with this level of obsession? Granduciel pauses, his expression



PHOTOGRAPHY BY **JEREMY LIEBMAN**

turning a shade more serious. "Part of turning something in is being aware that you've missed the mark on a few things."

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Granduciel was raised in Dover, Massachusetts, the middle child of a small-business owner and a Montessori-school administrator who are still married. He went to high school at one of the oldest schools in America. ("Yeah, that was drilled into our heads.") His father spent 40 years in the garment business. At one point he ran 17 stores selling designer clothing that he shuttled from Fashion Avenue in New York City in his Volvo.

"My dad is probably the biggest War on Drugs fan," Granduciel says of his father, who is in his 80s. "He comes on tour with us. He figured out Google Alerts. I'm surprised he's kept up with it as much as he has. He's got these big headphones, and when I go home to visit, I'll see him asleep in the chair and I'll be like, 'Oh my God, he's listening to 'Red Eyes.'" After years of defending life choices that were at times confusing to his parents, sharing the band's success, even over quiet moments such as these, feels like a victory to Granduciel.

Like his father, Granduciel has had an irrepressible work ethic from an early age. "I got in trouble for being an idiot—you know, crashing the car, falling asleep at the wheel." Because he was drunk? High? "No, no," he says. "I was exhausted from fuckin' life. It was tough. All these things to do all the time." He taught himself to play guitar in seventh grade, amassing thick binders of printed-off guitar tabs. ("Basically all of *Siamese Dream,* but I couldn't do the solos.") At Dickinson College, a liberal arts school in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, he studied art and waited tables. After graduation, he worked his way through more restaurant jobs in Oakland and then Boston. His career in the service industry nearly ended after he spilled grease on a baby's head at a restaurant that required him to wear an American-flag tie. (The tie, he ruefully adds, was constantly streaked with peppercorn ranch dressing.)

So when Granduciel moved to Philadelphia in 2003, sharing a light blue row house in not-yet-gentrified Fishtown with a revolving set of roommates, he felt liberated—even if the house gave him mold poisoning, he says, laughing. He met Hartley, now 37, after college, when they were two under-bathed artsy guys working at a real-estate firm near the University of Pennsylvania.

The War on Drugs maintains a practice space in Philadelphia, where core members Hartley, Bennett and Hall currently reside. Tomorrow, Granduciel says, he'll rent a car to drop off some gear and clock in a rehearsal before the band debuts new material on national television. It's a little impractical, but keeping a foothold in Philadelphia is more than just an old habit for Granduciel. It has become part of the band's identity and, by extension, his own.

And identity matters to him, no matter how much he hides behind eyelids, hair and reverb. "I wondered if I had lost a little bit of my identity in my music, and how much of my identity is my music?" he says. "What am I in relation to my music? How much of me singing these songs is a character and how much is my real life?"

Moving around seems to have had a sharpening effect on the band's sound. There's a grandeur and a cohesion to *A Deeper Understanding* that are different from the busy excitement of *Lost in the Dream.* The album's first official

"I WONDERED IF I HAD LOST MY IDENTITY. WHAT AM I IN RELATION TO MY MUSIC?"

single, "Holding On," sounds as though Granduciel took a glass pipette to "Thunder Road" and transformed it into an energized new beast. Unlike Springsteen's, Granduciel's process doesn't revolve around lyrics. He spends most of his time tinkering with the instrumentation until the timbres start to tell their own story. But to hear Granduciel describe his work, starting with the arrangement is like entering a palace through the back door. Despite the recognition he has gained, he still carries an element of the amateur.

He's still the kid hiding underneath the covers, studying his pain.

• • •

The conversation never strays far from Granduciel's tumultuous creative process. "I'm learning that I'm more instinctual than I give myself credit for," he says, shifting his weight in his seat. He listens to his demos over and over, with no great design in mind, waiting for that flicker. "Maybe when I was 24 and all I listened to was 1964 and 1966 Bob Dylan, you'd have someone sitting here trying to create a myth around himself," he says. "But it's like there's no more myth. We're just out there doing what we do."

Granduciel's intuition yielded his finest new song, "Thinking of a Place." It's the kind he's always wanted to write—a Tom Joad–style solo-trek song, as he describes it—but he says he never could have done it with just pen and paper.

"I can chip away with ease for months at the sonics, and it doesn't get me frustrated. The words, though, I get very frustrated," he says. He improvises off a scratch vocal track, which he describes as "total gibberish," while working on the other arrangements. When it's time to focus on the vocals, he'll return to the demos and "chase the inflections" like an audio Rorschach test. "I'm writing around sounds, if that makes any sense," he says. He pauses for a beat. "You're kind of like, 'Well, it doesn't have to be fuckin' Raymond Carver.' "

It was back in Little Bend that I saw you
Light was changing on the water
Where birds above had flown.

That's how "Place" begins. It's hard to believe the exquisite specificity of the first verse came to him on a whim. "I was like, 'little bend?' I didn't even know what it was," he says. "It was syllables. I did some research on the words *little bend,* and it turns out it was this beautiful RV park on the banks of the Missouri River. Then it becomes something, like how do I tie this into a story?"

There was pain in your eyes
So you vanished in the night
Missouri River in the distance
So I lied upon the lawn.

He goes on. "Every song kind of lives in that state for six or seven months, and everything's in flux. Every song has its bit of improvisation." He flashes a smile, suddenly aware he's talking too fast. "It's a roundabout way to end up somewhere, but it's what you gotta do, I guess."

On *A Deeper Understanding,* Granduciel had a writing partner—in spirit, anyway—in Bruce Springsteen. When Granduciel was living in Hollywood in 2015, he rediscovered the 1980 double album *The River* and recognized the chill of uncertainty in Springsteen's voice as his own.

"It's a record about being 30 years old, watching your friends have kids and families, and thinking, When am I going to enter that part of my life?" he says. "I think that's what I sought, what I was trying to get to on this record. I'm a little older than the Boss was then, but how am I part of this whole thing, you know?"

Granduciel looks up from the table. It's almost time to go home and feed the dog. "I also figured out I could drive from my studio to my house in Hollywood in about one 'The River,' " he notes of the album's title track. His eyes darken to a smile. At the Bowery show, his father wears a nearly identical expression as he shoots an iPhone video from the balcony. He's focusing not on his son onstage but on the crowd below, bobbing and swaying to the music. It's a scene neither could have imagined just a few years ago. And it's a fitting beginning for a new album derived from traveling down—and trusting in—new roads.

"Seven minutes," says Granduciel. "No traffic. All green lights." ■

Playboy Advisor

Columnist Bridget Phetasy on when it's okay to have sex with a best friend's ex. Plus, advice for a woman whose boyfriend isn't cutting it between the sheets

Q: *How soon is too soon to start dating a friend's ex? Here's the story: A year ago, my buddy was sleeping with a girl he really liked. They never made it official, though, because she didn't like him in that way. (She pretty much broke his heart.) Now, a year later, the woman is sliding into my DMs on Instagram, and she lives only two blocks away. I liked her then and I like her now, so I want to pursue something. By the way, my buddy goes on a new Tinder date every other week, so I think he's over her.—J.G., Phoenix, Arizona*

A: Here's what I know about men: It's never too soon and it's never too late to date your buddy's ex, because either way he's going to be ticked off. Blame evolution and men's deeply ingrained biological drive to dominate when competing for a mate. It boils down to "You're not going to piss on my tree."

That's the bad news. The good news is that culturally, men are indoctrinated with the "bro code" from the time they're children. Growing up, they're taught "bros before hos" every step of the way. So men are much better than women at duking it out, licking their wounds and moving on. But your buddy's frequent Tinder dating is no guarantee he's over her. My guess is he's still trying to fill the hole she left when she crushed his heart. So ask yourself how good a buddy he is. If you do pursue her, be prepared for a backlash, and recognize that you might be sacrificing a friendship for an Instagram crush. Is she worth it?

Q: *How tacky are bite marks? I'm currently sporting a few that felt hot at the time, but now I'm a little embarrassed about them. Asking for a friend who won't ask for me.—L.W., New York, New York*

A: Getting bite marks and hickeys is like entering a hot-pepper-eating contest: It's thrilling in the moment, but you'll regret it later. They're tacky as fuck and scream "I'm a teenager discovering my sexuality!" or "I'm desperately trying to prove how much sex I'm having!" or "I wear Ed Hardy T-shirts!" (And I say this with all due respect to anyone who identifies with those sentiments.) Even so, it happens. Fingerprint bruises on the ass, claw marks down the back, rug burn—all this evidence that you just had kinky sex isn't a great look at your family's Labor Day barbecue. If you're into being branded, keep it in places you can hide. Also, if you're not in an exclusive relationship, potential partners probably won't be stoked to see remnants of your other, crazier sexual escapades on your body.

Q: *I've gone on several dates with someone and want to ask her to be exclusive, but I worry I'm not in the right financial position to take the relationship to that level. To start, I have a roommate. I know some women look down on that, so I haven't even brought her home. Am I being overly sensitive about my circumstances?—D.B., Topeka, Kansas*

A: Yes and no. I have a lot of compassion for men, because despite third- and fourth-wave feminism, you're still expected to be big-shot providers. Women still want a guy—a baller—who *can* pay the bill even if they want to be able to pay it themselves too. So I understand why your financial circumstances might make you feel insecure, especially given our capitalist society's tendency to equate one's value with one's bank account.

You have to ask yourself what kind of woman you want. For women who require a certain kind of lifestyle, the fact that you don't own a home would be a deal breaker. That's fine. Other women value substance over materialism. If the person you're dating judges you for having a roommate (assuming this roommate isn't your mom and you're living in her basement), she might not be the right one for you. Figure that out before you even contemplate something as serious as an exclusive relationship.

Q: *Is it possible to be in love with two people at the same time? I've been casually dating someone for three months now, and on a few occasions "I love you" almost slipped out of my mouth when we were saying good-bye. So I know I love her. But I've also realized that I'm in love with a friend of about a year. I can't stop thinking about either of them. What's the difference between love and infatuation? I've never felt so conflicted.—K.H., Dallas, Texas*

A: These are two separate questions, so let's start with the first. Yes, it is absolutely possible to be in love with two people at the same time; the practice of polyamory is based on this idea. I suggest you look into poly. It will turn you on to alternatives to monogamy and you'll also learn about a radical approach to communication, honesty and transparency that can be applied to any relationship.

And of course you feel conflicted. You're trying to pin down a feeling—love—that's as deep, vast and changing as the ocean. Love is a shape-shifter: It can be the warmth you feel for a child or the familial devotion you have for a sibling. It can be delirious and messy, like infatuation, or hot, passionate and short-term. That same infatuation may then turn into friendship, which then evolves into deeper affection. Try to pin down love and you lose. Let it be.

Your challenge is to remain honest with both women and, more important, yourself while love does its thing. You have a lot of questions to answer, but first is whether either woman feels the same way about you. Start there.

Q: *I consider myself a romantic guy, but it seems the more romantic the gesture (e.g., randomly sending flowers and "good morning" texts), the more a girl backs off. Is negging the new chivalry?—C.O., Chicago, Illinois*

A: No. Chivalry is the new chivalry because it died sometime around 2005 when Neil Strauss published *The Game: Penetrating the Secret Society of Pickup Artists* and courting a woman morphed into just picking her up. Negging is lame. Most smart, modern women are savvy enough to see through that shit. Over the years, we've developed strong immunities to stupid tricks. Don't resort to playground tactics. We're adults here.

Unfortunately, many women I know have become so distrustful of male advances that they sometimes view even straightforward romance with skepticism. You have to be willing to put in the time it takes to earn a girl's trust. There's also such a thing as doing too much, too soon, which signals that you may be co-dependent, controlling or needy. She might also just be one of those women who are into assholes, which is her problem, not yours. Consider some rejections a blessing. Go easy. Unless you're bombarding her with flowers and texts like a psycho, keep being your charming self. Eventually you'll attract a woman who appreciates your old-school values. It might even be me.

Q: *Woman to woman, what's the best way to tell a boyfriend he's not a great lover? We have sex, and I'm attracted to him, but I feel my body is simply a vehicle for his orgasms. The way he positions my legs, the focus he gives me during sex and his interest in helping me come after he comes all need improvement. I love him, but his lackluster sex skills are his worst quality.—K.A., Bangor, Maine*

A: Telling a man he sucks in the sack requires the finesse and skill of a bomb defuser. A man's identity is intertwined with his sexual prowess, and broaching the subject will expose you to booby traps, remote detonations and ambushes from his ego. Proceed with caution.

Men aren't taught how to fuck. We have to teach them—gently. Don't bring up the subject in the heat of the moment (do it over brunch or dinner instead) and don't say anything that will put him on the defensive. If you make him feel like a failure, you'll set the stage for all sorts of interpersonal problems, such as performance anxiety. Ask if he's willing to explore some new techniques in the bedroom with you. Make it about the two of you getting to know each other better. Express that you want to focus more on your orgasm, your pleasure. Most men are responsive to the idea of improving their skills.

Worst-case scenario, you've fallen in love with a selfish asshole. You'll never be satisfied, because you'll either grow resentful or end up looking outside the relationship to meet your needs. If that's the truth, fuck him—then get out.

Questions? E-mail advisor@playboy.com.

ILLUSTRATION BY **ZOHAR LAZAR**


For the Imperfect Gentleman
*Descendant of Thieves
By: Dres Ladro

PLAYBOY INTERVIEW: PATTON OSWALT

A candid conversation with the comedian, actor and social media maestro on how he carved a path out of unthinkable tragedy and found his way back to the stage

There are many ways you could describe the life of Patton Oswalt over the past year and a half. "Normal" is not one of them.

Consider: On April 21, 2016, Oswalt, an award-winning stand-up comedian and actor known for, among many other things, his nine years on the CBS sitcom *The King of Queens* and for voicing Remy in the animated hit *Ratatouille,* found that his wife of nearly 11 years had died in her sleep in their Los Angeles home. The sudden passing of crime writer Michelle McNamara, 46, sparked outpourings of support for Oswalt and his and McNamara's then seven-year-old daughter, Alice, from fans, celebrities and total strangers the world over.

On August 1, 2016, Oswalt, who for years has touched on his struggles with depression and anxiety in his stand-up routines, took to social media to grieve. He wrote on Facebook about how "102 days at the mercy of grief and loss feels like 102 years and you have shit to show for it." But even then he was able to offer a glimmer of hope: "I'm going to start telling jokes again soon. And writing. And acting in stuff and making things I like and working with friends on projects and do all the stuff I was always so privileged to get to do before the air caught fire around me and the sun died. It's all I knew how to do before I met Michelle. I don't know what else I'm supposed to do now without her."

On February 3, 2017, Oswalt revealed in a statement released to the Associated Press that, according to a report from the coroner's office, Michelle McNamara's death was caused by an undiagnosed artery-blocking heart condition, "combined with her taking the medications Adderall, Xanax and the pain medication fentanyl." Nine days later, when he won a Grammy for best comedy album for *Talking for Clapping* (he had won an Emmy for the same special the previous September), he called the award "bittersweet" but added, "I'm hoping to move beyond the bitterness."

On July 6, 2017, Oswalt announced his engagement to actress Meredith Salenger, 47, having recently tweeted, "Every time you choose love it delays the apocalypse." The couple's nerdy, charming social media repartee awakened even some cynics' faith in the restorative power of love. For the haters—Oswalt called them out as "grub worms"—the news of the relationship provided a nasty field day. Both Oswalt and Salenger reposted young widow and blogger Erica Roman's defense of their relationship and engagement. "You don't get to comment on the choices of a widower while you sit happily next to your own living spouse," Roman wrote.

"I was a fucking loudmouth. I got beaten up a few times, but if I'm going to look back on it honestly, maybe I needed to get my ass kicked because I was running my mouth."

"In talking specifically, I accidentally tripped into something universal. People who are going through this have been writing me, and they've helped me."

"For all the things I can point out about people like Trump, Ann Coulter and these alt-right MRA douchebags, I see that same jealousy, resentment and trauma in myself."

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **PATRICK MAUS**

"You didn't have to stand and watch your mundane morning turn into your absolute worst nightmare." It went viral.

These days, Oswalt sounds a bit more optimistic. In addition to a characteristically full dance card—the upcoming dramatic film *Nostalgia,* the edgy new NBC comedy series *A.P. Bio,* possible returns to *Veep* and *Mystery Science Theater 3000*—he will confront the trials of his recent life in a new comedy special, taped by Netflix and never to be repeated onstage. If there is salvation and renewal in work, Oswalt just may find it.

Born Patton Peter Oswalt on January 27, 1969 in Portsmouth, Virginia, Oswalt, along with his younger brother, Matt, was raised a well-traveled military brat. Obsessed with comic books, records, films and Dungeons & Dragons paraphernalia, Oswalt grew up in Sterling, Virginia and obtained an English degree from the College of William and Mary, where he was a member of the Phi Kappa Tau fraternity. Either in the late 1980s or early 1990s, according to his own foggy memory, he began performing stand-up. Influenced by Jonathan Winters, Richard Pryor, Bill Hicks, Steve Martin and others, he immediately knew where he was going.

Oswalt's quick-spreading reputation as a cranky, shrewdly observational comic speedball helped win him a gig writing for *MADtv* from 1995 to 1997. That in turn led to a 1997 episode of HBO's *Comedy Half-Hour,* in which he muses on looking like a lesbian, obsesses over little people and waxes ecstatic about *Xena: Warrior Princess.* His career-making gig on *The King of Queens* started in 1998 and was followed by supporting roles in projects ranging from the arty (*Magnolia*) to the asinine (*A Very Harold & Kumar 3D Christmas*). He has penned comic books (*Batman 600*) and memoirs (*Zombie Spaceship Wasteland* in 2011 and *Silver Screen Fiend* in 2015); he has doctored screenplays for DreamWorks Animation; and he's served as off-screen narrator for ABC's *The Goldbergs.* You get the sense that work became his salvation long before the horrors of 2016.

We sent writer **Stephen Rebello,** who interviewed Christopher Nolan for our last issue—and Oswalt himself for a 2014 *20Q*—to Soho House West Hollywood on the Sunset Strip, where he and Oswalt talked for hours over Clean Green smoothies and rice porridge, before detouring toward strong cups of coffee and fattening breads and spreads. Rebello reports: "It didn't surprise me that the Patton Oswalt I met four years ago has evolved. Brought to his knees by personal tragedy, he has emerged stronger and every bit as irreverent, authoritative and entertaining on virtually any topic, from the 19th century's gloomiest Russian literature to the arcane comic genius of Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman.* The pain in his eyes is unmistakable, and he may laugh less frequently these days, but when he does, it's infectious. His withering scorn for politicians on both sides of the aisle is intact, and his lashing deconstructions of pop culture and his celebrity grudges are tempered by a different sort of reflection; you could even call it balance. If you ask me, Oswalt's greatest work lies ahead."

PLAYBOY: When people approach you these days, do they want to meet the stand-up comedian, the voice from *Ratatouille,* the social media wit or someone else?

OSWALT: If I had to make a pie chart, a big part of it is still *The King of Queens.* That show is on all the time, and it really holds up.

Grief is like, "Hey, depression, I taught you everything you know, but I didn't teach you everything I know."

I remember the creators, Michael Weithorn and David Litt, and the writers saying they wanted each episode to be a solid, funny stand-alone short film about life. None of the characters really learns anything. There's a reason shows like *MASH, Cheers, Friends* and *Seinfeld* have this afterlife. Each one is a little nugget—there's no better word for it—of entertainment. People can just kick back and recharge. I loved doing that show.

PLAYBOY: You're currently shooting a co-starring role as a school principal on *A.P. Bio,* a new NBC comedy series created by Seth Meyers, Michael O'Brien and Lorne Michaels. When you do a new series, do you tend to compare it to your nine years on *The King of Queens*?

OSWALT: I hope it turns out to be the same kind of environment we had on *King of Queens.* All the writers and executive producers on that show were hilarious fucking stoners and goofballs. They were trying to do funny little stories; they weren't out to change the goddamn world. For sweeps week one year early on in the series, they did an arc where Carrie [played by Leah Remini] might have a baby, and then they lose the baby. Kevin James and the writers were all going, "This is not why we did this fucking show." So the three-episode arc for the next sweeps week was the characters finding mold in the basement, hiring a guy to get the mold out and then finding out it's going to cost too much. That was a way of saying, "Fuck, that's our sweeps-week story: mold in the basement."

We would hide all kinds of in-jokes on *King of Queens* that people are just now starting to discover. It reminds me of what *The Book of Mormon* did for Broadway musicals. Structurally, that show is completely not subversive; it's traditional. On *King of Queens,* they used a standard sitcom structure to slip in all kinds of weird stuff. *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* does the same thing: It covers deep life stuff but in ways you don't realize.

PLAYBOY: For instance?

OSWALT: On *King of Queens* there was this great story where Jerry Stiller's character, Arthur, reads about reparations, so he gives $200 to the character Deacon, played by Victor Williams, who is black. Arthur says, "I just need to say that I contributed to my reparations," and Deacon says, "Oh wow, thanks, man." Arthur finds out later that his family were immigrants—no money, never owned slaves. He goes to Deacon and says, "Going to need that $200 back," and Deacon goes, "Well, I spent it on new speakers." Then Arthur says, "Eh, that's typical." On *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* the character played by Donna Lynne Champlin is in a bake-off, and she's sure this unbeatable baker has some secret ingredient. She's determined to find out what it is but realizes it's just butter and the woman is just a better baker than she is. That applies to so much in life. Sometimes half-hour shows like these and *Veep* tackle issues with goofiness and slapstick. That's better than the hour-long shows that announce they're doing it and it's like they're patting themselves on the back.

PLAYBOY: So you're saying viewers want to be entertained first. If a statement or "message" is going to be imparted, it's better when it's smuggled in.

OSWALT: Go back to the Westerns of the late 1940s and 1950s like *Red River, 3:10 to Yuma* and *The Tall T* and you'll see gay themes. They were smuggling these themes in, and seeing these movies now we're like, "Are you kidding? How dumb were people back then?" *3:10 to Yuma* has Glenn Ford lying on a bed in a bridal suite, and there's Van Heflin, and Ford says something like "You seem real strong. You'd be

real helpful in our gang. I don't why you're stuck on that boring old farm with that woman." *The Tall T* is about a failed romance between Randolph Scott and Richard Boone, who aren't brave enough to come out of the closet. Scott goes and marries a woman and even says something like "She ain't much to look at, but oh well," which is like saying ,"I guess I'll just put on this fucking beard."

PLAYBOY: When you watch those movies, do you ever wonder which actors were and which weren't in the know?

OSWALT: The way Glenn Ford plays it, he had to have known. Van Heflin might not have. Randolph Scott may have known, because I think he was bi.

PLAYBOY: You're referring to the fact that Scott and Cary Grant shared a Santa Monica beach house and a house in Los Feliz in the 1930s and how it has been widely written about and speculated that they were lovers hiding in plain sight, some say for well over 11 years.

OSWALT: And by the way, even if I wasn't gay but I was living with Cary Grant and he wanted me to fuck him, I would. I could be married and I would still say to my wife, "It's Cary Grant. I mean, Jesus, sweetie." And my wife would go, "Oh, you get over there right now and fuck Cary Grant. Hell yeah, go ahead. Have fun, guys."

PLAYBOY: It's good to hear you laugh. You've been very up-front about the time you've had since April of last year.

OSWALT: I'm quoting the first line of C.S. Lewis's *A Grief Observed:* "No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear." It's terrifying. It's fucking terrifying.

PLAYBOY: Aside from terror, what have you experienced about grief?

OSWALT: Dude, the thing you know once you go through real chronic grief—in fact, my very first instinct was to think, I don't want anyone to go through what I'm going through right now. I wouldn't even want Donald Trump to go through what I'm feeling right now. That's how awful it is.

PLAYBOY: How have you and your daughter helped each other over the past year and a half?

OSWALT: This is going to sound selfish, but I'm forever glad that I have Alice. If I hadn't had a daughter and my wife died, we wouldn't be talking right now. I'm not saying I would be dead, but I would be a shut-in alcoholic. Everything would have shut down. I wouldn't have been about anything. But with Alice, it was and is "You got to get up." There are mornings when we're late to school because I'm sad, but I've still fucking got to get up. A night when I've had maybe one scotch with some friends, I'll say, "That's it. I've got to take her to school tomorrow." If there were no reason to wake up, I would be morbidly obese. I'd be rewatching movies I've seen a million times, and I would have wallowed and sealed myself off in a falsely comforting bath of despair. Depression is not terrifying. Depression is seductive and comforting. It sticks around so long because it creates this false sense of "Oh, here's where I'm safe." Grief is like depression's drill sergeant. It knows the tricks that depression doesn't know. Grief is like, "Hey, depression, I taught you everything you know, but I didn't teach you everything I know. Here, watch what I can do."

PLAYBOY: What's tougher to deal with, your own sadness or your daughter's?

OSWALT: The first few weeks were a little rough. There was crying at night, but she bounced back. She's a really happy little kid, and she goes to this thing called Our House, a fantastic grief group for kids. But there were times when I got really worried, like what if she's just putting on a show for me, trying to be brave but inside she's dying? There were times when she was a little kid in a house with a father who was sort of shut down and having trouble talking. There were times when I had to get her to play a game on her iPad or start a little project, and then I would say, "Oh, let me go upstairs," and I would go put my head in a pillow and just scream and cry because I didn't want to break down in front of her. She wanted to go back to school the Monday after Michelle died, and there were a lot of times those first few months when I would take her to school, pull around the block and just park and have my coffee. I'd have some books, and I would just sit there all day. I'd tell the teacher, "If anything goes wrong, call me or text me and I'll just run right over." I didn't want to leave. I just wanted to sit out there and wait. I know that kids go through sad stuff and scary stuff, so I called in favors like you wouldn't believe just to give her little special moments. Yes, that was a bit of show-biz privilege, but fuck it. If you've got it, use it.

PLAYBOY: Was it ever worse for you when you were alone?

OSWALT: I would seriously have these existential moments—not to get too dramatic—when I was like, "What if I'm the one who has died and my brain can't deal with the body horror of it, so it has created this whole other life where Trump is president, where reality doesn't make sense? What if I'm imagining my daughter here right now and I have to protect her but she's not really here? All this could be something that I created." It was freaking me out. There were moments when I truly was like, "I have plenty of evidence that I'm dead right now. Should I test this? Should I try to *Matrix* myself out of this and step in front of a bus or stab myself or something to see if this is real?"

There were moments when I was like, "I have plenty of evidence that I'm dead right now. Should I test this?"

PLAYBOY: Did you and Alice move to another house?

OSWALT: I redecorated a little, but I just thought, I'm going to need to get through the trauma of the grief and then I'll go through the trauma of moving. Moving out of the house would have been more painful than staying in it. It would have been like running away from Michelle's ghost rather than giving her ghost time to leave at its own pace.

PLAYBOY: If you could imagine an avatar for grief, what would it be?

OSWALT: An avatar of despair would be like a flavor packet you get with a Cup O' Noodles. On the packet is generic lettering that reads, "This is life," but when you taste it, it's just a flavor of life. You can't live on it and it has a weird flavor. All it does is make you hungrier, and that drives you crazy because it tastes like life, but it isn't life. When I won my Emmy, it was great, but it was like, "This is the flavor of joy, but I'm not digesting anything."

PLAYBOY: Could anything or anybody help you punch through the despair?

OSWALT: You know what really helped me break through? Sheer fucking absurdity, because life was absurd. I was obsessed with *The Eric Andre Show,* and when I would laugh until I started crying, it was like, "At least I'm laughing. Maybe there's a way out of this." What else? Tim and Eric. A lot of Mitchell and Webb—there's a sketch of theirs called "Numberwang" that I would watch over and over. I wanted sheer absurdity and nonsensicalness. I'd watch Billy Eichner over and over. I watched all of Steve Martin's old TV specials, because that was just surrealism in prime time in the late 1970s, and it's hard to believe that was on TV. I remember very clearly when I was a kid, my friend had *Another Monty Python Record* on LP, and we

started listening to it. I was like, "This is stupid. This isn't funny." I went home and listened to *A Wild and Crazy Guy,* and in the middle of it, I thought, Oh, I get Monty Python now. It's just sheer absurdity.

PLAYBOY: How has your life been changed by falling in love with Meredith Salenger, who is now your fiancée? Many movie fans have also fallen in love with her, going as far back as the 1985 movie *The Journey of Natty Gann*.

OSWALT: Here's the thing. I've been through such extremes of despair and now such extremes of joy that I think, Is that unhealthy? My fiancée and I started talking February 28, through Facebook. We have friends in common and we were messaging, and it just turned into every night for three months—February through May. We would talk about everything, writing these short novels to each other every night. It wasn't like I met this person and there was some thunderbolt. During that time, we never even spoke, never met face-to-face. We had conversations about books and philosophies and what love means and what loyalty and death are. We talked all about Michelle and what I was going through and the stuff that Meredith has gone through. We didn't meet face-to-face until May 20.

PLAYBOY: What was it like when you two finally met?

OSWALT: It was as if I had known this person since we were teenagers and we both had unrequited crushes since we were 14 and now it was finally crashing together. Even though I'm at this level of joy I didn't think I would ever feel again, I still wouldn't recommend those extremes to anybody. I'd like people to have this joy without that despair. And this is not a case of "Yeah, but see, it makes joy so much sweeter." No, this joy would have been just as sweet without the horror.

PLAYBOY: To repeat the old Hollywood cliché, if Ginger Rogers gave Fred Astaire sex appeal and Astaire gave Ginger Rogers class, what's the dynamic between you and Meredith?

OSWALT: If I really boil it down, she brings me—and I've rarely experienced this with someone—excitement and calm, which sounds contradictory. I'm excited, but because she gives me something that is so secure and calming, I don't have to question and worry about it. There are no mind games. I'm calm enough to let the excitement really grow, you know?

One of the things I missed the most about Michelle is like the old Elvis Costello lyric: "I miss talking in the dark." Meredith and I talk in the dark, at night. One of us has some half-formed thought, like "I've been thinking about..." and then we just go off and off and off. Of course, she's beautiful before she even opens her mouth. I mean, you just look at her across the room and you think, Oh my God, beautiful woman. But then you sit and talk with her, and you write back and forth, and you also see her not just in action. It means only so much if someone is nice to me; it's how you see her treat other people. She can teach me things about being kind that I thought I maybe had nailed down. Michelle was the last person I met like that, but this is another level of it, an even more intense version of that. But if I hadn't met Michelle and been changed by her the way that I was, and if she hadn't helped me grow the way that I did, I would never have deserved Meredith. With Meredith, I have a mind I can play with again.

PLAYBOY: How did you react when some people went nuts on the internet, criticizing you for moving too fast into a new relationship?

OSWALT: Oh fuck. A friend of mine who went through this exact same thing and got married nine months afterward said, "You are living with and dealing with this grief every second of your life and in therapy all the time. So you're going to get over it quicker, because you have to. For others to go, 'I don't think I'm comfortable with this,' it's like, 'Too fucking bad. Live with it every day like I did, and if you're still uncomfortable, then we can talk. But until then you've got to be quiet.' "

I'd like people to have this joy without that despair. This joy would have been just as sweet without the horror.

PLAYBOY: How have your parents, your brother and your late wife's family taken the news of your engagement?

OSWALT: When I told Michelle's sisters they were like, "Oh my God, we were so worried. We thought you were going to be alone forever." If I had passed away, no fucking way would I want someone as dynamic and unique as Michelle to be pining for me. My family was terrific. My dad served in Vietnam for three years, so he's very pragmatic, like, "Why would you make yourself miserable if you don't need to be?" He was really happy, and my mom was excited too. My mom had that classic 1950s upbringing, though, so she had one question: "Why has Meredith never been married?" I'm like, "Because she didn't want to be. You understand, if she went that long without getting married, it's because she dodged some bullets, so that's actually a really good thing." My brother was really happy, like, "Oh my God. She's smart. She's sane. It's wonderful."

PLAYBOY: You and your brother traveled a lot because of your father's military career. Have the two of you always been close?

OSWALT: Growing up, my relationship with my brother was tense only in that I liked books and movies and if I had my way I could spend hours just reading. He would say, "Well, you never played catch with me," and I would say, "Yeah, but you never discussed Dostoyevsky's 'White Nights' with me. So there." But now he's awesome. I love him.

PLAYBOY: Does being the son of a military man, a man who named that son Patton, mean there was pressure on you or your brother to serve in the military?

OSWALT: I think my dad named me Patton partially out of irony, because at that point he had been in the military for three years; he'd been wounded and seen three years of unending horror. He was always, "You and your brother will join the military over my dead body, and you will never go to war." I remember I was always very down on George W. Bush. I was like, "That fucking draft dodger," and my dad would say, "Hold up. The fact that he dodged the Vietnam draft is a positive. He saw it was going to be terrible and he found a way out of it. I couldn't figure out a way out of it. He did."

PLAYBOY: How do you most vividly remember yourself as a kid?

OSWALT: I was a fucking loudmouth. I got beaten up a few times, but if I'm going to look back on it honestly, maybe I needed to get my ass kicked because I was running my mouth at someone I shouldn't have been running it at. There were times in middle school when I was really nervous and terrified that I would become that thing I hate the most, because I was the bully's little friend. If I could get in good with the bully and help him by using my comedic skills to feed him vicious lines to say to kids, then I wouldn't get my ass kicked. It's something that really has stayed with me, and I will overreact when I see it. But then, by the time I got to high school, it just made me fucking ill, and I stopped. I'm embarrassed that it took me that long to realize it. As much as I hate people like Karl Rove, if you look at his background and the way he grew up, he was always getting picked on and bullied, so he was

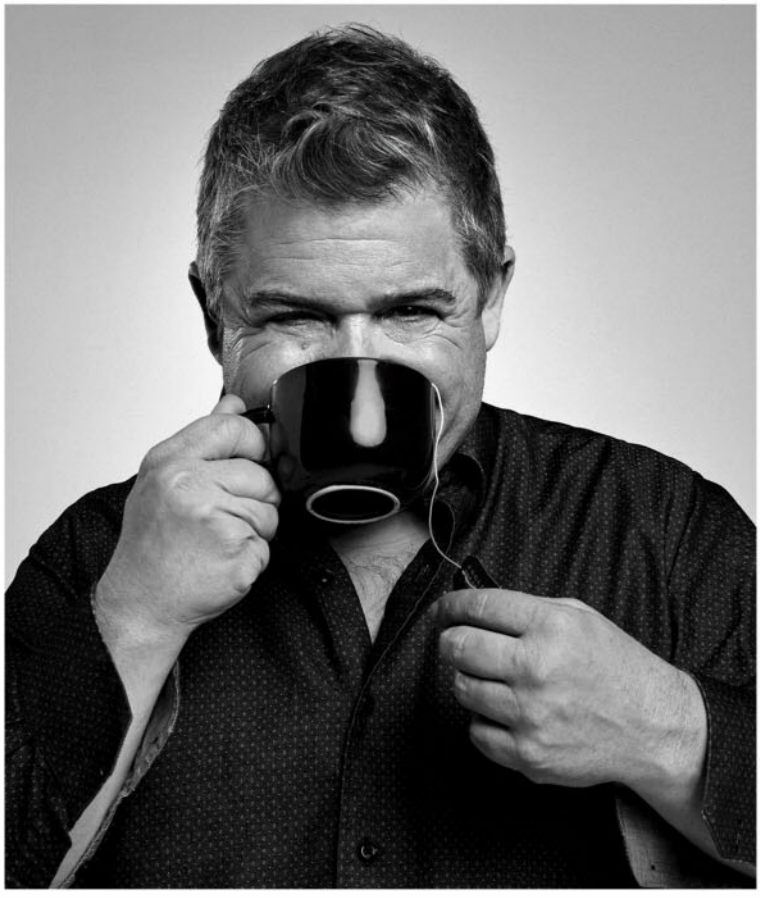
like, "I will get in with the bullies." Some of us work to move past that.

PLAYBOY: Have you gone to school reunions?

OSWALT: Yes, and it reminds me of that great moment at the end of *The King of Comedy* when the main character has clearly gone nuts, and the high school principal comes out and says something like "We were wrong about you, and we're sorry." Everyone has this thing in their mind that anyone who was ever shitty to them is going to have to eat their words. Whereas what you realize later in life is that those people who were shitty to you when you were younger? They don't remember you, or if they were to meet you again, they would go, "Oh, good for you." I've gone to my high school reunions and seen people I was shitty to, and I'll say, "Aw, man, hey, I'm sorry," and they're like, "What are you talking about?" You were never the target; it was whatever shit they were going through.

PLAYBOY: Were you one of the kings of comedy at your high school?

OSWALT: It was me and about five other friends who could recite Monty Python, Pryor and Cosby—and in this group, they were all funnier than me. I just decided to make it into a vocation. But it was a really good preview for my circle of friends now—all the comedians I hang out with are way funnier than I am. I don't believe in false humility. I think I'm an excellent comedian, but the reason I'm as good as I am is because I hang out with way funnier people. So in my mind, I have their voices going, "Maybe don't go with the first joke you came up with. Go further. What's the next twist we can do here?" And there's nothing worse for a comedian than being the funniest one in the circle.



PLAYBOY: What feels more rewarding when you're doing stand-up: getting a big response from the crowd or getting a response from that one comedian friend you know is a tough critic?

OSWALT: What has become the biggest reward for me is finding a way to get a response from a crowd with something about which my friends have said, "I don't know if you can make that work." That's what comedians appreciate: "Wow. I didn't think that was going to work." It's thrilling when Sarah Silverman, Dave Chappelle and Louis C.K. are so funny, because for comedians it's like, "They got laughs with that? Wow!" Dave Attell starts with the filthiest premise or with something that you're like "The fuck are you doing?" and then spins it into something that even people who are offended will go, "Fuck, that is funny." Brian Regan will start off with the most picked-to-death, hacky subjects where you're like, "Come on, dude." And then he finds this new angle, and you think, Oh my fucking.... Everyone else thought of that same premise, but no one went where he did, and the crowd literally can't get their breath watching him. Two comedian friends went to see him, and they said, "We were punching each other, we were so happy." Brian Regan is like a reminder of when people say, "Oh, not another fucking zombie movie," but the fucking zombie movie turns out to be *Shaun of the Dead*. Or it's like Anthony Bourdain making haddock. "Just look at what I can do with nothing. Can you do this?" It's very intimidating.

PLAYBOY: What would you say was your nadir as a stand-up?

OSWALT: It was after 9/11 and during the lead-up to the Iraq war. I'd been on *King of Queens* four years. The show was very popular, and I was selling out clubs, just coasting on that. I was in Pittsburgh doing a comedy club and the audience booed me off the stage for talking about the war and doing jokes about George Bush. People were dumping drinks on me and throwing shit. They had to lock me in the office while they cleared the crowd. People were down at the bar, screaming, "Send his ass down here! Motherfucker!" I wasn't some liberal flamethrower, and what I said wasn't that controversial. The nadir was that I got lazy. I allowed *King of Queens* to bring my crowd without asserting who I was. Success brings you the privileges, but you don't get to be yourself. Your nadir is when you're taking success for granted and becoming this automaton who doesn't give a shit about what you're doing.

PLAYBOY: Getting back to your childhood, what was your parents' attitude toward sexuality and porn?

OSWALT: I looked at any porn I could get my hands on, trust me. They found some PLAYBOYS under my bed, and that was my fault because I had hidden them so badly, and I should have been punished. I was more into finding porn in places I didn't even realize I was finding it, like illustrations in *Heavy Metal* by Richard Corben and movies like *Village of the Giants*. I had fantasies of giantesses. There was also weird sexual stuff in places that I don't think many people realized. That scene in *The Big Sleep* with Dorothy Malone in the bookstore with Humphrey Bogart was maybe one of the most erotic things ever shown on TV. I mean, in *Written on the Wind* she's ridiculously and contemporarily sexy and beautiful. Look, Lauren Bacall is beautiful, though in *The Big Sleep* she's actually sexy, like you can see fucking her and everything else is, "Eh, okay." But Dorothy Malone, Ella Raines, Bettie Page, I could see fucking them—like erotic fucking them, because they're alive on that screen. Same with Simone Simon in *Cat People,* except that she's less sexy and it's more like you just want to protect her. I'm being creepy, but I want to have her under a glass dome and just look at her.

PLAYBOY: Was being funny an entrée to girls when you were growing up?

OSWALT: An entrée? Trying to be funny was *the* entrée—the only one I had. I have to come to terms with the fact that I do not have *those* looks for women. I doubt I would be engaged to my fiancée if she had just glanced at me across a room. It was us talking. I mean, it can be very frustrating when you're like, "*Grrrr,* these fucking good-looking assholes." They've probably racked up 10 times the number of women you're going to sleep with, and the woman you end up with has probably hooked up with one of them in the past.

PLAYBOY: Who would be the right movie director to shoot the screen version of you losing your virginity?

OSWALT: Unfortunately, it would be either Lina Wertmüller or John Waters. Here's why: I was 18. It was Beach Week in Ocean City, Maryland, at the Islander Motel, with my high school girlfriend since junior year. Later, we went all through college and it was one of those tumultuous on-and-off things. Anyway, back to the Islander Motel. We had done everything *but,* and it was just, "We gotta do this." Both sunburned. Fucking. We had the TV on because the walls were thin. It was MTV and the songs were fucking great—like Cheap Trick's "Tonight It's You." Then, when I'm like, "My God, I'm going to come," George Michael's "I Want Your Sex" comes on. I'm like, "I don't want to lose my virginity to this song!" But I was so fucking turned on, I was going to come anyway, even if they had started playing "Deutschland Über Alles." So it was a great Wertmüller or Waters moment. Of course there's going to be a bit of comedy in the irony of it.

PLAYBOY: Anyone who has seen you in concert or read your Facebook page or Twitter feeds knows how passionate you are about politics. How has Trump's presidency made an impact on your grieving and on your state of mind?

OSWALT: One thing about grieving is I don't totally trust a lot of my emotions and perceptions about the world we're in right now. I see a lot of it through the funnel of loss and damage and covering up. I'm trying to understand people rather than just write them off.

PLAYBOY: Even those people in positions of authority and influence who can do and are doing great harm?

OSWALT: Take someone like Ann Coulter, who is so hateful. If you just take three steps back, you can see trauma, loss, frustration. It's not that she's mean; it's that she's hurt. If you look at how Trump and his siblings were raised, what we're seeing is the tail end of his having been hurt his whole life. His whole life since his childhood has been about vengeance and lashing out. He also came along during a time when a lot of the neoliberal experiment had kind of turned on the people it pretended to be helping.

PLAYBOY: You're not saying Trump should have been elected president?

OSWALT: No. But what if you're an American and you're watching your job go away and you're watching this professional chattering class just talking *blah, blah, blah* about theories? Then you see this guy Trump, and he says, "Fuck them! You're great!" Even if you suspect he's lying, if it will upset someone powerful, even for a minute——

PLAYBOY: You mean that person might vote for Trump?

OSWALT: I understand doing shit out of vengeance. I understand kicking at the world out of a feeling of powerlessness. If we don't start addressing that in this country, we're going to get someone way worse than Trump way quicker than we think. I had opportunities to do some pretty shitty stuff in my grief that would have been very easy to justify, like "Well, look what life did to me, so fuck it. I'm the wronged hero here." I could have done shit out of fear and frustration.

If you look at how Trump was raised, what we're seeing is the tail end of his having been hurt his whole life.

PLAYBOY: Like what?

OSWALT: Shitty things I could have written. Mean things I could have said. Using my platform in that way. Some dark roads I could have gone down drinking-wise that I saw starting to happen before I said to myself, Okay, that was a mistake. Some relationships I could have had that would have been out of a sheer feeling of "I just want a warm body here. I don't give a shit." And that would have been very shitty of me to do to another person.

PLAYBOY: So you're calling for a more honest and nuanced examination of why so many Americans voted the way they did.

OSWALT: The thing about Trump is that he's someone who will leave decades of destruction behind him. Trump is a trauma victim. When he's lashing out, he's going through some serious psychological trauma, and no one has addressed it. I retweeted something someone wrote: "I don't want evil people to die. I want evil people to get good." A lot of people who are hurt are like, "I'm just going to spread hurt. I've earned it. I get to do that." What is the motivation of every villain? Someone hurt them. It's like the line Michael Penn always said to me that was then used in *Magnolia:* "We might be through with the past, but the past ain't through with us." For all the things I can point out about people like Trump, Ann Coulter and these alt-right MRA douchebags, I see that same jealousy, resentment and trauma in myself. I'm trying to deal with that. I no longer want to control other people; I want to control myself. If I can control myself, then I can actually do better in the world.

PLAYBOY: Have you stopped trying to talk to any conservative or alt-right people?

OSWALT: I've dealt with those people before, all my life—these frustrated failed comedians. There's no changing them. All they want to hear is "I'm funny too, right?" And you're like, "Well, no, I can't say that, because you're not." I know plenty of right-wing people who are genuinely funny, but they're professional comedians. You know how I can instantly tell if someone's a failed comedian? They'll say, "I'm a provocateur." Oh, I've got it. You couldn't make it as a comedian.

PLAYBOY: Has your anxiety level spiked since Trump and company have been at the helm?

OSWALT: The thing I was always terrified about with George W. Bush and Osama bin Laden, the one thing they really had in common was they both sincerely believed their god had selected them. For a while, the fate of the world was being decided by resentful sons of wealth who hated their dads and had gone to extremes because of personal trauma in their lives. They believed God was saying, "You have a score to settle. I've got your back, buddy." As scary as the Trump years are, that Bush–Bin Laden shit was cranked up to Tolkien-level evil and chaos. Bush was a mediocrity being controlled by an evil genius. Trump is a mediocrity surrounded by other mediocrities. There's no evil genius in the mix. We don't have a Palpatine or a Tarkin in there. We just have cave trolls.

PLAYBOY: What about the Putin connection?

OSWALT: This wasn't a 40-year plan by Putin. Putin quickly saw an opportunity and ran with it, but there was no plan. Trump doesn't have

any plans. Whatever was the last thing someone said to him, he'll parrot. He was talking about the wall between California and Mexico being transparent. That's because he was in a meeting and someone said, "Financially, we have to have transparency." He isn't even a Chauncey Gardiner [protagonist of Jerzy Kosinski's novella *Being There*] because Chauncey Gardiner at least had an ethos: You plant trees, then they die, and then you plant them again. Trump is like Chauncey Gardiner but with no training. He doesn't even know how to plant shit. In Trump's mind finally America has a good president, a truly historical president who is changing things.

When people say, "Trump is so infantile. Look at the goddamn food he eats," I think, No, he's eating the way I eat when I'm depressed. He wants comfort. He wants a rush of carbs, salt, sugar and something fried that will take him back to his childhood, because he's miserable. If you took him to a truly fine, expensive restaurant, he would just fucking hate it. If you took him to a really good barbecue joint, it would kill him watching these guys being happy while they make their beef brisket, sweating and toiling but saying, "This is what I want to do." But to be brought KFC on his jet and to show everyone, that's his little moment of happiness, because he can shove it in people's faces. Look at all the gold and jets; for him it's "I'm fucking miserable." That's why he talks about losers, "sad" and winning: There have to be moments when he looks over at someone making a sandwich and sees a peace in their eyes that he has never felt. It must enrage him.

PLAYBOY: Where is the resistance from Democrats, let alone the self-examination that should have happened after losing the election?

OSWALT: Oh, I don't see any looking into a deep, dark, truthful mirror on the part of the Democrats right now. That might be because of some entrenched older-generation people who need to make way. There's a great podcast, *Chapo Trap House*—they call themselves the Dirtbag Left—that talks about this. Right now, there are too many other Democrats who are entrenched and comfortable. I see them as World War I generals saying, "Send another wave of machine guns." Or they're the advisors left over from the Korean War. They don't understand that there's a new enemy. They don't get it. Look, in a sick way, there will be some very concerned and committed leftists who will be sad to see Trump go because then their daily outrage is taken away. And you know what? I might even end up being guilty of that. We'll see. I hope not, because a lot of people are really hurting and afraid right now because of him—specifically because of him—so it would be good if he were gone. But there's money to be made in the disaster that is Trump, even for people on the left.

PLAYBOY: Where do you spend your political money?

OSWALT: My plan once Trump got in was to put money not into so-called "political organizations" but to signal-boost smaller charities that we're going to need—social organizations like NARAL and the American Indian College Fund. I got on the President's Circle of Planned Parenthood. And Alice's Kids, which anonymously pays off school-lunch debt at high-risk schools. Go to a little independent bookstore, go see a little independent film, do things that our administration doesn't value, the kind of entrepreneurship in the arts that, to them, is like "Fuck all that shit. Why run a little bike shop and make just enough to pay your rent, you fucking losers? You should turn it into a giant chain and blight the landscape."

PLAYBOY: What happens when the Rock and Kid Rock and—why not?—Scott Baio and Tila Tequila run and maybe win?

OSWALT: We're fucked. I love the Rock. It's a brutally hard job to be an action hero. Look at all the guys who tried to do it and it was unwatchable. That doesn't mean you're going to be a good president. Arnold Schwarzenegger was an amazing actor and businessman and a terrible governor. He fucked our state up. Now he's a very effective critic. If you notice, all his critiques come from, "Hey, look, I know. I tried doing this, and I fucked it up." One of the most moral men alive, Jimmy Carter, was a terrible president, but he's an amazing ex-president who takes people to task. If he had gotten his way as president, our country would be so fucking better right now. He was saying, "We've got to get off oil for the environment and because it would cut the knees out from under the Middle East, and then they won't be able to fund terrorism." He saw all this, and people said, "Get out of here, you dumb hippie." In a sick way, you could say George W. Bush and Ronald Reagan were amazing politicians, because as horrible as they were, they pretty much passed all the evil shit they wanted.

PLAYBOY: Before we wrap, let's talk about your upcoming special.

OSWALT: It's called *Annihilation,* and it's about just that. In it, I don't back away from the fact that here I am doing some comedy, and now I gotta do a hard segue into the year I just went through. It gets really dark, and I hope I end it on a hopeful note. I tell this insane, unnecessarily dirty, going-out-of-my-way-to-be-really-gross joke that Michelle and I would always riff on—it's about pitching movies. Michelle thought it was hilarious. She liked it when things were, to quote Liz Phair, "obnoxious, funny, true and mean," and so that's where I went with it.

People were saying, "You should do a one-man show." I'm like, "No, I'm a stand-up comedian. I don't want to exploit Michelle and Alice for some bigger piece." And also, I wrote very specifically about what I went through grief-wise, and it seems to have helped a lot of people. In talking specifically, I accidentally tripped into something universal. People who are going through this have been writing me, and they've helped me. There's this horrific club we're in, and we're all about "I want to make sure that person's okay." That's your first instinct, just to go, "Hey, let me reach out."

PLAYBOY: Your new movie, *Nostalgia,* is about characters dealing with loss and grief. Did you have any ambivalence about doing it?

OSWALT: I trusted the director, Mark Pellington. I am, literally, in only one scene, but in that scene I'm grieving over a child. I got a little angry with Mark and kind of had a breakdown on the set, like, "What the fuck? For real, dude, why the fuck are you making me do this right now? I'm not ready for this. I understand you have the best intentions in your heart"—because he went through the same thing I did. [Pellington's wife died in 2004, leaving him with a two-year-old daughter.] "But goddamn, dude, would you have wanted to do this?" I think he meant well, like he thought it would be a catharsis, but it's kind of not.

PLAYBOY: So, despite everything, is it getting better for you at all?

OSWALT: It's no slam on Meredith, but I've been conditioned to believe this level of joy always gets yanked away from you. So I'm cautiously hopeful. Cautiously happy. Does that make sense? ■

It's called Annihilation, and it's about just that. It gets really dark, and I hope I end it on a hopeful note.

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THE BODY ELECTRIC

Its recent clients range from Bowie to Lorde, but when we take over Electric Lady—Jimi Hendrix's legendary Greenwich Village studio—the wind cries Daria

PHOTOGRAPHY BY

CHRISTOPHER VON STEINBACH


ELECTRIC LADY


ELECTRIC


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lexicon
PRIME TIME II
SUPER PRIME TIME
INSTANT PHASER
EVENTIDE CLOCKWORKS
ALTEC POWER


ELECTRIC
LADY


TELETRONIX
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SPACE STATION
MSP-128

THE PUBLICLY TRADED HUMAN GOES NSFW

For almost 10 years, Mike Merrill has sold shares of his very existence. Now he and his 600-plus shareholders are hoping an erotica scheme will boost his sagging stock price

If you really knew Mike Merrill, you would know that it is very un–Mike Merrill–like to lie bare-chested on the floor with his best friend's girlfriend—in a skimpy bra and thong—nestled in his arms. But one rainy spring afternoon, that's exactly what he's doing.

But listen, it's totally cool! Because the other thing you would know about Mike Merrill, if you knew him, is that he doesn't do anything extreme without asking for permission from roughly 615 people, many of whom are like you: They don't know him either.

BY **LEAH SOTTILE**

Merrill, a slick-dressed, slick-haired, steely-eyed 40-year-old with a firm handshake and a warm smile, is best known to the world as the first publicly traded human being. For the past nine years, the Portland, Oregon resident has allowed perfect strangers to purchase shares of his life, giving them the ability to vote on his major decisions. (Don't go looking for him in *The Wall Street Journal;* the shares are available only via Merrill's website.) The more shares they own of KmikeyM—short for Kenneth Michael Merrill—the more control they have.

Some do actually know him. His father, who once served as a Christian missionary in Africa, owns shares. So do his brothers, Gene and Curt; his girlfriend, Marijke Dixon; and his best friend, Marcus Estes. Most of the hundreds of people who control Merrill don't know him in real life but are compelled by the idea of buying the right to make someone do what they decide.

The whole thing pisses off a lot of people. "It's a really complicated form of prostitution," wrote one Redditor about the project. Another called it slavery.

" 'My shareholders made me do it!' probably won't fly in front of a judge after you're arrested for masturbating in the produce section of your local supermarket," quipped another.

"Sounds good until you get a divorce and the ex becomes majority shareholder," wrote one more. "Now kick yourself in the dick until I say when. Now he has to kick his own dick."

Merrill does control what his shareholders vote on, and in nine years, dick kicking and public exposure haven't come up. Still, most people who hear about the project ask the same question: Why the fuck would someone do this?

In 2013, *Wired* chronicled how being publicly traded tanked his romantic relationship and how Merrill left it up to the 16 shareholders he had at the time to decide if he should get a vasectomy. (They decided by a narrow majority that he should not.)

Actor Jason Bateman read about Merrill and optioned the TV and movie rights to his story, likely compelled by the very same "Why the fuck?" question. Matt Lauer, of the *Today* show, also wondered why the fuck—in eloquent daytime television terms, of course—and invited Merrill to the NBC studio, where he asked him, "Do you worry about disappointing people?"

"I worry about disappointing myself," Merrill immediately answered.

By capitalist standards, the period following his *Today* appearance was Merrill's peak, with shares topping out at $25. If 2013 was his Mount Everest, 2014 was his Mount St. Helens, post-eruption. By early 2015, shares had dipped as low as $2.18. All along, Merrill has touched none of his investors' money, instead acting like a bank, depositing the funds in an account and holding them for the day the shareholders might cash out. In the meantime? "Every month I pay the IRS," Merrill says. How much? "A good amount."

"HE'S A WEIRDO—A CONCEPTUAL BUSINESS ARTIST PLAYING WITH SIGNIFIERS OF PRIVILEGE."

"He loses money," Dixon, a bookkeeper by trade, flatly tells me.

This winter, Merrill seemed to be at a crossroads with the project. He was staring down his 40th birthday, and though he had once asked shareholders what color to dye his hair and what to watch on Netflix, he just didn't have as many questions for them as he used to.

And so he proposed something totally new: a *Fifty Shades of Grey*–inspired book of erotic fan fiction called *Publicly-Traded, Privately Held,* featuring a publicly traded businessman named Kenneth Michelangelo Maximilian whose most carnal moments are decided by voters. His investors loved the sexy *Choose Your Own Adventure*–style idea, approving it by a 96 percent vote. "He's using it as an occasion to explore, for lack of a better word, his kinkier persona," says Estes. "Mike's a pretty straightforward vanilla dude." (*Vanilla* is a word Merrill also uses to describe himself.)

The book serves as a springboard to launch his latest experiment: Weejee, a decision-making engine that will enable others like him to have a crowd of people vote on their life. And it's also why he's rolling around on the floor of a cable-access studio with his best friend's girlfriend, a doe-eyed brunette with long bangs named Cecilia Warbington. Keeping with modern erotica trends, Estes is filming Warbington and Merrill for a steamy, low-budget book trailer.

Estes, a tiny-ponytailed Alabaman in purple sneakers and a gold-glittered sweatshirt, is standing over Merrill and Warbington, the drop-crotch of his sweatpants stretched taut as he straddles the pair.

"Here's the vibe," says Estes from behind the lens of a camera. "That hazy, I-just-fucked-a-stranger thing, you know what I'm talking about?" Warbington and Estes giggle. Merrill looks like he's in hell. Estes shoots Merrill slowly peeling nylons from Warbington's legs, running his hand across her skin. All the while, Merrill's face is tight. He looks miserable, guilty—his eyes worried, as if someone here might mistakenly think he enjoys this.

Afterward, at a nearby bar, Merrill knocks back a couple of whiskey shots before ordering a beer and a bowl of brussels sprouts. In a bar filled with grubby hipsters, Merrill, in a gray spring suit, looks as though he stopped in on his way to a wedding. Without Warbington's legs in his face, he's the Merrill I've been talking to for months: friendly, laughing through his teeth. But even with a little liquor in him, Merrill's eyes often finish stories and sentences for him—searching, as if to assess whether the person he's talking to is pleased by what he's saying. As if Mike is back there in his brain, hiding behind KmikeyM.

I ask him about the erotica project. What if trolls pick up on it and make his character a *Scheisse* freak? A zoophiliac? Things I haven't thought of?

"That would be amazing!" he exclaims, swallowing a sip. "Because collectively, that's what a group of people decided."

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **PADRAIC O'MEARA**

"IT'S NOT A GAME, BECAUSE A GAME IS A SAFE PLACE. THIS IS REAL AND THERE ARE CONSEQUENCES."

But a few days later, Merrill is less than enthusiastic about crowdsourced decisions. On the morning of his 40th birthday, he puts a shareholder-approval rating up for a vote: A yes vote means "KmikeyM is a ship on the right course," and a no vote means shareholders "expect some changes."

"I voted no," Dixon tells me that night.

In fact, when the voting closes, the shareholders—including both of his brothers and a friend he has known since elementary school—have overwhelmingly voted no. "Let's be real, your stock price has been static or dwindling," wrote one shareholder. They demanded more accountability so they know Merrill is doing what they say.

How did it feel to be told his shareholders were unhappy, I ask him a few days later on Slack.

He types back immediately: "It was horrible."

• • •

For months I talked to friends, family, collaborators, perfect strangers and Merrill himself, trying to wrap my head around why in God's name a person would want other people to control his life.

They told me Merrill is a lifelong contrarian. He's antiauthority and pro-capitalist. He's an artist, a game maker, a system breaker, a man with no practical skills but with endless ideas. He's an Army veteran, an early blogger and an infuriating board-game adversary because he always finds a way to bend the rules.

For years, though, Mike Merrill was a kid living in ice-crusted Coldfoot, Alaska—one of the few towns above the arctic circle reachable by road, a place with a population that, according to recent census data, peaked at 13 people. You might have seen it on *Ice Road Truckers*.

Winter there meant months of darkness, and summer meant a sun that never set. Merrill and his brothers rode state-owned three-wheelers through the wilderness. They balanced on top of oil pipelines on cross-country skis. Bears prowled the edges of their fenced yard. The boys coaxed moose to eat through their bedroom windows but got mad "when they'd stick their heads in and eat our comic-book collection," Gene says.

Merrill's Christian father and mother—who declined to be interviewed for PLAYBOY—homeschooled their children and worked as an Alaska state trooper and the head of a rescue squad, respectively. "We were pressed into service," Gene says. "I was dispatching helicopters to the rescue squad on the shortwave in the fifth grade."

Before high school, the family moved south to the Kenai Peninsula, where they lived in Soldotna, a city with a population in the thousands. The urge to explore this new place was irresistible, and at night, when the sun was still high in the sky, Gene and Mike sneaked out of the house, basking in their freedom in the ways that only nerds would: riding bikes, eating at an all-night diner, scheming how best to rearrange the marquees of local businesses and making a homemade zine with a friend named Josh Berezin. After graduation, Merrill enlisted in the Army and was stationed in Germany. For two and a half years he served as a military police officer with ambitions of following in his father's law enforcement footsteps. But he eventually realized he didn't want to wield authority; he wanted to test it.

He recalls that when sergeants would demand he "drop and give me 20," Merrill would perform the push-ups, only to pop up and ask, "Five more for country?" Then, "Three more for our fallen soldiers?" Then, "One more for God?"

But when it came to his job, Merrill says, "I was enforcing the rules as I interpreted them"—which meant never writing a ticket as an MP. He was asked to leave the Army after failing a routine physical fitness test and repeatedly refusing to perform his duties.

In 1998 he joined Berezin in Portland, finding people who, unlike those in the military, admired Merrill's knack for dissecting rules. He soon met a woman who, for the purposes of this story, has asked to be called "the Professor," a tenure-track college professor who will ghostwrite *Publicly-Traded, Privately Held*. When she first encountered Merrill, he had blue hair. "I remember him telling me he could do push-ups with me sitting on his back," she says.

Soon, everyone around him was watching Merrill transform. At punk shows in grimy warehouse spaces around the city, Merrill would "show up in a suit, carrying a briefcase," the Professor says. He started dying his temples

gray, brandished a pipe, wore a smoking jacket. Merrill became known for, if nothing else, consistently overdressing in underdressed Portland. When he co-founded the blogging collective Urban Honking, even Portland reporters observed Merrill's strange affection for suits, noting in a 2006 article that his "pinstriped suit jackets and jaunty neckties make him the best-dressed" of the site's founders.

"It's almost like business cosplay," says Claire Evans, half of the band Yacht and an early shareholder who met Merrill during Urban Honking's heyday. He likes spreadsheets and flowcharts and "complicated desk organizers," she says.

"He's a weirdo," she adds. "I think of him as a conceptual business artist playing with these signifiers of privilege and seeing how they can be exploited."

On November 4, 2003, Merrill keyed an idea into his computer: What if a person sold shares of his life? When he couldn't stop thinking about it, he realized he should become that person. "I would rather be an investor; I would rather buy into this and have control over someone," he recalls. "But no one else was going to do it, so I guess I had to."

"Nine years ago he was a disorganized and filthy person. He didn't wash his dishes. He didn't clean the house. He was always late," the Professor tells me. "He wanted to clean up his act; he wanted to have a career that was meaningful. Eventually he wanted to find a girlfriend."

Being "a performative businessman," his best friend Estes says—whether it's Mike Merrill or KmikeyM or Kenneth Michelangelo Maximilian—"is actually projecting a self that is in command, in control and very orderly and principled and objective-oriented."

As his business-suit-wearing self, Merrill cofounded a start-up with Estes called Chroma, which raises money for good causes. (Chroma has since laid Merrill off.) But he also dreamed up the idea of placing his personal stamp of approval on websites by offering to tattoo their names on his arm. (He's done this twice.)

"Is this a game?" I ask him one evening in April. We're sitting in Merrill's garage, which he has converted into an office space. The walls are covered in blue and green Post-its listing the ideas he's working on. (One, Chess Fight, reimagines the game of chess; another, Nookids, is a nootropic-pill subscription program.) He bristles. "It's not a game, because a game is a safe place. A game is like we're going to set rules, and within the game space, I can kill you," he says. "I can't kill you in real life. It's not a game in that this is real and there are real consequences."

He tells me about a time he participated in a local art show in which he erected a corporate trade-show booth in a white-box gallery, complete with a vinyl banner and the cardboard cutout that's here in the corner. He staffed the booth with an aggressive salesman (that would be Estes) peddling shares to gallery-goers.

"So this is art, then?"

"I feel it's more fully incorporated than that," he replies. "It doesn't belong in a gallery. It doesn't belong to people who only want to talk about art. I guess I look at it more like a game than art."

"But you said it wasn't a game," I say.

He laughs.

• • •

"It's a game—I think it's a game," Dixon, Merrill's girlfriend and shareholder number 160, says to me a few weeks later. We're sitting in the lobby of a laser-tag arena south of Portland, where Merrill has chosen to host his 40th birthday party. She's sipping on a travel mug filled with rosé. "Everything's a game to Mike."

While Merrill is unflappably friendly, grinning his way through the most uncomfortable questions, Dixon is the opposite: stoic, stern, maybe even a little annoyed about having to keep talking about this weird game happening inside her own life. She's petite and hauntingly beautiful: long, straight brown hair and sad eyes that, unlike Merrill's, are unwavering and sure. The couple boasts a pair of unique noses—hers round, his sharp—and it's hard not to wonder what sort of strange and stunning progeny they'd have. While Merrill often seems eager to please, Dixon is blunt. And when she does smile, she gives you the sense that you've earned it.

Above: Dixon and Merrill.
Below: Merrill on the day of his trailer shoot.

Dixon says there's more to Merrill's game than just having a good time. It's *not* a good time, in fact—not for her. And it gives people the idea that Merrill has money, when, she claims, he doesn't. "I find it totally irritating," she says. Still, she reminds me, being publicly traded has been part of their relationship since the very beginning.

"He takes it to a place that can be paralyzing," she says. "He's not confident in his decision making."

Dixon says that sometimes she would like to see her boyfriend get punked, faced with a real opponent in this game that everyone is playing with him.

"He fucks with everything," she says, a little spite and a little wine in her words. "Somebody should fuck with him."

She points at the crowd that has come to this weird Portland suburb for a grown man's laser-tag party. Across the room, Merrill leans against a token machine flanked by arcade games. He's dressed for his 40th birthday in a shirt and slacks and a red necktie, his hair perfectly combed.

"I mean, why are we all here to play laser tag? On a Wednesday?" she says, laughing. "Mike Merrill."

• • •

Four years after Merrill went public, Estes, the Professor and Merrill's ex-girlfriend were among those who voted to approve shareholder control of whom he dated. Berezin, the guy he made zines with in high school, voted no—and lost by a vote of 86 percent to 14 percent.

A year later, Berezin, Evans and the Professor were on the winning side of a vote that approved Merrill's "general relationship agreement" with Dixon, which includes a clause that dictates that the couple have sex "at minimum three times per week excepting periods of illness, separation and conditions that prevent the enjoyment of sex." That time, Estes voted no.

By Merrill's 37th birthday, votes began to come with hot debate—particularly votes that would amend his contract with Dixon. "I am

concerned by the provision in this contract that allows the couple to form a legally binding relationship without further shareholder input," wrote one shareholder. Estes agreed: "I want to continue to assert my support for Mike's romantic union with shareholder 160. But I also agree with the contention that pre-approval for a life event as significant as marriage deserves its own shareholder vote. I vote nay."

All of which raises the question: Does he actually do what they say? What if he wore jeans instead of the mandated Brooks Brothers suits? What if he said "Fuck it" and painted his house pink instead of voter-approved black? Or if he had his own plans for his relationship with shareholder 160?

"Then people sell shares and leave," he says. "They remember and go back and say, 'You're not doing the things that you said. This isn't fun.' That's a broken system. They would sell, and the share price would drop. And then no one would want to play anymore."

I wonder if he's thinking of the November 2016 vote, when shareholders approved the "Proposal Proposal"—which deemed he could officially ask Dixon to marry him—by 99 percent.

As of the first days of June, he has not asked the question. "It's pending," he tells me.

Dixon says Merrill "enjoys his life," that he's positive "to a fault," but that his "happiness is an indicator of a lack of judgment."

"I don't want to live a normal life," he tells me later. "So I'm happy to be poked and prodded away from that by the shareholders."

But if his shareholders see this as a game, do they also see how seriously Merrill takes it? Sure, a vasectomy vote is a funny, stakes-raising stunt, but would they still want to play if they knew a little more? For instance, that he told his girlfriend at the time that if she wanted him to listen to her, she should buy more shares? That he has told Dixon the same? "My primary loyalty is to my shareholders," he says. "Either you're okay with being second or you're going to have to buy in. It doesn't work otherwise. It breaks it, and I don't want to break it."

One day in early June, Merrill messages me. He's in Los Angeles to meet with a company that's pitching a KmikeyM reality show. He and Dixon are "in a not-great spot," he says. Every time he talks about it, he says, he starts crying.

We don't talk on the phone because he's afraid he'll cry again. But even as we type back and forth, I feel a lump in my throat. In the months I've been talking to Merrill, this is the rawest, the most real, the most honest I've seen him. Every time I've pushed him—for juicy details about wanting to star in an erotic book, to explain why his parents won't talk to me—he has danced around the details, ending lines of questioning with a friendly, firm businessman's smile that tells me I will get no further.

"My inability to share feelings and go deep with people is related to both the project and to the problems with us. So the project is more a representation of the issue than the issue itself," he says. "And in realizing that, I'm trying to open up."

Everything to Merrill is a project that can be tackled and flowcharted and spreadsheeted. I ask him if maybe that's the problem—has disappearing into a character made him forget how to be himself?

Nope. And he thinks he can learn even more about himself if he dives deeper into his new erotic persona.

"HE FUCKS WITH EVERYTHING. SOMEBODY SHOULD FUCK WITH HIM."

"If I'm able to take on more Michelangelo, then I should be able to relate, to be better, express feelings and be more in touch with my own desires," he says. "It's funny to realize that part of my personal relationship problems is that I've been hiding in a persona, and then my next project is to create a new one. Soon I'll have a whole superhero team."

KmikeyM was the guy who told his girlfriends to buy shares. "KmikeyM doesn't cry; he opens Excel," Merrill says.

Michelangelo might be the 40-year-old guy who decides you can take a game too far.

• • •

So how the fuck does this end?

With his relationship floundering, Merrill opened up a "100-share bounty" to the shareholders who found him a new job. By late July, he was in L.A., punching the clock and brainstorming ways to pair a tie with shorts. Meanwhile, he's on the verge of enabling others to have their life decisions voted on via Weejee. He'll always be the publicly traded man, but he says Weejee will allow other people to get stakeholders to help in their lives too. "That interaction is actually the fun, valuable thing that keeps you going," he says.

Estes has never doubted that Merrill will probably do this for the rest of his life. "I think this is a weirdly powerful way to expose people to the idea that all this stuff is more fun together," Estes says. But will other people take their games as far as he will? As he has set it up, Merrill's game ends only when he dies—at which point a life-insurance policy will distribute all KmikeyM funds equally among shareholders.

So even though he loses money on this project, even though it means people he'll never meet will guide the course of his life, even though his shareholders will tell him he's doing a bad job and it puts his relationships in a tailspin and people like me will continue to be bewildered by it all, Merrill is relentlessly committed. To change. To refine. To be a better investment for people who care about him, as well as for people who will never shake his hand.

And the longer he does it, the more he bends the rules of the game he designed—the game of which he and he alone remains the creator and mastermind.

One morning he sends a message to inform me of a potential vote—called "Engineering Conflict"—that would "create an account and put one share in it for every journalist/reporter who writes/has written about KmikeyM to create a conflict of interest. Motivate them to write more flattering stories because they are now invested!"

What the fuck?

"Let's say I did that to you. It would say 'There's your name, there's your picture,' " he explains later, over the phone. "I think it will go up to a vote."

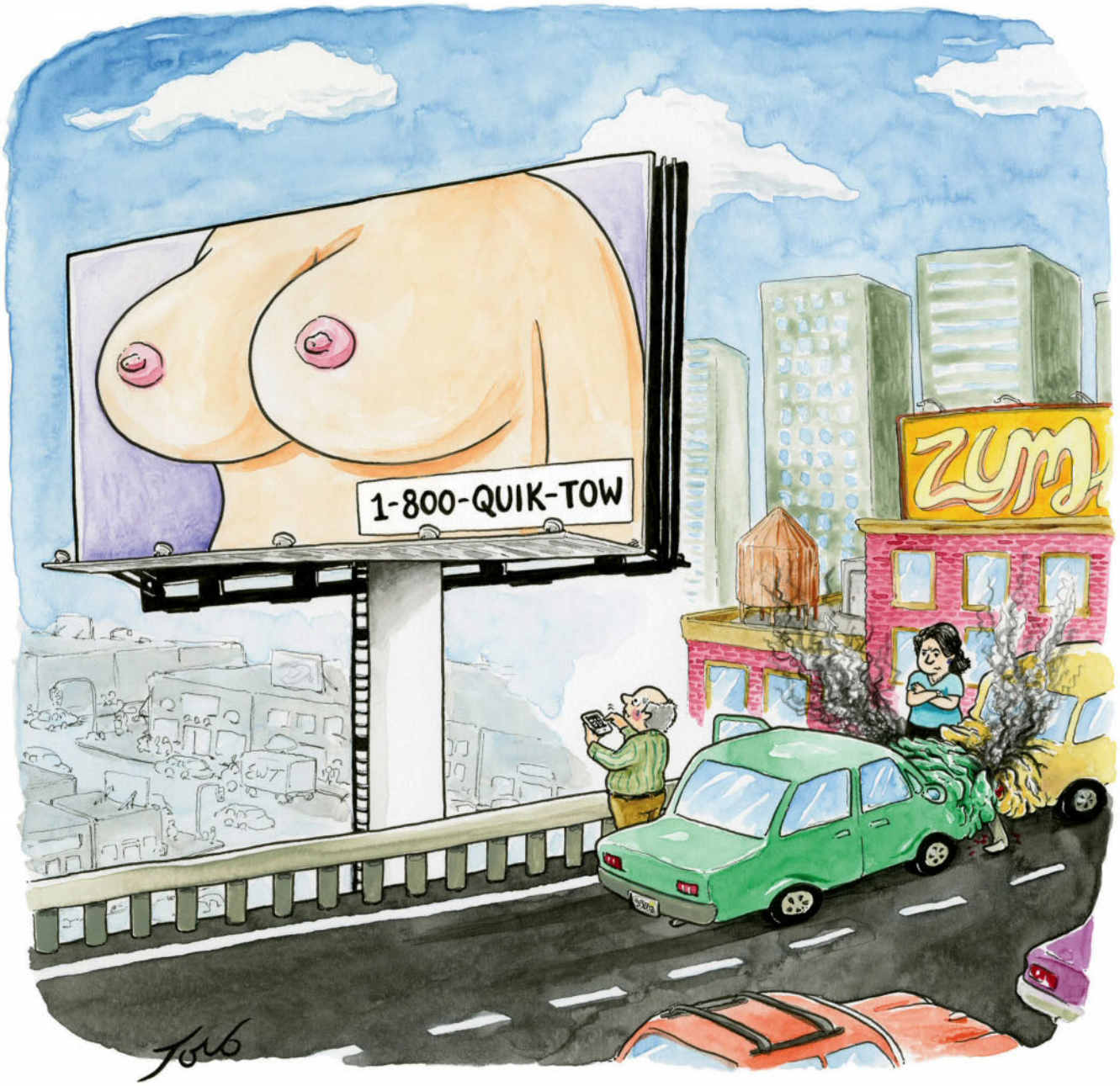
Now I'm the nervous one.

"Please don't do that," I say.

He senses my discomfort, and I can almost hear him smile over the phone. "It's the kind of way of fucking with the system that I love."

That's when I realize: Whatever happens with KmikeyM, or between Merrill and Dixon, this isn't a sad story. Merrill is no victim. This idea was his. He is in control.

And he will stop at nothing to find himself new playmates. ■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PHOTOGRAPHY BY **KYLE DELEU**

Subtract One Death

by T.C. Boyle

When life sets you adrift, sometimes the best course is to jump ship

Riley didn't like dogs, or not particularly. They were like children (of which he had none, thankfully), bringing dirt, confusion and unlooked-for expense into your life. But here was a dog, a darting, elaborately whiskered thing in the 70- to 80-pound range with a wall-eye and one collapsed ear, barking inquisitively at him from the terminus of its chain. Behind him, in the drive, Caroline stuck her head out the car window, her face leached of color. "Don't tell me *this* is the place?"

"Wait'll you see inside," he called over his shoulder, the dog's explosive barks underscoring the dreariness of the day, which was gray and coldish for mid-May.

He'd rented the house for a week because the few local hotels had been booked for graduation across the river at West Point and he most emphatically did not want to go down into the city, which was what Caroline most emphatically did want but wasn't going to get. He hated cities. Hated the seethe of people, the noise, the crush of everybody wanting everything at the same time. What he liked was this, simplicity, nature, the river spread out at his feet and his gaze carrying all the way across to the wooded mountains on the other side, which, apart from the rail line—and what was that, an oil tank?—couldn't have looked all that much different when Henry Hudson first laid eyes on them. He felt his heart lift. All was right with the world. Except for the dog. And Caroline.

But Caroline liked dogs, and she was out of the car now, striding across the wet lawn in her heels, calling to the dog in a clucking, high childish voice. "Oh, that's a good boy; he's a good boy, isn't he? What a good *boy,*" she called until she was right there and the dog was fawning at her feet, rolling over on its back so she could apply her $200 manicure to its underbelly. After a minute of this—and Riley was just standing there watching, not with the proprietary pride he'd felt after their marriage four years ago but with a vague kind of quotidian interest, the same interest, dulled and flattened, that just barely got him out of bed in the mornings—she turned round to him and said, girlishly, sweetly, "This must be Meg

ILLUSTRATION BY **MARC ASPINALL**

and Brian's new dog. I wonder why they didn't say anything? I mean, I remember the old one, when they came to visit that time? The one that died—I'm picturing German shepherd, right? Wasn't it a German shepherd?"

He just shrugged. One dog was the same as another as far as he was concerned. Meg had said she'd be home from work by four to give him the keys to the rental, which belonged to her next-door neighbors, an older couple who were away in Tuscany for the month on some sort of culinary tour. But it was already half-past four, there were no cars in Meg's driveway, and her house—a modest one-story place shingled in gray that had had its basement flooded twice in the past year after storms upriver—looked abandoned. Except for the dog, that is, which was clearly Meg's, since its chain was affixed to a stake on her side of the rolling expanse of lawn the two properties shared. If Meg was home—or Brian—the dog would have been in the house.

"Give her a call, why don't you?" he said, and watched Caroline straighten up and dig in her purse for her phone. He didn't carry a cell phone himself—one, because he despised technology and the grip it had on the jugular of America, and two, because he didn't want the federal stooges mapping his every move. Might as well have them attach one of those tracking devices. Like with wolves—or parolees. Or better yet, just tattoo your social security number across your forehead.

Caroline, slim still, with gym-toned legs tapering down to those glistening black patent-leather heels, had turned her back to him, as if for privacy, the phone pressed to her ear. It was a picture, her standing there framed against the river like that, and he would have snapped a photo too—if he had a cell phone. But then what was the use of pictures anyway? Nobody would ever see them. It wasn't like the old days, when he was a kid and Polaroid was king. Then you could snap a picture, hold it in your hand, put it in a photo album. Today? All the photos were in the Cloud, ready for the NSA to download at their leisure. And pleasure.

Leisure and pleasure. He liked the sound of that and made a little chant of it while he waited for Caroline to turn round and tell him Meg wasn't answering, or Brian either.

It began to drizzle. This had the effect of intensifying the otherworldly greenness of the place, and he liked that, liked the weather, liked the scene, but the shoulders of his new sports coat seemed strangely spongelike, and his coiffure—the modified pompadour he still affected—was threatening to collapse across his forehead. He let out a curse. "What now?" he said. "Jesus. She *did* say four, didn't she?"

There was something in his tone that got the dog barking again, which drove a fresh stake through his mood. He was about to swing round, get back in the car and go look for a bar somewhere when Meg's generic little silver car swished into the drive next door and he moved toward her, foolishly, because that put him in range of the dog, which reared up on its hind legs to rapturously smear mud all over his white linen pants and attempt to trip him in the process. "Shit," he cursed, shoving the dog down and trying vainly to wipe away the mud, a good portion of which transferred itself to his hands. But was it mud—or the very element he'd just named?

No matter. So what if his jacket was soaked, his pants ruined and dirt of whatever denomination worked up under his fingernails? He wasn't here to show off his fashion sense or dine out with celebrities or sit for press interviews. No, Lester was dead. And he was here for the funeral.

• • •

One thing, among many, that Caroline didn't know was that he'd been involved with Meg all those years ago, long before he met her—or either of his first two wives, for that matter—but if she did, he suspected she wouldn't have cared much one way or the other, except to drop the knowledge like a fragmentation device into the middle of one of their increasingly bitter squabbles, squabbles over nothing. Like whose turn it was to empty the litter box and why they needed a litter box in the first place when the cats could just shit outside, but no, she insisted, that was the kind of thinking that was driving birds to extinction and how could he be so shortsighted, and he, in his shortsightedness, countering with *What birds? There's nothing but crows out there. Crows and more crows.* And she: *My point exactly.* Or who'd conveniently forgotten to fill up the car or buy cheese at the market, and not blue cheese, which tasted like hand soap, but a nice Gruyère or Emmentaler? Or how you pronounced her brother Cary's name, which he rendered as "Carry" and she as "Kierie" in her Buffalese.

And what was that all about? Boredom, he supposed, the two of them locked away in their restored 18th century farmhouse in the midst of a peace so unshakable it was like living in a tomb. Which was all right with him—he was a novelist, "high mid-list," as he liked to say, bitterly, and he'd chosen to isolate himself for the sake of his writing—but after the remodel was done and she'd selected the antiques and the rugs and the fire irons and dug her flower beds and landscaped the front portion of their six-point-five acres, what was left for her? You choose rural, you choose isolation. And Caroline didn't especially like isolation.

He was spooked right down to the soles of his

But none of that mattered now because Lester was dead and Meg was crossing the lawn to him, her eyes already full. Before he could think, he was wrapping her in a full-body embrace that rocked them in each other's orbit far too long while Caroline stood there watching and the mud staining his trousers imperceptibly worked itself into Meg's jeans. He was feeling sorrow, a sorrow so fluent it swept him in over his head, Lester gone and Meg pressed tight to him, and it really hadn't come home to him till now because now he was here, now it was real. He'd always suppressed his emotions in the service of cool, of being cool and detached and untouchable, but suddenly there were tears in his eyes. He might have stood there forever, clutching Meg to him, so far gone he couldn't think beyond the three questions he and Lester used to put to each other when they were stoned (*Who are we? Where are we? Why are we?*), but for the fact that Brian's car had somehow appeared in the drive, right behind Meg's. If Caroline didn't know how he'd once felt about

Meg, Brian certainly did, and the knowledge of that—and of some of the extracurricular things Brian had said to him at a party a few years ago—made him come back to himself.

He became aware of the rain, which was more persistent now. Lester's face rose up suddenly in his consciousness, then melted away, as if he'd taken a match to a photograph. He let go of Meg, dropped his arms to his sides, took a step back. "Hi, Brian," he called, lifting one hand in a crippled, fluttering wave though Brian couldn't have heard him since the window was rolled up and the motor running. Still, he couldn't help adding, "Great to see you!"

• • •

The house was one of 12 set on a slim strip of land between the river and the train tracks, a smallish 1940s bungalow that had been recast as a two-story contemporary, with fireplace, boat mooring and panoptic views of the river. It was nothing like the farmhouse, of course, but once you stepped inside it gave a good first impression: rustic furniture, framed photos of Hudson scenes on the walls, a brass telescope for stargazing or catching the eye-gleam of the tugboat captains who pushed barges up and down the river all day long. The second impression was maybe a hair less favorable (cramped kitchen, a smell of what, bilge?), but he was gratified—and relieved—to see that Caroline was going to be all right with it. "I love the view," she said, striding across the parquet floor to pull the curtains open wide. "It's"—she searched for the word, turning to him and holding out her hands. If he thought she was going to say "inspiring" or "sublime" or even "awesome," he was disappointed. "It's nice," she said, and then clarified—"I mean it works, right?"

They were just mixing their inaugural cocktail—vodka gimlet, Lester's touchstone—when the first train entered the scene. On a theoretical level, Riley had understood that the proximity of the tracks might give rise to a certain degree of noise now and again, but this was something else altogether. There was a sudden shattering blast, as of a jet fighter obliterating the sound barrier, then the roar of the wheels, the insult of the horn and the chattered-teeth rattle of every glass, cup, dish and saucer in the cupboard. The whole thing, beginning to end, couldn't have lasted more than 10 seconds, but it managed to spike his blood pressure and induce him to slosh Rose's lime juice all over the granite countertop the older couple had installed to fortify their barely adequate kitchen. "Jesus," he said, "what was that?"

Caroline, deadpan: "The train."

"How're we supposed to sleep? I mean, what's the schedule? Are there night trains—or no, there wouldn't be, right?"

"Ask Meg and Brian."

"You get used to it, is that what you're saying?"

She shrugged. Implicit in that shrug and the tight smile that accompanied it was the reminder that they wouldn't have been having this discussion if they were on the 12th floor of the Algonquin or even the Royalton or Sofitel and that any train they might have run across would have been a conveyance, only that, a means of getting them from the city to this benighted place and back again.

"Jesus," he repeated, looking round for the paper towels, and he was just sopping up the mess—sticky, redolent, probably 90 percent sugar—when there was a tap at the sliding door and Meg was there, framed in the glass panel as in a Renaissance painting, *Our Lady of the River.* She'd changed out of her jeans and into a skirt and she'd done something with her hair. He waved, enjoying the moment, till Brian's head and shoulders entered the frame and then, at hip level, the dog. She tapped again, grinning, and held up a handle of vodka.

They had a round of gimlets in memory of Lester, then another, after which they switched to wine, a Bordeaux from the case Riley had brought down from Buffalo to help ease Lester's passage, or at least his own immersion in it. He'd written about death to the point of obsession, but he'd been spared the experience of it, if you except the death of his parents, which had happened so long ago he couldn't even remember what they looked like, and he was finding the process of mourning in someone else's living room increasingly disorienting. He tried to make small talk, but small talk wasn't going to work, not with Lester hanging over them like some great-winged bird. The shadows deepened. The river went the color of steel. Everything he said seemed to begin with "You remember when?" And here were Meg's eyes, inviting him right in, the most patient, salvatory eyes he'd ever seen. He was drunk, of course, that was it, and if Caroline and Brian were forced to hover on the fringes of the conversation, that was something they'd just have to get used to because they hadn't been there with Lester right from the beginning and he had. And Meg had too.

"You're slurring your words," Caroline said at one point, and he looked up, wondering how it had gotten dark so quickly—and without his noticing.

"Maybe we should eat something?" he heard himself say, even as the lights of a barge drifted by on the dark shoulders of the river and the dog, agitated by something beyond the range of human senses, began to whine.

Brian pushed himself up from the easy chair in the corner, an empty wineglass in one hand. He was big-headed, white-haired and, Riley noted with a certain degree of satisfaction, he'd begun to develop a potbelly. He looked old, tired, bored. "I'm ready for bed."

"Pizza?" Meg made a question of it. "They'll deliver."

"Count me out," Brian said, and gave a little laugh that was meant to be self-deprecating but to Riley's ears sounded just this side of rude. He was a killjoy, Brian. A nonentity. And Meg was wasted on him. "But if you three want"—Brian waved at the air—"I mean, go ahead."

"I don't eat pizza," Caroline put in, her voice light and incisive, no slurring for her though she'd had as much to drink as anybody. She let out a laugh. "It's not Paleo."

"You're telling me they didn't have pizza delivery in the Stone Age?" Riley had used the joke before, somewhere, sometime, and nobody responded to it now. He was sunk deep in the easy chair beside Brian's, feeling as if he'd never summon the volition to move again.

feet. Did death come in pairs, like twins?

Somehow he found the dog's head in his lap, and he began idly stroking its collapsed ear.

"We could go out," Meg offered, but Caroline just shook her head and he sank deeper into the chair, wondering how he was even going to get up the stairs to bed, let alone negotiate the car and deal with lights, people, waiters, menus.

Just then there was a tap at the glass, which sent the dog into a frenzy, its head rocketing up out of Riley's lap, paws scrabbling on the floor, the barking rising in pitch till it was nearly a scream, and Riley looked up to see a ghostly face illuminated there at the door, a woman's face, nobody he knew, but it made his heart seize all the same.

As it turned out, she was Meg's neighbor from the next house up and she had some bad news to impart, some very bad news, in fact. Meg slid the door back and the funk of the river rushed in to overwhelm him. "Turn on the TV!" the woman shouted, thumping into the room and going directly to the television—a wall-mounted thing Riley hadn't to this point even noticed—and clicked it on. "I can't believe it," she sang out as images of wreckage, flames, emergency flares and stunned onlookers played across the screen in a way that had become the nightly reality and every bit as believable as anything else out there in the world. The feed at the foot of the screen read *Florence, Italy,* and gave the time there, *5:30 A.M.* "They got Ted," she said.

Meg gave her a look of disbelief. "What are you talking about? *Who?*"

"The *terrorists.* I just had a call from Nadine." And here her voice broke. "It was, I don't know, wrong place, wrong time." She was 50-ish, this woman, bottom-heavy, her hair cut short but for a spray of pink-dyed strands sprouting like feathers at the back of her neck. "She's going to be okay, but Ted—he didn't make it."

Loudly, in a rising wail, Meg denied it.

"Who's Ted?" he asked, puzzled, even as the tension began to sink its claws in his stomach, deep down, where he was most vulnerable.

"Ted Marchant," Meg said without turning her head. "I can't believe it," she echoed, her eyes jumping from the screen to the woman who'd come to destroy their evening. Or night. It was night now. Definitely. "When?" she demanded. "Are you sure?"

"Who's Ted Marchant?"

Brian loomed over him with his big white head, the empty glass arrested in midair. "The guy," he said flatly, "whose chair you're sitting in."

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So there were two deaths. First Lester, and now this. Ted Marchant. Whose name Riley must have written across the face of a check, though he had no recollection of it, who'd sat in this very chair and trained his telescope on the stars or maybe a girl going topless in a speedboat on the far side of the river, who, as it would turn out, had been unlucky enough to be sitting at a corner table in a Florentine café, sipping his espresso, at the very moment the black-clad gunmen had rumbled up on their stolen Ducatis and begun shooting. He'd never met Ted Marchant or his wife of 45 years either—Nadine—but here he was in possession of the dead man's home and all the dead man's things, drinking out of the dead man's wineglasses. It made him queasy to know it.

The television talked to them and they leaned forward in their chairs and watched the images play across the dead man's screen, listened to the voices of the reporters, the same old thing, the tiredest thing, except that one of the 17 dead had plodded across these floors and breathed this same dank river air that smelled of a whole array of deaths, from fish to worms to clams and the algae that bloomed on a bounty of phosphates and died back to nothing again. It was staggering. He almost wanted to protest—this wasn't about Ted Marchant, whom he didn't even know; it was about Lester—but instead, into the void, he said, "Maybe we should leave?"

Meg turned away from the screen, her features saturated with the garish light, and looked him full in the face. "No," she said, fierce suddenly, as if the killers were in the room with them. "No way. You're going to stay."

He glanced at Caroline for support, but Caroline's eyes never left the screen. "But won't the wife—? She'll be coming back now, she'll have to, the widow, I mean——"

"Are you serious? Something like this—it could be weeks, months, who knows." Meg's voice caught in her throat. "Poor Nadine—can you imagine?"

"The weirdest thing"—and here the woman who'd brought the news gave him a long look—"is that you're here...for a funeral, right?" A glance for Meg. "Or that's what Meg said. And that makes this whole thing so, I don't know, *spooky,* I guess you'd have to say——"

He didn't deny it. In fact, he was spooked right down to the superstitious God-denying soles of his feet. It was like that time in Alaska when the surviving pilot of a two-man air service told him his partner had crashed while delivering a family of Inuit to the next village for the funeral of a family of Inuit killed in an air crash the previous day. Was that how the fates were aligned? Did death come in pairs, like twins? Lester had died of melanoma, a cruel, preposterous thing that had begun as a blister on the little toe of his right foot and spread to his brain and killed him so fast Riley hadn't even known he was sick, let alone dying. It wasn't cool to die, wasn't hip, that was how Lester felt—he had an image to maintain—and so he'd done it alone. That was what hurt. He hadn't called, e-mailed, written, hadn't breathed a word. He'd just crawled off to some hospice in California and spared them the pain.

Later, after Caroline had gone up to bed and Brian took the dog back across the lawn to his own house and shut out the lights one by one till the fading image of it vanished into the night, there were just the three of them left there in the dead man's living room. Everything was quiet, the lights muted, the TV screen gone blank now. He was the one who'd finally gotten up and shut it off, Meg whispering "Thank you" and the other woman (her name was Anna or Anne or maybe Joanne, he never quite caught it, not that it mattered—she was the Messenger of Death and that was all he needed to know) seconded her. "These media hyenas," she said, waving her hand in dismissal. "Really, it's just disgusting." For a long while no one said

His heart slamming at his ribs, Riley reached

anything, the only sounds the tap of bottle on glass and the consolatory splash of the wine, but then the house began to quail and rattle and here came the blast again, that violent rending of the air, and a train hurtled past with a last fading shriek.

"Oh my God, I didn't realize it was so late," the woman said, rising from her chair and setting her glass down on the nearest horizontal surface—an inlaid end table, already blemished with a dozen fading circular scars, not that Ted Marchant was going to care. In the next moment she was embracing Meg, the two of them tearful, exuberant in their grief, and then the woman was gone and he was alone with Meg. She looked at him and shook her head. "It's terrible, isn't it?"

He didn't know what to say. It was. Of course it was. Everything was terrible—and getting worse.

He watched her as she bent for her glass, stood up and drained it, one hand on her hip. She looked dazed, uncertain on her feet, and she set the glass down carefully beside the one her neighbor had left, then sank heavily into the couch. "Here," she said, giving him a tired smile, "sit here beside me. Take a load off. It's been a day."

So he sat beside her and felt the warmth of her there in the house that had taken on a chill with the lateness of the hour, and then he put his arm around her and pulled her to him and they kissed and though he felt the tug of her like some elemental force of reconciliation and surcease, he didn't give in to it. What he did do, with the smallest adjustment, was stretch out his legs and lay his head in her lap so that the warmth became a heat and his eyes fell shut, and the death, the two deaths, faded into oblivion.

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The next morning, Caroline, declaring the situation "too weird for words," took a train into the city to lunch with her roommate from college and engage in a little resuscitative shopping, and by the time he extracted himself from the bed he'd somehow managed to find his way to at some unfathomable hour of the night, he was just in time to see Meg pulling out of the driveway on her way to work. Brian's car was gone too, as was his own—Caroline had taken it up to the Garrison station and left it there because he was too enfeebled by the night's reversals to get up and drop her off. So he was alone there in the dead man's house (the *murdered* man's house) poking through the cupboards with the idea of coffee in mind—and maybe something to ease his stomach, like dry toast. Or... the zwieback he somehow found in his hand, the pastel rendering of a baby grinning up at him from the front of the cardboard box. But why would the old couple stock baby crackers? Grandchildren? Dental issues? He put a zwieback in his mouth, experimentally, then spat it back out in the palm of his hand. Milk. Maybe milk would settle his stomach. He poured out a clean white glass of it, set it on the counter and stared at it a long moment before trying, with mixed success, to pour it back into the carton. In his distraction, it must have taken him five entire minutes before he remembered that Lester was dead. And that the funeral, at which he'd be expected to get himself together long enough to deliver a eulogy, was tomorrow.

He looked up at a sudden noise—a thump—and there was the dog, pressing its nose to the glass of the sliding door, a ruptured length of chain trailing away from its throat like essential jewelry. The day was bright, he noticed now, yesterday's clouds and drizzle driven back over the hills and the sun dividing the lawn like a chessboard into patches of shadow and light, and the irritation he would normally have felt at the intrusion gave way to something lighter, more tenable, something almost like acceptance. He was glad Caroline had gone into the city and Meg to work, glad to be alone here so he could slow things down, take a walk, sit by the river, commune with Lester on his own terms, and never mind Ted Marchant—Ted Marchant was another issue altogether and he wasn't going to go there.

The thump came again. The dog was pawing the glass as if it wanted something, as if it had a message to convey, some extrasensory glimpse into the process that had claimed Lester and Ted Marchant and would repurpose itself, in good time, to claim the survivors too. Or maybe it was just hungry, maybe that was it. Or, more likely, it wanted in so it could go take a crap on the carpet—wasn't that what dogs were famous for? But then it occurred to him that the dog shouldn't be there at all, that it had, in fact, broken free of its chain, which meant that it was in danger, or potential danger—hadn't Meg complained about how vigilant you had to be or it would bolt out the door and make straight for the train tracks? He got up from where he was sitting at the kitchen table, thinking to let the dog in—to trap it in the house—and then see if he could do something about reinforcing the chain.

But what was the thing's name? Something with a *T*—Tuffy? Terry? Or no, Taffy, that was it, because of its coloration, as Meg had explained shortly after it had annihilated his pants. Anyway, he got up from the kitchen table, went to the door and slid it open, which, far from having the desired effect, caused the dog to back away from him so precipitately it fell from the porch in an awkward scramble of limbs. For the briefest moment it lay there on its back, its legs kicking in the air, and then it sprang up and bolted headlong away from him, straight in the direction of the tracks. "Taffy!" he called, feeling ridiculous but nonetheless coming down off the porch and hustling across the lawn after him (or her; he wasn't even sure what sex the thing was). "Taffy! No!"

It was at that moment the train appeared, the 9:50 or 10:10 or whatever it was, the air shrieking, the wheels thundering, a great onrushing force that eclipsed the animal as if it had never been there at all. Running now, his heart slamming at his ribs, Riley reached the tracks just as the last car—*the caboose,* a term that came to him out of a buried past, childhood, Lionel, mittens pressed to ears, *Take Daddy's hand now*—raged on by and the tracks stood vacant, shining malevolently in the hard gleam of the sun. What he expected was death, another death, the dog's remains dribbled like ragout up and down the line—and what was he going to tell Meg?—but that wasn't what he found. The

the tracks just as the last car raged by.

dog was there, intact, remnant chain and all, sitting on its rump on the far side of the tracks and staring at him stupidly across the void.

"Taffy," he called, trying to control his voice, the edge of hysteria there, of fury. "Come!"

But Taffy didn't come. Taffy never budged, except to contort himself (he was a male, Riley saw now, the sheath of the organ, the tight dark balls like damson plums) so he could reach up and scratch his chin with one back paw. Riley looked up and down the tracks, a long tapering *V* to the vanishing point in either direction, then called again, again without response. *Maybe if I turn my back on him,* he thought. Or maybe—and here he felt embarrassed with himself, because what was he now, a dog whisperer?—maybe he should just say fuck the whole business. Let the dog take his chances. Right. Fine. He swung abruptly round and made his way through the damp grass to mount the porch of the dead man's house and see if he could find the means to make himself a cup of coffee.

He wasn't really tracking the time, but it must have been around noon or so, the sun high overhead and the dog frisking back and forth across the lawn, chain in tow, when he looked up from his coffee and toast and his eyes came to rest on the canoe where it lay overturned on the dock. He'd been reading a very dull book, trying not to think beyond the next dull paragraph, wondering how he was going to get through the rest of the day, and there it was, this vision: the canoe. It was just the thing he needed—to get out on the river, clear his head, let nature be his guide. What could be better? The sun-spanked waves, the breeze fresh out of the north, a little exercise—he could always use the exercise, and really, how often did he have the opportunity to get out here on the Hudson, the river of his boyhood, of his connections, of his past, of *Lester*? All right. A plan. A definite plan.

It took him a while to find the paddles, secreted as they were in the back of the garage behind a six-foot-tall rusting metal cabinet that contained the other boating things: blue flotation cushion, orange life vest, various fishing rods, crab traps, gigs and landing nets. He took the cushion, a spinning rod and a tackle box stocked with Ted Marchant's lures—why not?—balanced a paddle over one shoulder and crossed the lawn to the dock. If he didn't bother with the life vest it was because he never bothered with life vests—he knew what he was doing, and even at his age (he would be 56 in December, though officially he admitted only to 50) he was a strong swimmer, had always been, and for a moment he saw himself in his 20s, racing Lester out to the raft on Kitchawank Lake over and over again, one sprint after the other, the loser having to swig a shot of the tequila their girlfriends, leaning over the edge of the raft, held out for them even as they laughed and cheered and kicked up a froth with their pretty, tanned feet.

The canoe—aluminum, indestructible—was surprisingly heavy, but he managed to flip it over, stow his gear and slide it into the water before lowering himself into it and equalizing his weight. In the next moment he was stroking hard against the tug of the current, the first strokes the best, always the best, all the power gone to your shoulders and upper arms in a flush of resurgent joy. It was sensational. Transformative. Dip, rise, dip again. He must have been a hundred feet from shore when he realized he'd forgotten a hat, which would have been nice to have to keep the sun out of his face, and his water bottle too, but that wasn't a problem because he wasn't going to stay out that long. Cruise up the river and back again, 45 minutes, an hour. Max. Though, admittedly, he did feel a bit dehydrated and maybe hungover into the bargain, and the thought flickered in and out of his mind that he might paddle up the river to Garrison, to the bar there, and then drift back down when the tide reversed, but that was too ambitious...no, better to keep it simple.

Ahead of him on the right, just past the promontory where the last of the 12 houses sat, was a low trestle that gave onto the marsh on the far side, and he paddled for the entrance, thinking he'd do a little exploring. Meg had taken him back there the last time he'd visited and he remembered it as a magical place, alive with birds of every description, turtles stacked up like dinner plates on the butts of half-submerged trees—and, better yet, the sense of enclosure and privacy it held, as if you were miles away from anyone. The point, he realized, as he dug the paddle in and flew across the gray froth of the river, was that Lester was dead and he wasn't. He was alive, never more alive. The burden of grief was a burden we all carried—*Lester! Lester!*—but there was this too, this living in the moment, the sunstruck chop, the breeze, the scent of the wildflowers clustered round the mouth of the trestle till it could have been a bower in a Rossetti poem. He flew for it. But then, drawing closer, he saw that the tide was up higher than he'd realized—the space seemed barely adequate for the canoe itself to pass under, no more than three feet of vertical clearance, if that.

Riley, for better or worse—worse, actually—never backed down from a challenge, and once he'd made up his mind to shoot the entrance, he just kept going. At the last moment, he slid down supine on the floor of the canoe and let the inrushing current carry him, which wouldn't have been a problem if he'd arrived 15 minutes earlier, when he would have had another two or three inches between him and the concrete belly of the trestle. As it was, he could have glided right through if he'd been in a kayak or riding a surfboard, but unfortunately the twin high points of the canoe, at bow and stern, struck the ceiling with a sound like grinding molars, the current dragging the canoe forward till finally, a dozen feet from the far side, it stuck fast.

He saw his predicament and experienced a moment of regret, but regret wasn't going to get him out of this, was it? The water was streaming in and soon it would engulf the entire space, right to the ceiling, or at least that had to be a possibility, didn't it? All right. No need to panic. He raised his arms and pushed hard against the concrete above him and the boat edged forward, scraping in protest. What he hadn't counted on—but he hadn't counted on anything, just acted, and acted stupidly, suicidally, really—was the unevenness of the structure, which, as it turned out, had

Riley, for better or worse—worse, actually

subsided ever so imperceptibly on the far side, not that it was any of his business, but what, exactly, was wrong with the maintenance people on the New York Central line? Didn't they inspect these things?

Whether they did or not, the fact remained that he was stuck. On his back. In a space that was like a coffin, with the tide rushing in and no more than a few spare inches of clearance between him and the cold gray lid above him that might or might not have been home to various spiders and biting insects and water snakes too, an example of which had just whipped past him in a display of muscular urgency. What else? The cold. The smell of mud, muck, the decay the river fostered and throve on, and all at once he was remembering the story his father had told him of the drowned woman in Annsville Creek whose corpse had floated to the surface in a twitching scrum of blue-claw crabs. This was serious. He was in trouble. He was going to drown, that was what was going to happen, and he could already see the headlines—AUTHOR DROWNS IN BOATING ACCIDENT—and the prepackaged rudiments of his obituary: his books, his wives, the early promise, the bloated middle years, the prizes, the checks, survived by his loving wife. Minutes, that was all he had till the water started pouring in over the gunwales, but in that moment he could picture the newspaper account as clearly as if he were sitting at the big oak table in the kitchen at the farmhouse, the overhead lamp bright and his reading glasses clamped over the bridge of his nose.

He'd often wondered how he'd respond in a crisis, at the same time praying he'd never be obligated to find out (and how was it for Ted Marchant, protecting Nadine with the shield of his own body in the millisecond before the AK rounds split him open?). To this point, the closest he'd come was some 30 years ago in the company of Lester, both of them drunk on cheap scotch and saturated with the triumph of their selves and their wise ways and the hipness that cloaked and absolved them, when the lip of the dune they'd been sitting on gave way beneath them so that they were rudely plunged into the ice bath of San Francisco Bay, but—and here was the charm—wound up none the worse for it. So all right. The water was rising but he wasn't panicking—he was too humiliated for panic. He was just—concerned, that was all. And amused. Struck between the eyes with the force of his own stupidity—of all the millions of deaths that come raining down each and every day of our lives, how many involve aging novelists trapped under train trestles in canoes?

We fear death because all we know is life, and once you're alive the safest bet is to stay that way. He knew that, subscribed to it as a principle, and it provided his motivation now. What if—experimentally—he were to tip the canoe ever so slightly, purposely letting the water in so he could gain another six inches to free himself and take his chances in the water before the air gave out? He could do that, but then his wallet would be soaked and his clothes ruined, yet what were wallets and clothes when he was so close to joining Lester and Ted Marchant in the Land of the Dead? Nothing, nothing at all. Still, he did take the time to wriggle out of his jacket, shirt, jeans and hiking boots and ball the whole business up in one hand as he pushed hard off the ceiling, found the surge of the water and squeezed into it...yes, and Jesus, it was freezing!

A lesser writer than Riley might have said something like "Time stood still," but that wasn't it at all, not even close: Time accelerated. One instant had him in the canoe, passively awaiting his death by drowning, and the next saw him flailing his way through cattails and muck, his shirt, shoes and jacket gone but his jeans—and wallet—still clutched sopping in one hand till he reached the high stony embankment some previous generation had erected here in the backwater to carry the locomotive freight. It wasn't easy, his feet battered, the stones slippery, a dense growth of briars and poison ivy impeding his way, but finally, too cold and wet and residually shaken even to curse, he was able to pull himself up by stages and emerge on the tracks, and so what if he was in his Joe Boxers and his shoes were missing? He was alive, alive all over again.

He didn't say a word to anyone, not the old man bobbing in his boat or the two women sitting in lawn chairs at the house across the way. He just limped up the tracks in his bare feet and wet underwear, and here was the dog to greet him, dashing by with its length of chain rapping at the rails, and of course it was inevitable that in the interval yet another train would come hurtling by to rake him with its tailwind, faces pressed to windows, a young girl waving—waving, for God's sake—and he, nothing else for it, waving back.

• • •

After the funeral, once everyone had exhausted their praise for the emotional intensity of his eulogy and the tears had dried and the drinks circulated, he bowed out early, pleading a headache. He and Caroline drove back to the rented house on the river, where the dog, its chain reinforced, twisted round and round the steel post Brian had pounded angrily into the ground just that morning, and they spent all of 10 minutes throwing their things together and bringing the suitcases down to the car. Then Riley locked up, gave the dog a wide berth and hurried across the lawn to leave the key under the mat at Meg and Brian's before they could get back from the reception or wake or whatever you wanted to call it. The tear-fest. The slog. The canoe had unwedged itself on the turn of the tide, but Riley hadn't been there to recover it. He didn't leave a note. If Nadine noticed it missing he'd send her a check, no problem, glad to do it, in fact, glad to help out, but no sense in worrying about that now.

Traffic was light and they made good time. Caroline was silent most of the way down, but her face was composed and she looked good—better than good—in the black velvet dress and single strand of pearls she'd worn for the funeral. They checked into the Algonquin, the only hotel where he really felt appreciated, a homey place, a *writer's* place, and while Caroline went down to see about theater tickets he settled in a chair by the window, high above the crush and grab of West 44th Street. For a long while he gazed out into the grayness, then he picked up the dull book he'd been working his way through, found where he'd left off and started reading. ■

—never backed down from a challenge.

TOUCH-TONE

September Playmate Jessica Wall travels light, loves to learn and hopes you know how to kiss

"I have a 50-pound hiking backpack and my normal little backpack, and that's it. That's everything." To call Jessica Wall a low-maintenance woman is an understatement. The eldest of six kids ("I'm great at sharing rooms with people," she says), Jessica can also do a great deal of *actual* maintenance, thanks in part to her contractor dad. "I grew up working for him. I can paint a straight line with both hands," she says. "I know how to drywall and mud, all that stuff." Perhaps that's why the all-American beauty—whose lush brows and aqua-green gaze bring to mind a young Brooke Shields—has a raw, unfussy appeal. She's not afraid to get her hands dirty.

Jessica's passion for paint goes far beyond the hardware store. "I'm in love with oil paints," she says. "Art is an expression of emotion, and we all have a visceral connection to color. I think my hands covered in paint is one of my favorite things." Another favorite? Learning. "Do you want to teach me how to box? Rock climb? Cook something? I'm a sponge." Growing up, Jessica didn't have big dreams of being a model, but her fifth-grade teacher's wife was represented by Ford Models and recommended she visit their office. "I'm from the Midwest, so I was like, 'Ford? The car company?' I walked in, the agent took a picture of me, and five minutes later I had a contract."

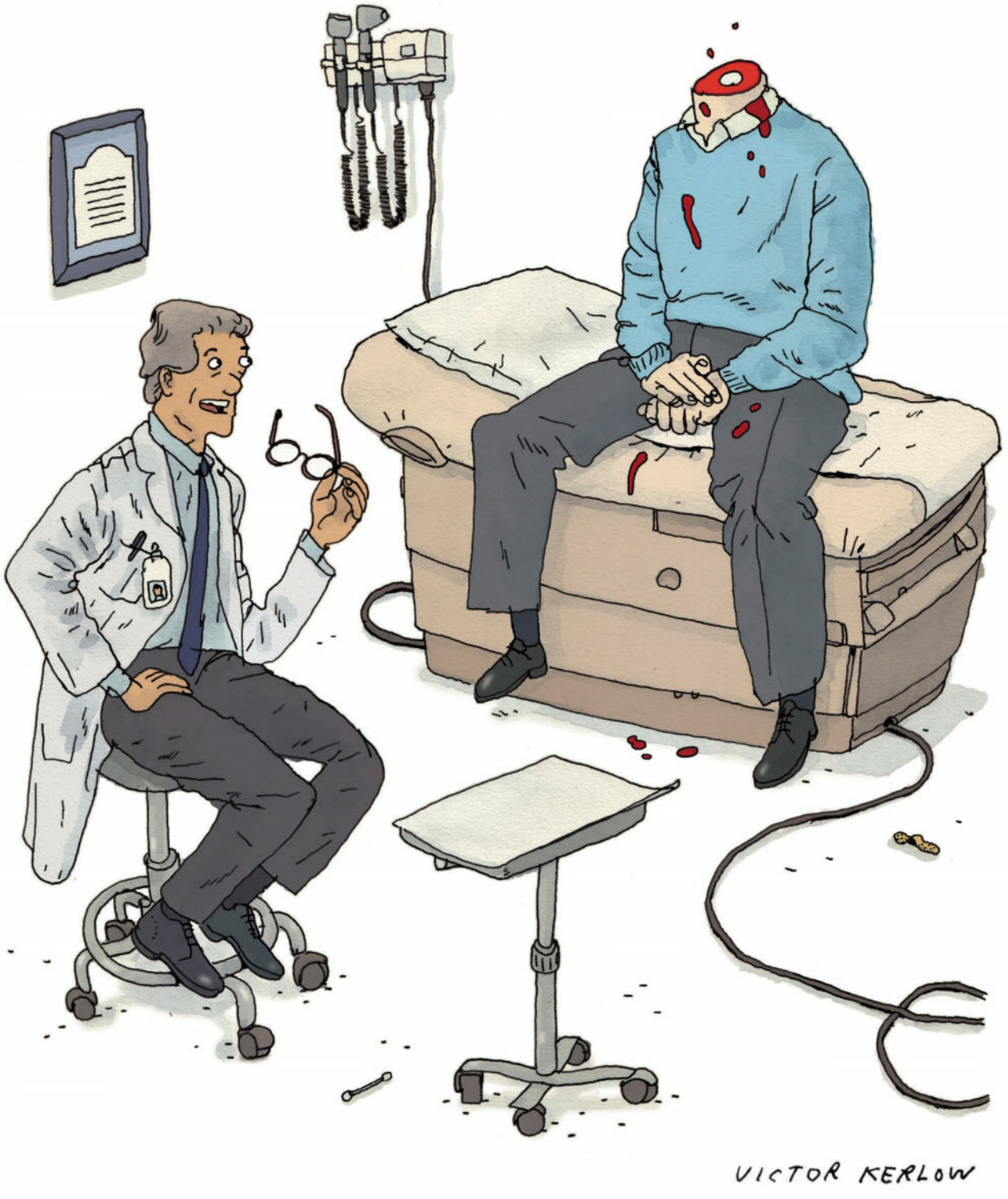
The nomadic life of a model suits Jessica's up-for-anything attitude. "I meet people walking down the street, on trains, in Ubers. If you come up to me, my reaction is 'Tell me your story. Where are you from? Tell me everything.' I want to connect with other human beings. Let's enjoy life."

Perhaps that's why Jessica has never needed to use a dating app. For her, it's pretty simple: "Say hi to me. Just start a conversation!" She'll give anyone a fair shot—as long as you know how to kiss. "Nothing is happening past there. Can you talk? Do you understand hygiene? Can you kiss? Okay, let's go."

Phrases like *salt of the earth* come to mind when describing Jessica, but she doesn't much concern herself with others' opinions. "I don't really gauge myself by what other people think of me. I don't have time for fake stuff in my life. I've seen too much real life."

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **GRAHAM DUNN**

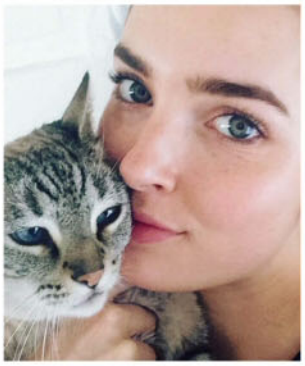

Space
Shuttle



"But it could also just be gas...."

SEPTEMBER 2017 PLAYMATE

DATA SHEET



AGE: 23 **BIRTHPLACE:** Chicago, Illinois **CURRENT CITY:** Los Angeles, California

LIFE LESSONS

Everyone has their own journey. If you run into hard patches in life, it changes you. It's important to get brushed up by life every once in a while. Those challenges make you a better person, someone who's able to relate to others. Challenges give your life more color, feeling and emotion than it would otherwise have.

SUBSTANCE OVER STYLE

When it comes to men, I go for personality over looks. Since I got into modeling, I've realized looks mean nothing. I want to be with someone I can talk to—someone I can laugh with, share experiences with and be like, "Oh my gosh, I can't believe we just did that!"

ECCENTRICS WELCOME

I don't care if you're weird. I'm a weirdo too. Weird is good, interesting. Who wants to be normal?

WINGING IT

I never know my schedule until the day before, so I roll with what's happening and say, "You know what? I'm going to make the best of every situation that comes my way."

COMFORT ZONE

I can't date anyone I'm not comfortable with. I'm already very comfortable in my own skin, so you need to be on the same level. I shouldn't be second-guessing myself when I'm out with you.

LISTEN UP

When I was younger, I was really shy, like stick-my-face-in-a-book, don't-talk-to-anyone shy. It was hard for me to talk to people and for them to talk to me. So I learned how to listen. It taught me how to walk into a room, see who's on edge, who's uncomfortable, and go up to that person and say, "Hi, how are you? What's your day like? What's happening?" Treating people like humans and treating them kindly is such a wonderful, simple thing, so why not do it?

ONCE UPON A TIME

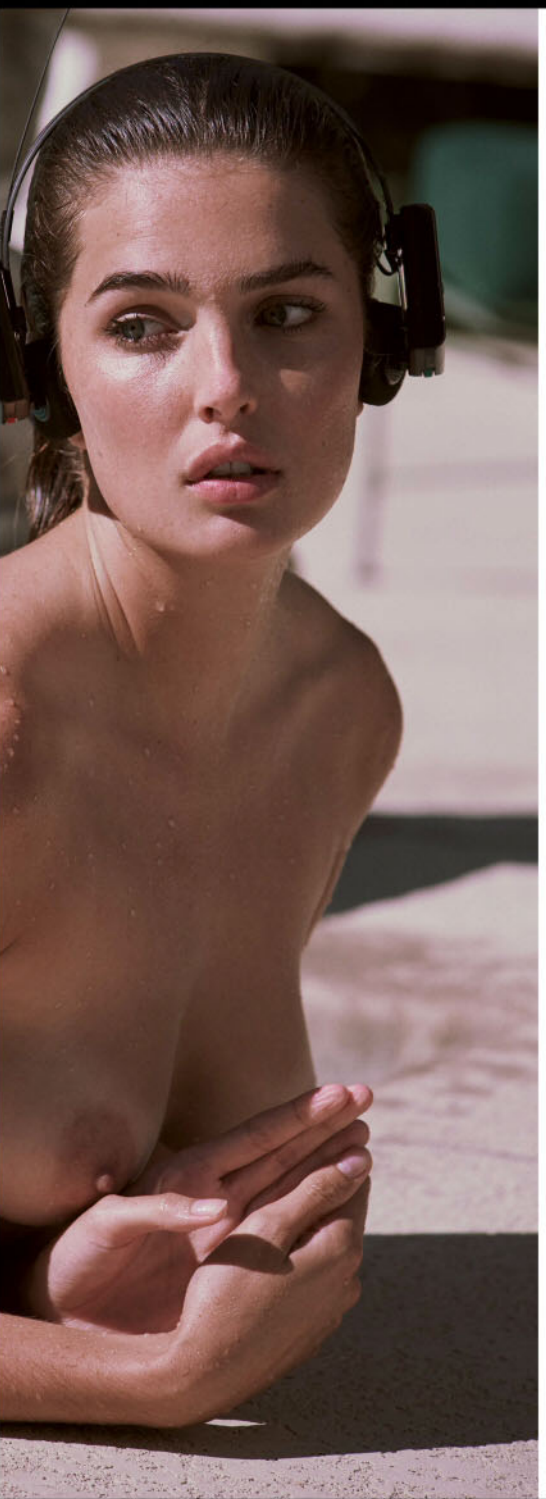
Storytellers are amazing. Chatting with the people no one else talks to can lead to the best conversations. Leaving someone with a smile or leaving them just a little bit better off than you found them is what everyone should do. It makes life so much more fulfilling.

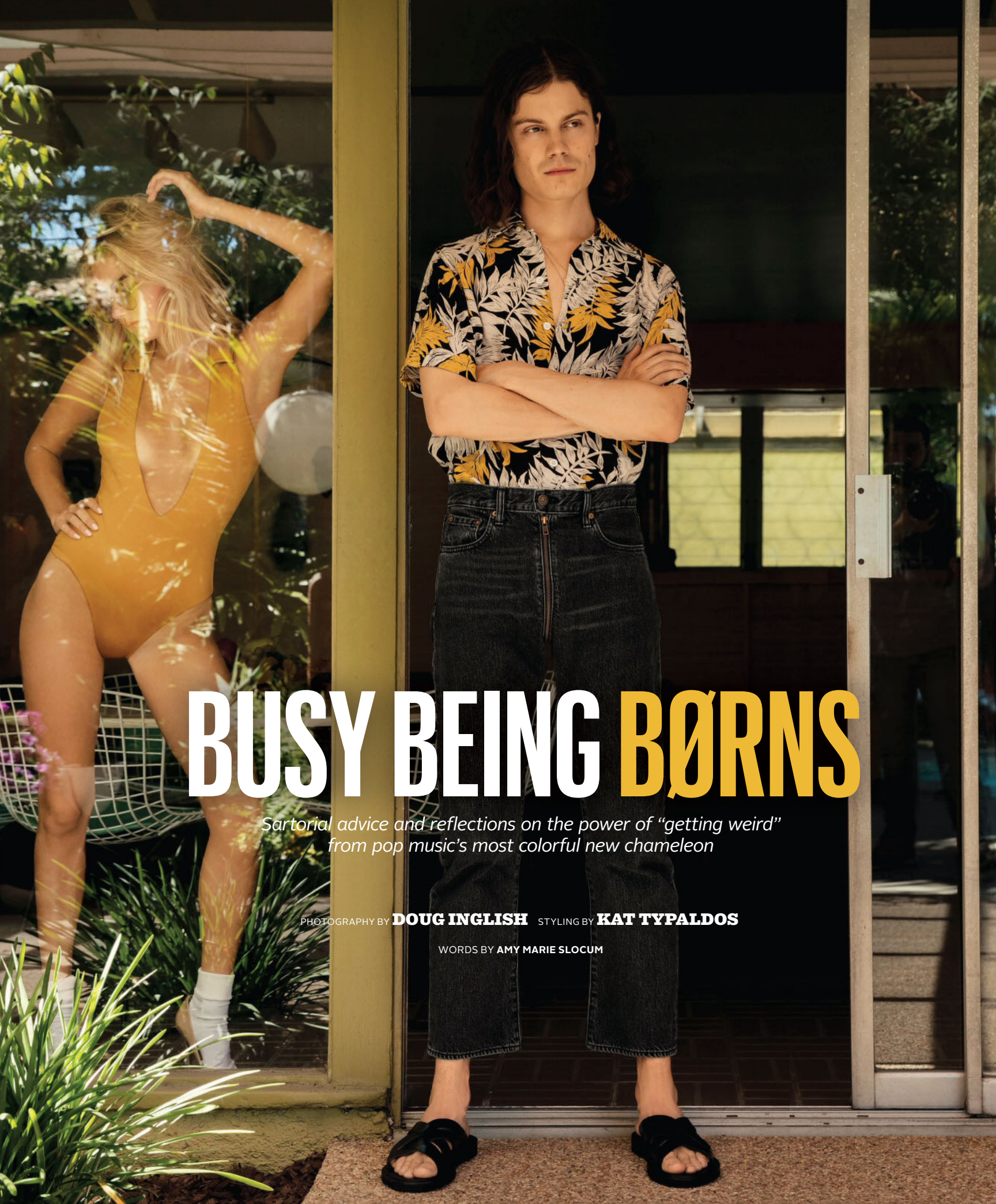
ROCK STAR

I once went rock climbing in hand-me-down shoes. Halfway up the soles came apart. I took them off and threw them down. It was great. Every once in a while you've got to get dirty.

Jessica Wall

@msjessicawall





BUSY BEING BØRNS

Sartorial advice and reflections on the power of "getting weird" from pop music's most colorful new chameleon

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **DOUG INGLISH** STYLING BY **KAT TYPALDOS**

WORDS BY **AMY MARIE SLOCUM**

Listening to the latest BØRNS single, "Faded Heart"—and you should listen to it if you haven't already; it's a *jam*—you might briefly mistake the 25-year-old for yet another 1970s-swag devotee. Listen more closely, though, and the song turns out to be more complex than the same old moves that pop music has built its empire on. Ask about the specific influences behind his second studio album, out in early 2018, and the Michigan native lists great American musicians and composers from the Beach Boys to Roy Orbison to Les Baxter. Indeed, everything about BØRNS seems to derive from a deeper source, or perhaps several sources pooling together in vivid iridescence.

His wardrobe is no less colorful or varied. He's often found in flowy shirts and tight pants à la Keith Richards on the *Sticky Fingers* tour, and his long wavy hair appears to give him Samson-like powers onstage. Now that he's popping up at fashion week front rows, rubbing elbows with the top brass at Gucci and collaborating with the white-hot designer Jahnkoy, BØRNS has emerged as the embodiment of a modern men's style that's retro and forward-looking all at once. You would do well to study the next few pages and see how he does it.

You moved to Los Angeles fairly abruptly a few years ago. How has the city influenced your style?
It wasn't really a move; it was sort of an accidental four-year vacation. To be honest,

Shirt by **Rochambeau;** jeans by **Vetements;** silver necklace by **Cartography;** gold necklace stylist's own.
Opposite page: vintage Hawaiian shirt; jeans by **Vetements;** sandals by **OAK.**

it doesn't feel like I've been in L.A. for four years because I've been touring so much. Since working on this new record I've reacquainted myself with the sounds, the heat and the spice of life here, which is really nice.

A lot of musicians find it hard to go from the road to back home and the studio. How do you deal with that creative dichotomy?
I think there are two people living inside me: One is the vagabond who enjoys performing and wearing bright, silky things, and then there's another part of me that enjoys getting into the craft of music and just wondering about a lot of different things.

How did that influence the upcoming album?
Two things I wrote down when I was thinking about this record were "live strings" and "theremin." I wanted to have those on the album, so that was a jumping-off point. It's a mixture of real and synthesized instruments, and I think that's kind of where we are with music these days.

Who are some of your style icons in music?
It's pretty broad. Anything from *Purple Rain*–era Prince to a younger Little Richard, when he would go on all the talk shows in his pajama-style suits. Pretty much anyone who likes to constantly reinvent themselves is interesting. I have a pretty short attention span, so I always like trying different things.

You're known to have an affinity for Gucci, and the creative director there, Alessandro Michele, has spoken highly of you. What attracts you to that brand?
Alessandro's never-ending playfulness. There are so many things that go into those clothes, and his creative mind—where it goes and how he takes ancient influences and combines them with modern ones—is inspiring.

How would you describe your own style?
I guess it depends on my mood. I'm always blending in with my surroundings. Lately I've been wearing a lot of natural textures, and I've been into changing up my silhouette. I like high-waisted pants, blousy shirts, crop tops—stuff that moves with the wind. I'm always experimenting and getting weird with what I wear because it's fun and it makes the performance different.

What's your hair regimen?
Just let nature do her thing. I don't really do much to alter it. It's good to let the natural oils work their way.


Shirt and leather trousers by **Saint Laurent.**

How has your look changed as you've been exposed to the fashion world?
I think it's interesting that the fashion world is derived not just from fashion but also from the history of art and architecture. Fashion is just one element of that. Since I've been traveling a lot and working with my stylist, Kat Typaldos, I feel I've been getting a lot of different influences.

What trends are you into these days?
I like athletic influences in clothes. I did a collaboration with Jahnkoy, an incredible designer from Siberia. She does these kind of deconstructed tribal tracksuits, and her line is just unreal. I saw a show during New York Fashion Week back in January that was really inspiring, so we collaborated.

What was it like being a CFDA ambassador for New York Fashion Week: Men's?
You wear designer clothes, walk around, watch shows and drink expensive water.

You've said you were inspired by vintage PLAYBOYS when you were writing your first album, *Dopamine*. Can you elaborate on that?
Sure—how much do you want to know? [*laughs*] I mostly loved the advertisements. The language in them was clever and sexy and enticing. Actually, one of the songs on *Dopamine,* "Overnight Sensation," came from an ad for a speaker system that just said "Overnight Sensation." The picture tells a thousand words.

On her: polo by **David Hart.**
On him: polo by **Issey Miyake;**
rings artist's own.

Shirt by **Rochambeau;**
jeans by **Vetements;**
belt by **Robert Geller.**

Shirt by **David Hart;**
jeans by **Vetements.**

HALSEY

With Hopeless Fountain Kingdom, the queen of New Americana is more outspoken than ever. Here, she talks about donating $100,000 to Planned Parenthood and the virtues of the dad bod

BY **REBECCA HAITHCOAT** PHOTOGRAPHY BY **RAMONA ROSALES**

Q1: *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom* hit number one on the *Billboard* 200. You're the first woman to top that chart in 2017. How does it feel?

HALSEY: A lot of this accolade shit is super arbitrary: "Halsey is the first girl with blue hair from New Jersey to...." It's exciting but also enraging, because I know a lot of women who put out better albums than me who deserve massive accolades, and I'm the one who had to break the seal.

Q2: *Badlands*, your 2015 debut studio album, made you a pop star. In less than a year you went from playing 400-capacity clubs to selling out Madison Square Garden. Then, last year, the Chainsmokers' "Closer" blasted you to a whole new level. Has your ascent been as dizzying as it looks from here?

HALSEY: I got successful so quickly. I blinked, and a couple months later I was performing on national television. There was zero time to get adjusted. I was considered relevant and important enough to accept awards and perform, but some people were like, "Who the fuck is that?" It's weird: The further I slip into the mainstream, I also maintain this kind of cult personality. And it's weird to me that I've tried so hard to be transparent, and then after "Closer" it dawned on me that many people know only that about me.

Q3: Do you ever feel you're underestimated?

HALSEY: I feel like I have been, yeah. After "Closer"—which is an absolutely great pop record, and I mean no disrespect to the guys—it was really hard for me and my fans. People were like, "Oh, the 'backseat of your Rover' girl." My fans were like, "No, the girl I've loved for three years and sings about mental health and self-love." Also, I write every song. I have co-writing credits, but most of the time it's a co-write from a melodic perspective. Make no mistake: The poetry is mine. I executive-produced this album and direct my videos, so to go from that to "Rover girl," no.

Q4: How is the new album different from *Badlands*?

HALSEY: I needed this album. I described *Badlands* as an angry female album. But I'm not angry anymore. I just feel catharsis. Calm. *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom* was about me trying to figure out who I am again. I'm smiling and happy. I stopped biting my nails. I have

these long, beautiful nails I grew out because I'm not anxious anymore. Now I feel just... good. Until the next thing comes along that fucks me up so I can write the third album.

Q5: You've become known as a pop star with an unusually close connection to your fans. Does that generosity make it hard for you to maintain romantic relationships?

HALSEY: I learned a while ago to keep that part separate. I've dated people no one knows about. I've managed to keep them to myself, going through a breakup and not having it be on the fucking internet. I'm always in a position of dominance in my relationships, and a lot of people have had a hard time dealing with that. I think because I'm so dominant in my main life, in my intimate life I want to be in a position of submission. I want to be taken care of since I'm taking care of everybody else all the time. But I'm a fucking 22-year-old female CEO of a company; I can't do all that all day and then come home to some person and be like, "Okay, now treat me like I'm a delicate little flower."

Q6: How do newer fans respond to you?

HALSEY: I love watching people change their mentality. I love watching frat bros tweet me things like "You're the hottest woman. You're my celebrity crush." And I'm judging them back, like "You are not a dude I'd think would find me hot. By any means." Whatever it is about me—my music, the way I speak or whatever led you to be accepting and interested in me—that's really cool.

Q7: You seem to have a pretty laissez-faire attitude about your appearance. Does that extend to your body image?

HALSEY: I always had an 18-year-old's tight body. I could just eat whatever the fuck I wanted to and have abs, and my butt was always firm and round. Then recently I was changing and looked in the mirror and was like, "Oh my God—it's been three months since I've been on tour! My body is changing. I need to put in work now." I went down this psychological rabbit hole, and now I'm telling myself that I need to change how my body is changing naturally.

Q8: Would you ever get cosmetic surgery?

HALSEY: I try never to do anything permanent. And it's not because I have qualms about plastic surgery; it's because I have qualms about my own indecisiveness. I don't want to make surgical decisions and in 10 years be like, "Ah, small lips are very in fashion now." Can you believe that around 10 years ago all the women's beauty magazines were writing articles about how to make your butt look smaller? Now it's "How to Make Your Butt Look As Big As You Fucking Can."

I STILL HAVE WHITE BOYS ASKING ME WHY MY NIPPLES ARE BROWN.

Q9: Do you think beauty ideals are becoming more inclusive?

HALSEY: I think we've finally reached the point where we're so oversaturated with sexuality and so much is considered "ideal" that we're in a position where we can change everything. I watch my own perspective changing. I was talking to a guy, flirting with him by a pool, and he took off his shirt. He wasn't a muscular dude, but he wasn't skinny; he was kind of chubby. I just remember being like, "He looks so happy and confident, and I love the way he looks." This isn't a self-applauding thing. Hopefully we are becoming a society that appreciates people as a whole package instead of little parts on a checklist.

Q10: You're only 22, but you've already used your platform to raise awareness about social issues. You went to the Women's March in Washington, D.C. and donated $100,000 to Planned Parenthood earlier this year. How was that received?

HALSEY: The negativity around Planned Parenthood was crazy: "That's not your money. Someone's using you as a front to donate it." "Whenever celebrities say they're donating money, they never really are; it's a company." No. I charged it to my personal Amex card. And the second-biggest response was "Why Planned Parenthood? Why not the ACLU? Why not LGBT causes? Why not blah blah blah?" I've got to fight one battle at a time.

Q11: You've been vocal about your endometriosis, and Planned Parenthood was instrumental in treating that, right?

HALSEY: Yeah! In 2015, I had a miscarriage on tour, and the first place I went was Planned Parenthood. All the responses were like, "Well, if you have $100,000 to donate, why did you have to go to Planned Parenthood?" Other people have controlled this negative narrative that it's a low-income place, this place in the ghetto, this place for abortions, this place where drug users go, this place where "slutty" girls go—I say "slutty" in quotes because I'm rolling my eyes at it. But it's a doctor's office. I can afford some of the best health care in the fucking world and I still went there, because I trust it.

Q12: How do you handle the negativity that's constantly hurled at you?

HALSEY: When a society is inclined to get negative, that frequency spreads across everyone. Everyone's looking for a fight. There *is* a fight to fight, but some people are picking the wrong one and fighting people who are on their side. And everyone has become a detective.

Q13: A detective? Is that related to "first" culture, where everybody races to be the first to post about a trend or controversy?

HALSEY: That's completely what it is. Everyone's goal is to be the one to find out that someone's doing something wrong. A girl will post a photo of herself with braids and the first response will be "This is cultural appropriation. What the fuck is wrong with you?" And the girl will say, "I'm half black." Then the person's like, "Oh, sorry. You look pretty." We've become traumatized because so many people have actually committed cultural appropriation, but our instinct is too reflexive.

Q14: How did you navigate growing up biracial?

HALSEY: I'm half black. My dad managed a car dealership, wore a suit to work, had a nice watch, was always clean-shaven, handsome, played golf on the weekends. And people would come up to him like, "Yo, brotha! What's up!" And my dad would be like, "Hi...."

Q15: How did that affect you?

HALSEY: I'm white-passing. I've accepted that about myself and have never tried to control anything about black culture that's not mine. I'm proud to be in a biracial family, I'm proud of who I am, and I'm proud of my hair. One of my big jokes a long time ago was "I look white, but I still have white boys in my life asking me why my nipples are brown." Every now and then I experience these racial blips. I look like a white girl, but I don't feel like one. I'm a black woman. So it's been weird navigating that. When I was growing up I didn't know if I was supposed to love TLC or Britney.

Q16: How do people react when they do find out you're biracial?

HALSEY: White guilt is funny, but this is a really hard time for white allies. People don't want to do too much but want to do enough, and in my bubble of Los Angeles I'm surrounded by a lot of good people with a lot of good intentions. But as I learned in this past election, my bubble is just a small fraction of how this country operates. That is ultimately my greatest frustration with the public perception of any sort of activism: the mentality of "Well, it's not affecting me." Open your fucking eyes.

Q17: Your hallmark in interviews is being really open. Is that just your nature, the same way you've refused to censor yourself when writing lyrics?

HALSEY: Sometimes I forget I'm doing interviews and I just talk to people. I have a friend who has been in the industry a very long time, and he said to me the other day, "Remember, the press is not your therapist." Being an artist is so fucking lonely, though. People forget that when I'm on tour, sometimes interviews are the only human interaction I get all day.

Q18: If it makes you feel better, oftentimes it's the only human interaction for the journalist too. Are there things you've regretted divulging?

HALSEY: Sometimes I give pieces of myself to everyone that I wish I could take back. As soon as I have my first child, articles will say, "Back in 2016, Halsey came out about having a miscarriage, so we're very happy for her." I'll be enjoying the happiest moment of my entire life, because I want to be a mom more than anything—if you told me tomorrow that I had to quit music but could have a happy family, I'd be like, "Sorry, guys, I'm out"—and I know the press will ruin it.

Q19: What spurred you to reveal your miscarriage to the press?

HALSEY: Every time I read a miscarriage story, it's about a happily married woman who loses a baby, and that's fucking terrible and I empathize, but I never read "A 20-year-old girl who's scared and alone and single had a miscarriage." And guess what—that happens all around the world every day. I wanted to say something about it because when I was going through it, I was fucking alone. I didn't know any artists I could have called and said, "Hey, I know this happened to you. What should I do? Can I go back on tour? How long did it take for your hormones to realign?" I had no one to talk to.

Q20: You have open DMs on Twitter, and you've helped fans out financially when they were struggling. Do you feel a responsibility toward them?

HALSEY: It has made me empathetic, but it's hard. I sign into Twitter and at any given moment there are a hundred kids messaging me: "My mom died. I hurt myself. I have an eating disorder. I'm failing school. My best friend committed suicide." It's amazing when I can be there for them, but that's still energy I carry all day long. I love that it hasn't numbed me. You can't cry 15 times in a meet-and-greet, but I still do. I hope I never lose that, because having the capacity to care in that way keeps you a decent human being. That's all I fucking want: to be a decent human being. ■

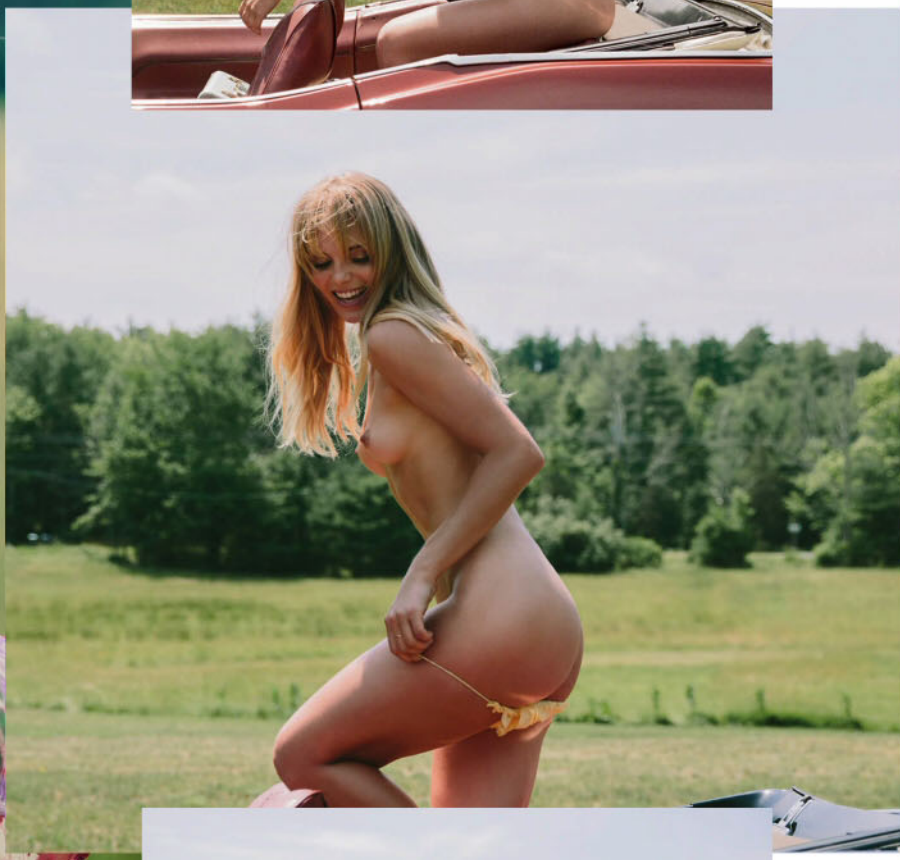

YOU CAN'T CRY 15 TIMES IN A MEET-AND-GREET, BUT I DO. I HOPE I NEVER LOSE THAT.
EVERYTHING

flower power forever

Hitch a ride with Jordy Murray to the hallowed grounds of Woodstock, where the spirit of free love is alive and well

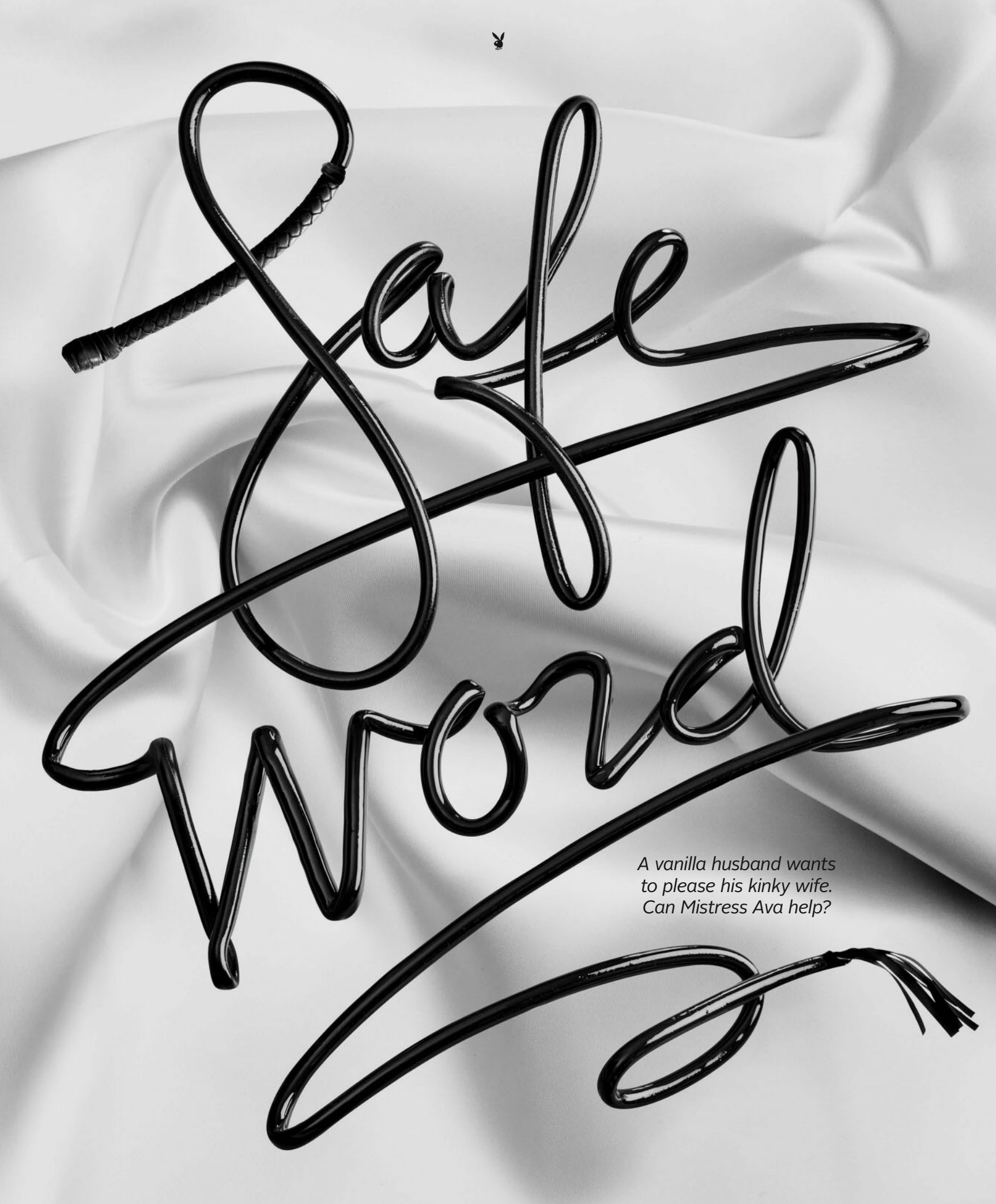
PHOTOGRAPHY BY **ALI MITTON**


would be nothing but nonsense.




Woodstock


MaKeLOVE
Not WAR!



A vanilla husband wants to please his kinky wife. Can Mistress Ava help?

After some discussion, they decided they'd both benefit from professional guidance. It was like doing yoga, they figured. Hazardous, at first, to go through the poses without an instructor's help. The woman who opened the door was shorter than her pictures had suggested she'd be. But on her website she'd been dressed in black pours of single-piece latex; now, in a buttoned white shirt with rolled sleeves, a simple black skirt

BY **R.O. KWON**

and calf-high boots so shiny Ken could see his blurred reflection, she looked less like a Mistress Ava Adamson than she did like a normal person, almost.

"Hello, Ken," she said. She took his hand in a predictably strong grip. Dark hair cupped her jaw, the tips curving under her chin like a gladiatorial helmet. She was roughly their age: still young, as opposed to young, period. "And *you,*" she said, turning to Jenny, who was standing half a step behind him, her hand in his. "I'm so glad to see you. Come along."

She turned and left them. Still holding hands, they followed the dominatrix. Down the long hall, then they were in a dim room flashing mirrors and—contraptions. Everything was an elaborate variation on something else, something he understood. A black padded massage table, but sturdier, buckle restraints hanging from its corners. A cross, but X-shaped, also dangling restraints. At the end of the room, something like a throne, high-backed, theatrical, gilded, the center of its seat cut away. Then what looked like a cat's scratching post, except that it was human-sized and, again, equipped with restraints. A mess of whips and crops, canes and paddles lined the walls. Jenny's grip on his hand had gone loose.

"May I take your coats?" the dominatrix said, smiling. Tattoos shimmered through the thin fabric of her shirt.

She'd be right back, she said. As soon as the door closed behind her, Jenny turned to him. Her eyes were wide and urgent. "The *envelope,*" she whispered.

"Oh, right," he said, pulling it from his pocket. The website had instructed them to leave their payment—their "tribute," what the fuck—out in plain sight at the start of their session. "Why are we whispering? Where am I supposed to put this?"

"Maybe on that—that table?"

He smoothed out the envelope and left it on the modified massage table. This woman was making more per hour than most bankers he knew. Jenny was hugging herself, looking down. She'd agonized that morning over what clothes she should wear, which was pretty funny, since, as he'd pointed out, she probably wasn't going to be in them very long. After five, six outfit changes, she'd ended up choosing the first thing she'd tried on, a slim wool dress with stockings, an ensemble at least 15 degrees too flimsy for the day. But now, underdressed, clutching herself, she looked tiny, miserable. He closed his arms around her, warming her up. He almost asked if she was all right, but maybe it was insensitive to imply there was any reason for her not to be all right, and why would there be? Here they were, in a dungeon in Chelsea, a dominatrix on her way: What could be off about this? So he kissed the top of her head, the white pure line of her part, and hoped the touch would say what needed to be said, whatever it was. He was so tired, he realized, of not knowing what he was supposed to do or say.

• • •

So much was his fault. Like a jackass, he'd pushed her and pushed her. A month ago, he'd interrupted the back massage he was giving her—"harder," she kept saying—to ask if there was anything else she wanted to try in bed.

"Jenny?" he said, after a moment. It was possible she was asleep, but it was even more possible she was pretending this wasn't happening. They were like two thirds of a bar joke: He was an ex-Pentecostal, she was an ex-Catholic, and though she'd been with him for three years she still refused to let him in the bathroom if she was so much as taking a piss.

"*Jen*-ny," he repeated, running a knuckle up the long knobbed curve of her neck. He was straddling her; she was lying on her stomach in her bra and panties.

"No, I'm fine," she said. "Thank you."

"Really, there's nothing?" he said. "Come on, there must be some fantasy you've never told me about. There's not even one other thing you want to try?" He'd brought this up as a joke, mostly, and also of course because he kind of wanted her to ask him what other fantasies he had, but now that she was being so evasive he had to wonder: Was she lying?

She twisted her neck to look up at him. "Ken," she said, too gently. "Are you bored?"

"No," he said. Quickly, before she had time to think, he said, "But you are."

Then came the denials, the expostulations, the what-the-hell-are-you-talking-abouts, and then, if only to prove him wrong, she pulled off his boxers and bounced on top of him for a long, athletic display of just how bored she was not. But after she'd fallen asleep, her head huddled under his chin, he lay awake, wondering.

A year married, three together. Say they had sex every three days, on average. Once every three days, 121.7 fucks a year, so 365 times they'd played hide the salami, the

ARTWORK BY **SEAN FREEMAN**

same stick in the same hole, the stick in the hole, the stick in the hole, the stick in the—who wouldn't feel bored? The fact that he hadn't, yet, meant nothing. He was an outlier. Recently, he'd eaten the same deli pork-belly-and-pickle sandwich every weekday for a month, because it was good. Tasty, filling, reliable. Why mess around? Maybe he should make the straightforward effort and believe his wife when she said she was fine, but now that he was thinking about it he couldn't, not really. She was so kind to him that she couldn't be trusted.

Over the next couple of weeks, he brought up the question every now and then, teasing her, and though she brushed him off each time, he shouldn't have been as surprised as he was when, one night, she shook him awake. It couldn't have taken long—he slept lightly, fearfully, because anything could happen. He opened his eyes, and Jenny was sitting cross-legged, her hands folded in her lap. "Fine," she said. "If you really have to know. I think it's gone but it comes back."

"What?" he said, thinking she'd had a bad dream. It was only when he reached for her hands, her palms damp and electric, that he realized she was crying. "Jenny, what is it? *What* comes back?"

"There's something a little wrong with me," she said, each word enunciated, as if she were reciting a speech. "You're going to hate this. Sometimes I really need you to hurt me."

• • •

The door flung open. Ava swept in, chattering, something about how she'd just gotten back from a trip to Buenos Aires, she'd hitched a ride on a Peruvian cargo ship, it was her new favorite way to travel, then, "Ken," she said. "What do you do?"

"I work in finance," he said, after a moment, flustered. She was still looking at him, so he added, "I'm a vice president at a fund. It's too boring to talk about." This last bit he said with a laugh—it was his usual sidestep, meant to prevent the blank look people got when he mentioned his job. *Oh, great, another overpaid bozo in finance.* It was a lie, though. It wasn't boring at all. He loved it, the numbers whizzing past, the rush of the transaction, the pure, exquisite logic of the math, all of it at his fingers and under his control.

The dominatrix let her eyes linger on Ken another long moment—it was stagy, her menace; she was an actress who'd said her lines too many times—then she nodded. Turning to his wife, she flashed a smile and said, "I really do love seeing couples. So often my clients are these lonely guys hiding from their wives. This is so much nicer.

Jenny, I'd like you to get rid of your clothes."

So he'd been right. He got to think about that, how right he'd been, as Jenny slipped out of her dress. She stripped down to her panties, a little black cotton thong, but then she hesitated. Thumbs hooked in the waistband, she looked up at Ava. "That's fine," the dominatrix said. "Good. Now. Come here."

• • •

That first announcement of Jenny's had felt like a rehearsed speech, he'd realized, because it was a rehearsed speech, a set piece of pure bravado, nearly exhausting what she had to say. That night and over the next few days, he quizzed Jenny, and as she tried—halting, wincing, tearing up—to answer his questions, it was slow going. Jenny wanted: to be beaten. She wanted: rules—control—punishment—correction—pain. Ropes. Blindfolds. Whips. Not always, but in the, well, the bedroom, yeah. It could take her all exasperating evening long even to begin to answer a question as basic as, Exactly what kinds of rules do you want? They were both second-generation Americans—his parents had moved from Montreal, which counted—and though they shared the immigrant's skepticism of psychotherapy, it didn't take a shrink to guess why she was so shy: what with the nuns, the Catholic boarding schools, the subsequent renunciation of the Catholic schools, the shame, the counteracting feminism, her quasi-Victorian and entirely Korean squeamishness regarding anything having anything to do with the body, and all this heaped for decade upon decade on top of the great hungry beast of sexual desire—well.

Worse yet, he blundered from the start, asking her why she felt she needed to be hurt. "Why are people gay?" she shot back, suddenly unshy. "Why does anyone have a foot fetish? One of my earlier memories is of looking up words related to—to this, in the dictionary. It just happens, you know?"

No, he didn't know: That was the problem. His fantasies were confined to, oh, an occasional longing for a threesome. His memory of a certain sixth-grade teacher, the pony-tailed Miss Berrymore. An unindulged appetite for pigtails and, unoriginally enough, for Natalie Portman. "Is this—something you've done before?" he asked her.

"God, no," she said.

So—his idea—they turned to outside sources. Huddled together on their couch, they watched *Belle de Jour* and *Repulsion.* They watched *Secretary,* and they tried reading *Fifty Shades* but soon dropped it; it was so badly written that it made her laugh. Also, they studied a different book, a sort of how-to manual with diagrams, titled *Screw the Roses, Send Me the Thorns.* ("You don't

like roses?" "Oh, I like roses.") After closing the book, after switching off the movie, he asked her what she'd liked about what they'd read or seen. ("Do you want us to get a cane?" Head nod for yes. "Do you...want to have mud thrown on you?" Head shake for no.)

Just once, he asked why in three years she'd never told him any of this.

"I don't want to be this way," she said, turning toward him her pale, determined face. "I'd rather not be this fucked-up."

By now, the right reply came automatically. "You're not fucked-up."

• • •

The dominatrix had Jenny bent over the black table, her ass soaring upward. With quick, rhythmic slaps the dominatrix struck her well below her tailbone. "I'm warming her up," Ava explained to Ken, who resisted the juvenile urge to say he knew that already.

Mistress Ava Adamson was attractive enough, he supposed, in a sturdy way that wasn't his thing, but some guys would be into it, with her strong calves showcased by the short boots, the clusters of muscles sleek in the low light. Big breasts too, tucked away in that no-nonsense shirt. The dominatrix was more muscular than he was, admittedly. He used to work out a lot more, then one day he caught himself fondling the flat planes of his abs and stopped, embarrassed. What was the point of all these muscles? It was the body of a thug, miscast in the life of a—fund manager. Brawn wouldn't maximize the possibility that he and Jenny would have long and happy lives; money would. He had no romantic illusions about money, but he understood its ability, so he went less often to the gym and spent those saved hours at the fund instead.

In one of the dungeon mirrors, he caught himself looking worried. The high flushed forehead settling into its first wrinkles, the disappearing hairline, his entire reflection these days a memento mori. He felt old, and tired. This was the thing about being an ex-Christian: Like that, your life expectancy went from eternity to 70-odd years. A death sentence on you and on those you loved. He tried not to think about it; he thought about it all the time.

"Up," the woman told his wife. Her ass was alarmingly red, and all she'd had was a so-called warm-up. "Jenny, turn around. Look at me. You know, don't you, that we're just getting started? And you can't do a thing about it. Scream if you like, and no one else will hear you. If you try to get away, Ken and I will stop you. You're not going anywhere."

Jenny looked—glassy, as if, Ava's threats to the contrary, she wasn't entirely here. "Are you okay, Jenny?" he said. "Is this what you want? Is there anything else we should be doing?"

She blinked a few times, and shook her head. "I'm all right," she said, the words sluggish. A glance at him, and back to the dominatrix.

"Poor little Jenny," Ava said, in singsong. "You're such a very submissive little girl, aren't you?" She spoke over her shoulder to Ken. "Your wife doesn't want to be asked what she wants. What she wants is to be told what to do."

THE DOMINATRIX HAD JENNY BENT OVER THE TABLE, HER ASS UPWARD. "I'M WARMING HER UP."

"How do you know what she wants?"

"For one, because your wife told me so," she said. Ava had required a half-hour phone consultation with Jenny before the session. "Plus, you see how she can barely talk? She's so high on endorphins, they're scrambling her brain. It's beautiful to see." Smiling at him, Ava added, gently, "She's been like this her whole life. In all likelihood, she'll stay this way. People don't change."

Something inside of him flailed, upset. He hadn't even realized he'd been hoping that, somehow, all this would go away. That they'd have their little excursion into the foreign land in which he was expected to beat his wife, then they'd come back to their cozy, normal life in which they took care of each other. But the dominatrix was still talking. "Right now, she just wants to be good, isn't that right, Jenny?"

• • •

Of course, if he'd known what to expect, they wouldn't have had to come here. A week ago, he'd stolen out of the office early to get to stores before they closed. First to an equestrian shop on the Upper East Side that, according to Yelp, was the best in the city. He selected a few sturdy crops and whips. On second thought, he also picked out a zippered kelly green canvas bag, to hide his purchases. Next, he rode the subway downtown to a sex shop on Sixth Avenue, where he bought a gag, a blindfold and handcuffs. They sold whips there too, but he knew—from his research—that they would be badly made, too flimsy to be functional. One last stop at a hardware store for a length of rope, and he was back on the subway, going home.

Jenny called to say she was running late at the office. He waited in an armchair, drinking his Laphroaig and trying to read the *Journal* but failing: nervous, though he shouldn't have been. He had it all planned out. He was going to astound his wife. He was Mister Fucking Poppins, and when she walked through the door and he greeted her with the canvas bag, and she unzipped it and said, "Oh," and sat on the floor, like a kid, he figured, or, at least, he hoped, that everything was going to be all right.

She lifted her head, and her eyes were shining. "You're sweet to me," she said. He smiled at her. Then he frowned. Sweet, an adjective fit for puppies and, what, figs. Wasn't his role now to be mean?

Soon he had his wife trussed to the four posters of their bed, facedown, crops lined up at her side. "Jenny-girl, I'm—going to hit you," he announced, like an idiot. The back of her head, banded electric pink with the blindfold, nodded her assent. Shostakovich was playing, in case of neighbors. Her hair split away from her head like black wings, but he knew she didn't want to fly away, so he raised his hand and let it fall on her trouser-covered ass.

Things went well enough, as far as he could tell, at first. Per the instructions in *Screw the Roses,* he steadily increased the intensity of his blows. At some point, he started wielding the lightest of the three crops. He could feel the scotch; still, his aim was good.

Jenny wiggled, and cried out a little, but the knots held—he'd studied that too—and they'd agreed on a safeword, "red," if things got to be too much for her, and it was crazy, frankly it terrified him to hurt her, but it was like trying to speak in tongues for the first time when every other believing kid but him could do it, his father telling him all he had to do was loosen up, open his mouth and let God in, let God work, so he gave it a try, jumbling together consonants until he was yelling out something that sounded about right, and since doubt was the work of the devil he kept going, telling himself that what sounded like squeals of pain were actually squeals of pleasure, and, in fact, he was starting to feel pretty good, getting into a rhythm, crop down, crop up, like Romeo-plus-a-whip, when she squeaked, "Red!"

"What is it?" he said, at her side, pulling up the blindfold. Her face was twisting with pain.

"You-hit-me-on-my-*tail*bone!"

"What's wrong?" he said, desperate, fumbling with rope knots. "What did I do?"

"Don't you know? It's unsafe," she said, wailing until he finally got her free.

• • •

So now Jenny was fastened onto the black table, bottom up. The heels of her feet were dry, haloed in white bits of skin. A strap. A flogger. A belt. A leather paddle. A crop. A Lochgelly tawse. A ruler. A wooden paddle. A Lexan paddle. ("What's Lexan?" he asked. "A kind of plastic," Ava said.) A rattan cane. A Lexan cane. This is how you hold it. This is how to strike from the wrist. Make sure to avoid her kidneys. ("Where, exactly, are her kidneys?" "Right here," she said. "And here.") Swing from the elbow. Now from the shoulder. Try her thighs. Yes, she's tender there. You can hit harder, if you like. That's it. Again from the shoulder. Don't mind her—it's good for her. She likes it. Isn't that right, little girl?

Jenny was yelping, her toes curling piteously into the soles of her feet. But no pleading, no safeword. Her ass was tingeing from red to bluish, which worried him. At some of Jenny's screams, Ava tipped back her head and let loose a big laugh. He glanced at Ava, fascinated. The dominatrix wasn't faking it—she loved hurting his wife. Was he supposed to enjoy it too, and how much further was this going to go, and exactly how often did she want to be hurt, and if he couldn't keep beating her up, then what, and what about *his* needs?

With each instrument, after a few strokes, Ava handed it to him, guiding him. She ran long fingers over Jenny's skin, pressing marks and ridges, inspecting. He hesitated, and she urged him on. At some point, he noticed Jenny had soaked through the cotton, and there was a small puddle under her half-covered crotch. So this was why Ava had had Jenny keep her panties on. He hadn't even known that could happen outside of the porn film demimonde, let alone with his wife. They kept an economy-size bottle of lubricant in a bedside table because of how slow her body could be, sometimes, often, to respond to his.

SWING FROM THE ELBOW. NOW THE SHOULDER. TRY HER THIGHS. YES, SHE'S TENDER THERE. SHE LIKES IT.

Jenny was gulping, possibly hyperventilating. He stopped hitting her, but before he could get to her, Ava was there, bending down until her face was level with Jenny's, which lay flat to the side, her mouth open. She raised the blindfold and said, "Breathe. Deep, long breaths. Breathe in. Breathe out. In. Out. That's a girl. I want you to keep doing that. Okay? You're all right. *Shh*. That's a very good girl. You're okay."

With each word her voice got lower and her face closer to Jenny's until her lips, almost whispering, were no more than another reassurance away from kissing his wife. Her dark hair swung forward, a curtain. Jenny inhaled and exhaled, visibly obedient. His prick, infuriatingly enough, was perking up, interested. Something about the two women, one little and Asian, one Amazonian, almost kissing. He'd have felt self-conscious, but hey, they weren't going to notice. Another few breaths, and Jenny said, "Okay. I think. I'm all right, Mistress."

Ava laughed again, the loudest yet. She stood and said, "Of course, you're all right. I wasn't asking you, I was telling you."

He was tired. His right shoulder hurt. He didn't want to hit Jenny anymore—he wanted to get out of here. He wanted to untie her and take her home, soothe her and have sex with her, his wife, whom he loved. But he kept going. Finish the session, he told himself. He got through the next round of implements, through Ava's jerking Jenny's head up by a handful of hair and informing her it was a lucky thing her husband was so nice to her. "If you were mine," she said, "I'd string you up by your toes." She got out a paper-wrapped package of jagged plants—stinging nettles, she said—and next he got through seeing her stick the stems *into* Jenny. Now there were nettles sprouting from his wife's ass, then came Jenny's gleeful screams, and Ava's laughter, and which of the two was crazier, he didn't know, but because he was finishing the session he got through that too.

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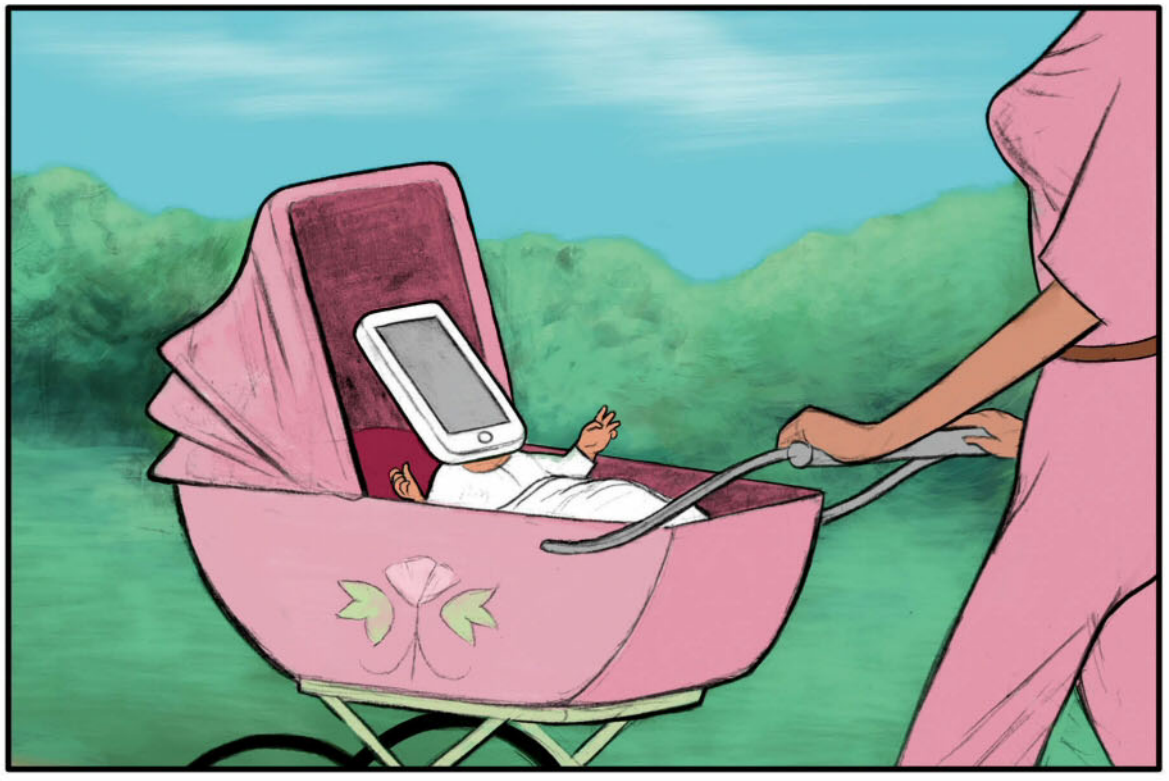
On Ava's recommendation, Ken and Jenny stopped at a pharmacy on the way home and picked up arnica gel, a homeopathic treatment that was supposed to reduce bruising. Once they were home, Jenny rolled off her stockings, wincing as the elastic rode over her skin. Then she grinned—she was in such a good mood. When she asked him to help her put the arnica on, he sat on the couch and she crawled over him, positioning her ass over his lap. He smoothed the gel over the discolored, swollen mass of her, and she sighed.

He was applying the gel to her thighs when it occurred to him that she was in a classic spanking position. If Ava were in his place she would give Jenny a few more smacks, now, for fun, to hurt her just when she thought she was safe. Ken raised his hand. From behind, his wife was unrecognizable. He raised his hand higher, then he put his hand back down to the couch.

"Up you go," he said, and she thanked him, patting his thigh as she pushed herself off his lap. She stood, stretching, and she moved away from him. ■



NICHOLAS GUREWITCH

PLAYMATE

CENTER STAGE

Ladies and gentlemen, please put your hands together for October Playmate Milan Dixon

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **AARON FEAVER**

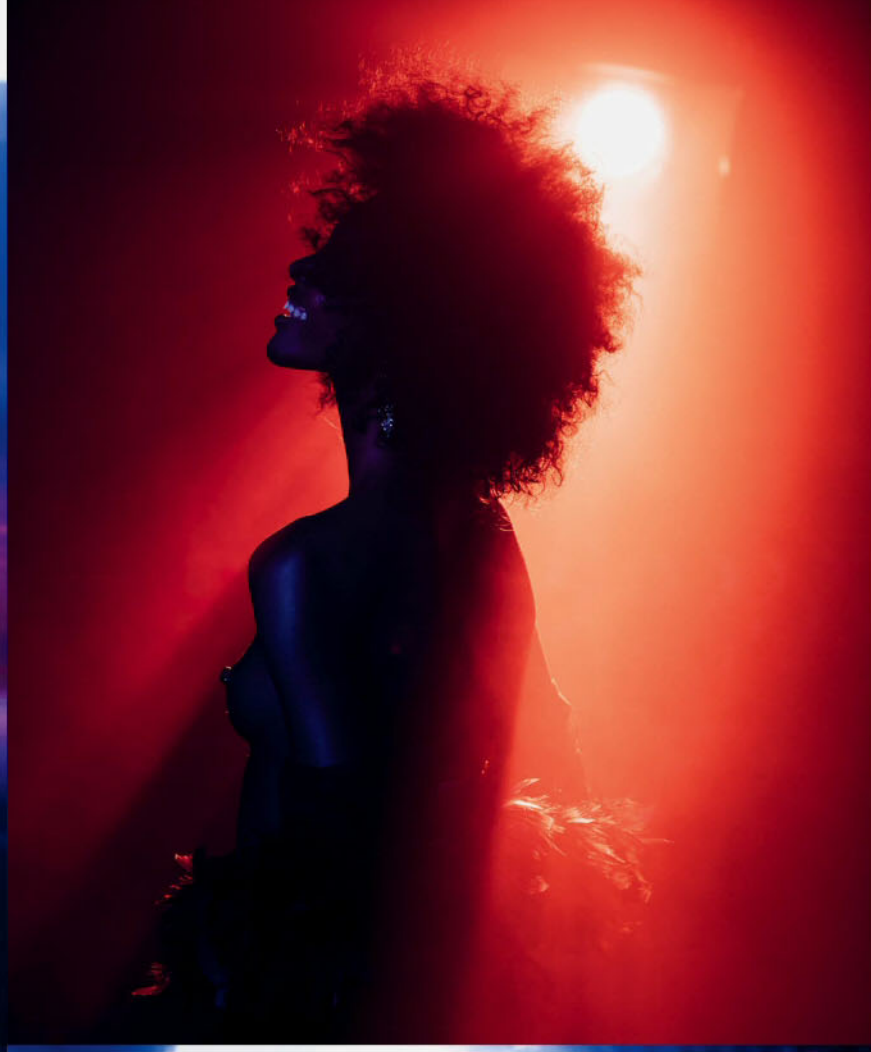
Call it charisma. Call it the X factor. Whatever you call it, Milan Dixon has it—that preternatural quality that makes people want to be around her. She's magnetic, a trait only enhanced by her bright, broad smile and absurdly high cheekbones. She is also dedicated. Before becoming a full-time model, the Las Vegas native worked at TGI Fridays for five years, squeezing in casting calls between shifts. "First I was a hostess and then a server after I turned 21. I saved up my money and moved to Los Angeles," she recalls. "But I didn't save enough, so I'd drive back and forth in my little PT Cruiser between tryouts in L.A. and my job in Vegas. I'd say, 'Yes, I'm available,' and just drive to Los Angeles right from work, then back to Vegas after a casting. I slept in my car a couple of times just to rest before driving home."

Notwithstanding her tireless work ethic, Milan knows how to relax. "I'm a pretty chill person. Being from Vegas, people expect you to be a party girl. But not me!" That doesn't mean she's without a spontaneous side. "I will try anything," she says. "Even if it looks gross, give me a dollar or something, and I'll do it. I've eaten stingray."

When it comes to men, Milan is more specific. "Physically, I like them tall, dark and handsome. I like guys I can take home to Mom. Have your shit together. Anything that's unique and different from me is a turn-on, and anything that's the same as me is also a turn-on!" Milan also knows what she doesn't appreciate. "I don't like it when guys approach me saying, 'Hey, slim.' I get it, but I'm not going to respond to you. I know I'm slim."

Our October Playmate believes wholeheartedly in the power of expression. "I'm all about positivity and being good overall," she says. "What you're thinking, what you're feeling in your heart—once you speak it, it can come to pass." Ultimately, though, that unmistakable magnetism comes from within. "After shooting, I feel like a totally different woman. I feel confident and comfortable. I don't care what anyone thinks of me. It's about being comfortable in my own skin."


ZOLTAR
SPEAKS


NISHANT

DATA SHEET

AGE: 28 **BIRTHPLACE:** Las Vegas, Nevada **CURRENT CITY:** Los Angeles, California

LEAPS AND BOUNDS

I was a high jumper on my high school track team. I was pretty good, even though I didn't like working out. I still don't. I'm a little lazy when it comes to being active like that, but I like to walk around. I do some crunches here and there.

ALL GOOD THINGS

On my dream day, I'd wake up somewhere like Ibiza, in time for a good breakfast. Then I'd just lie out and read a good book. I love reading books.

SKIN IS IN

I'm into spa culture and I especially like nude spas. At first I was like, What is this? But now I just love it. You see beautiful women who have lost tons of weight and who have all this extra skin, women who've survived breast cancer. And here we are on Instagram trying to get the perfect photo or make our butts look bigger. It's good to see women who have overcome challenges in their lives and aren't afraid to get out there.

GIRL CRUSHES

I love me some Lara Stone—her body, her realness, everything. And of course Naomi Campbell. I love the old-school icons too, like Diana Ross and Donna Summer. Older photos inspire me a lot, especially now that I'm rocking an Afro. That 1970s vibe is kind of my go-to look.

THROWBACK EVERY DAY

My Spotify playlists are loaded with music from the 1990s. I love it. R&B, stuff like Monica, Brandy, Tevin Campbell and Keith Sweat—that era. Boyz II Men? Yes, all of it. Notorious B.I.G., obviously, and Tupac is great too.

SNACK ATTACK

I'm a big snacker—Flamin' Hot Cheetos and Twizzlers. I'll buy the big pack of Twizzlers and it will disappear within two days. It's pretty bad. I always have to have my snacks.

HIDDEN TALENT

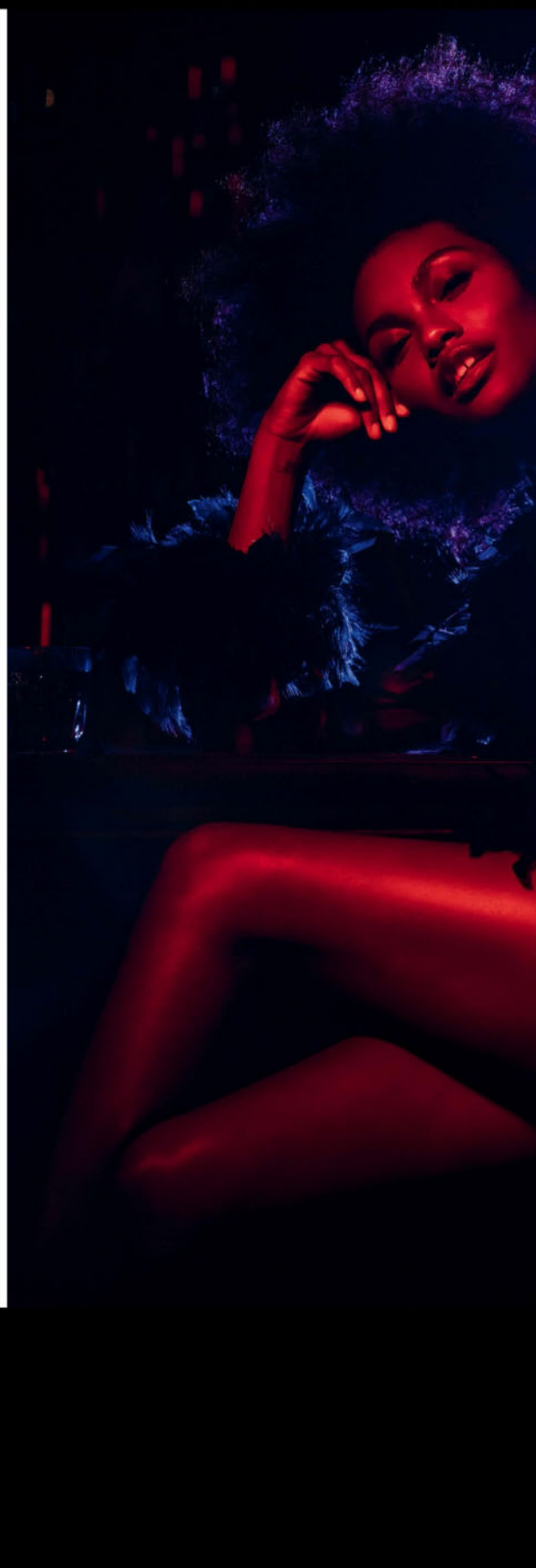
I used to braid hair in high school. It was a side hustle I had going. Cornrows were my specialty. My mom's a hairdresser, and my sister and I would hang out in her salon. She would give us a mannequin head to keep us busy, and we taught ourselves.

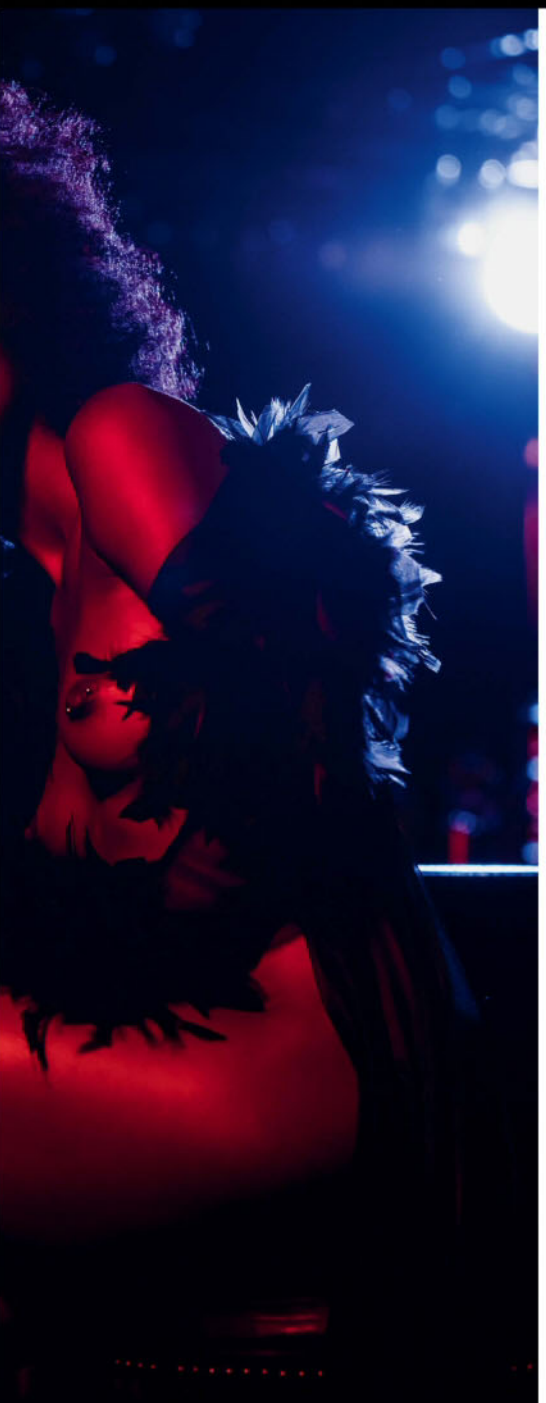
FLIPPING OUT

If modeling weren't my career, I'd flip homes. I like the idea of finding something old and beat-up and transforming it. I'm into the whole property world. I like watching home tours on YouTube. Embarrassing but true!

Milan Dijon

@modelomilano





PLAYBOY'S PARTY JOKES

Everyone knows "Sweet Caroline" is a classic Neil Diamond song. But did you know it's also the technical term for a group of drunk white people?

My girlfriend doesn't like it when I play music during sex, or maybe she just has something against "Macarena."

Hey, girl, are you the current political landscape, because I don't know what you're doing but you're definitely terrifying me.

We don't claim to be experts, but a "Brazilian" just sounds like a whole lot of bras to us.

Football and sex are very different, of course. One is an athletic game with a lot of fumbles and turnovers before scoring, and the other is football.

If the band Heart had been fronted by guys, they probably would have been called Dick.

Living in a dorm room is the best way to figure out how close you're willing to be to two people having sex.

We wonder how many future fathers will go to the store for vape refills and never come back.

Don't feel bad about pressing the CLOSE DOOR button when you see people running for the elevator. If they have that much energy, they should take the stairs.

DOCTOR: [*holding $5 bill*] What is this for?
PATIENT: It's a tip.
DOCTOR: Okay, but you still need to lose weight.
PATIENT: [*hands doctor $20 bill*]

If you bring a flask and share a shot with every man you see rolling his eyes behind his wife's back, shopping isn't so bad.

A museum of American history obtained the writing desk of one of our nation's most beloved literary figures, on loan. Apparently the new curator wasn't impressed: The sign for the exhibit reads FUCK THE POE LEASE!

That sound you hear when you shove something in the freezer and close the door before it falls out? That's the sound of someone else's problem.

Her milkshake brings all the boys to the yard, and then they're like, "I only drink vegan, gluten-free milkshakes with fresh açai."

The novel *Catcher in the Rye* is not about a baseball player who likes swimming in whiskey. I know this now.

Some guy's whining because the store's out of passion fruit LaCroix, and all I can think is that we used to hunt with spears.

What doesn't kill you probably will when you're no longer eligible for health insurance.

If you're not putting alcoholic beverages in your water bottle, can you truly call yourself a Little League fan?

It's strange how guitar solos are considered musical masturbation, but the only sound masturbation makes is the sound of one hand clapping.

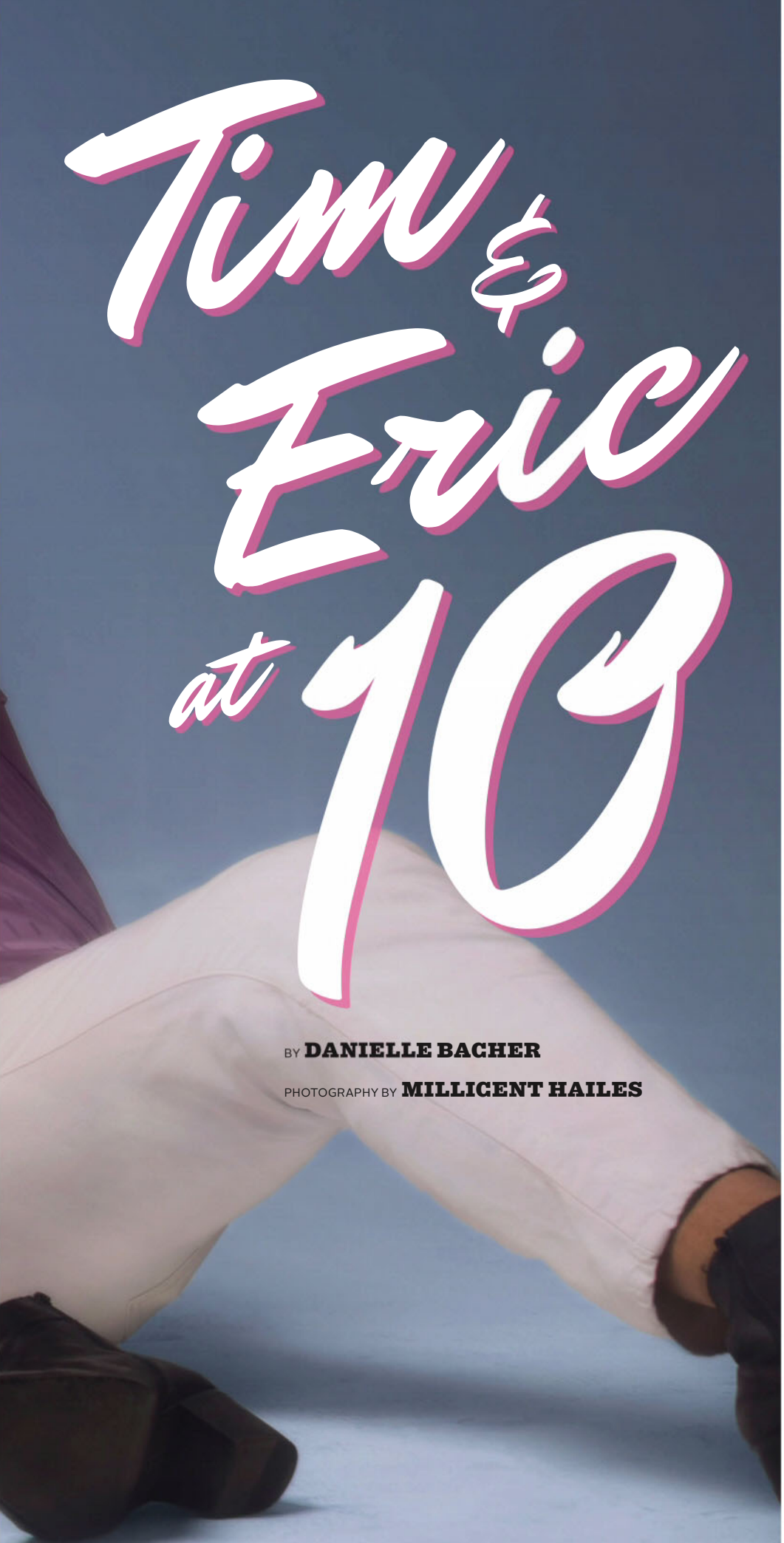
Did you hear about the guy whose safe word was *Beetlejuice*? Every time he had sex it quickly turned into an extremely awkward three-way.

Sex-ed curriculum circa 1997: Safe sex and family planning.
Sex-ed curriculum now: Swiping strategies and dick-pic angles.

BOY: [*kissing girl on couch*] You wanna take this upstairs?
GIRL: He-he, sure, baby.
BOY: Sweet! Grab the other end, and try not to scuff the banister.

You know it's a really good bar when there's a couple outside breaking up.

People say virtual-reality technology will revolutionize pornography, but there's nothing new about watching porn three inches from the screen. In the past, this practice was known simply as "watching porn."



Tim & Eric at 10

BY **DANIELLE BACHER**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **MILLICENT HAILES**

Tim and Eric Awesome Show, Great Job! debuted a decade ago. What do its creators make of the fact that our president may as well be one of the show's grotesquely comical characters?

"Someone give me a goddamn belt! My pants keep falling off!"

Tim Heidecker kicks off a pair of Kenneth Cole slacks and crosses the floor in black boxer briefs and matching socks, jiggling his belly to the AM classic "Rich Girl" blaring from the next room. Meanwhile, Eric Wareheim is shaving his face with an electric razor, fashioning a luxurious mustache. There's no air-conditioning in this downtown Los Angeles loft, and sweat glistens across his brow. Peeling off an XL T-shirt—he stands an ursine six-and-a-half-feet tall—Wareheim exposes his richly carpeted chest. "Damn, I look good," he says to the mirror as he adjusts a pair of aviators.

These two aren't quite household names, but they've spent the past 13 years carving out an unmistakable and ever-growing niche in the pop-culture landscape. They're currently at work on the second season of their horror-comedy anthology *Tim & Eric's Bedtime Stories.* Heidecker also heads up the Adult Swim series *Decker* (think *24* on a public-access budget), as well as *On Cinema,* and Wareheim has reached new heights of visibility playing Aziz Ansari's best friend on the Netflix series *Master of None.* But as a unit, they're best known for *Tim and Eric Awesome Show, Great Job!,* whose 10th anniversary they're commemorating with a live tour. Spanning five seasons, *Awesome Show* delivered lo-fi production, gross anatomy and frenetic non sequiturs in 11-minute doses. Some of the more memorable sequences include a holiday episode in which both men unexpectedly start lactating (they proceed to hand out bottles of their "man milk" as gifts); a scene featuring a pubic-hair milkshake, which Heidecker drinks in the hopes of growing an epic "pube mound"; and a series of ads in which a mangy-bearded Wareheim hawks live child clowns.

The creative process behind retina scorchers like these was surprisingly mundane. During the show's run, Heidecker and Wareheim would meet up in L.A. restaurants to eat BLTs and discuss forthcoming episodes. No matter how surreal (or gross) the finished product, most of their ideas came from scanning their environment.

"I'll be driving and think, Ah, Lamborghini. What can we do with that?" says Heidecker. "It's a very layered process. We go out and make a lot of raw material that doesn't become what it is until it's edited and put together." Wareheim agrees, adding that he "loves to fuck with people—not as a mean thing but to entertain ourselves."

Heidecker insists he has always rejected the idea of "anti-comedy." Despite material that strays far from the traditional setup-to-punchline framework, their goal is not to alienate or unnerve audiences, the way Andy Kaufman did in his heyday by reading *The Great Gatsby* onstage; they simply want to make people, themselves included, laugh. Nor is their comedy meant to appeal only to stoned hipsters. In fact, many would be surprised to learn they actually create their comedy while sober. "I thought it was cheating when I was high or tripping. I don't consider that as coming from me," says Wareheim. "When it came to what made me laugh, it was a realness and the man on the street who wasn't an actor doing something weird. We do

"We have to be razor-sharp. To act weird is a lot of work."

what we love and love what we do, but we have to be razor-sharp. To act weird is a lot of work."

The two concede that not everyone comprehends their absurdity, stoned or not. "I met a guy the other day who told me he got a divorce because of us," says Heidecker, giggling. "He said, 'My wife always hated you guys and she just couldn't get it.' But it's just a comedy show!"

"Sara Smile" begins in the background, and Heidecker sighs. It's possible he has hit his quota of Hall & Oates for the day. Now Wareheim is prancing around in *his* underwear, caressing his throat in slow motion. "Let's do this!" he yells to the crew. A wardrobe team surrounds Heidecker, guiding him into a baby blue Byblos suit.

"*Awesome Show* is definitely deep in our hearts," Wareheim says. "We were making the same exact thing in college. We were outsiders even back then. We didn't like anyone in our Film 101 class." He pauses, rethinking. "Well, it's not that we didn't *like* them," he says, laughing. "We didn't respect them. We knew we could eventually make something better."

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Now 41 years old, Heidecker and Wareheim met at Temple University in Philadelphia as freshmen in 1994. On their first day, they swapped inappropriate stories to make each other laugh, causing a disruption in the auditorium. "We immediately got in trouble and had to see the teacher after class," recalls Wareheim. "We were bad and got yelled at—in college. Then we ended up in the same dorm as all the basketball players. So it was one big jock party, and then us."

Heidecker adds, "They were like, 'Where is all the pot smoke coming from?' "

The first video assignment they did together was a bit called "Find That Chicken." "Even then there was a lot of *Tim and Eric* in it," says Heidecker. "It was this stupid thing with a British phone booth, and I was wearing a full chicken suit. It was the dumbest thing ever, but we knew we would be making so many more projects." Eventually they decided to launch a website, TimandEric.com, expanding their catalog of strange and transgressive humor.

After college, Wareheim began shooting videos for weddings and Jewish events in Pennsylvania, and Heidecker took an office job in Manhattan. In 2002, they packaged a selection of shorts and sent it to Robert Smigel, Dan Harmon, Rob Schrab and other comics they admired. The first to respond was Bob Odenkirk, co-creator of HBO's seminal sketch series *Mr. Show.* (Nowadays, Odenkirk is best known as the title character on *Better Call Saul.*) To Odenkirk's surprise, the two upstarts had included glossy head shots, a letter on proper stationery, DVDs—and an invoice.

"At first I thought I should throw it in the garbage, which I would usually do," says Odenkirk. "But then I was like, What the hell? I opened it, and alongside was this itemized bill for the postage, tapes, dubbing and editing. It was ridiculous and wonderfully executed, so I thought these guys were probably funny. I watched it, and I remember thinking it was inventive and very different, some semi-animated and music-video stuff, but it all came from this comical mix. If you like their voice, it was unique and rare."

But as Odenkirk, their eventual executive producer, admits, not everyone understood the humor—and maybe the humor didn't quite understand itself yet. They learned this the hard way when they launched their first show together on Adult Swim, *Tom Goes to the Mayor.* "It didn't work very well. I certainly knew it was funny, but I also knew what would become *Awesome Show* would work better," Odenkirk says. "They did whatever the hell they wanted to do. There were no rules to *Awesome Show.*"

Odenkirk offered creative input, but Heidecker and Wareheim often delivered their own skewed version of what he'd pitched. "It was their own voice," Odenkirk says. "They are self-starters in every way. They didn't need me. I'm just the biggest fan, that's all."

He continues, "Their influence was clearly massive, though. They even influenced *Saturday Night Live* to the point where they have two or three pieces that look like—well, you can almost call them rip-offs. That's a pretty big deal."

Indeed, *SNL* aired a 2010 sketch with Kristen Wiig and Amy Poehler titled "Ladies Who Lunch," in which a gaggle of socialites try to one-up each other with smaller and smaller hats. It bears distinct similarities to "Tiny Hats" (a commercial parody about an auto-parts store that sells very small hats), which had aired on *Awesome Show* years earlier. In March 2016, the good folks at Cheez-It Baked Snack Crackers uploaded a Facebook video that resembles a sequence from season four of *Awesome Show.* (In both cases a man has his "mind blown" with the help of some lo-fi visual effects.) Fans cried foul, and Kellogg's pulled the ad—but not before it had garnered nearly 4 million views. Heidecker weighed in via Splitsider, saying, in part, "Pretty straightforward rip, and I hope Turner's legal department digs into this and helps protect

our 'intellectual' property!"

The two have infiltrated mainstream entertainment more directly through their commercial and video work. A campaign with Old Spice starring Terry Crews and another with Loctite adhesive (who could forget that notorious Super Bowl XLIX ad?), along with music videos for acts including Depeche Mode, Maroon 5 and Major Lazer—all constitute a stealth infiltration, a steady creep of DIY weirdness onto prime-time TV.

"It's extremely difficult to do what they do and make it work," notes Odenkirk. "At first it just seems like absurdity and a kind of studied editorial clumsiness or visual crudeness being played with. But the truth is, what makes their presentation work is an instinctual awareness of how to play the moment. You can't copy it. Only they can do it."

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A week before their PLAYBOY shoot, Heidecker and Wareheim are sipping cran-raspberry LaCroix at the Glendale office of Abso Lutely Productions. They founded the company in 2006, toward the end of *Tom Goes to the Mayor*'s run, because they'd had a bad experience with the company they'd been working with and wanted complete creative control. They even own a sound studio across the street from the headquarters, where they film many of their sketches.

On a coffee table is a copy of *Paper* magazine's winter 2014 issue with Kim Kardashian ass-naked on the cover. (Heidecker and Wareheim, flaunting Tammy Faye–level drag, appear in a beauty feature in that issue.) Beneath that is a copy of their quasi-Scientologist self-help book, *Tim & Eric's Zone Theory: 7 Easy Steps to Achieve a Perfect Life*. They can't decide if they wrote the book together or not. They tell me it's unreadable.

Inevitably the conversation turns to our president. "I've been pleasantly surprised by him," says Heidecker, laughing. He was part of the "30 Days, 50 Songs" campaign, contributing "Trump's Pilot," which envisions Trump dying in an intentional plane crash. (Father John Misty later covered the song.) In addition to his 2016 solo album, *In Glendale,* Heidecker has written a handful of satirical songs about 45, with lyrics such as "And on Saturday night when Melania's a-fast asleep, I tiptoe to the only room where I really wanna be, and I crawl into that beautiful king-size bed and I snuggle between my true loves, Ivanka and Jared" and "Take me down to the bowels of Trump Tower.... I'll be hell-bent to call that motherfucker president."

It's no surprise that Trump has inspired the two comedians. "He's a *Tim and Eric* character, and he has been for years," Heidecker says. And he's right. The baffling hair, uneven skin tones, lowbrow speech patterns, ill-fitting attire and befuddled arrogance—all these are qualities Heidecker and Wareheim visit time and again in their work. It says something about the rele-

"Trump's a disaster. But it's the funniest thing every time he talks."

vance of *Awesome Show* that the president of the United States makes it look a lot less hyperbolic than it would otherwise.

"I mean, it's horrible," Heidecker says about Trump. "He's a disaster for our country, our future, our children, everything and everybody. But it's the funniest thing every time he talks."

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The political climate comes up again when the two are asked to name one thing they can't live without.

"Sean Spicer," Wareheim shouts.

"My preteen sex dungeon," Heidecker says. "Now you have to say, 'Just kidding.' I heard myself saying, 'Don't say anything about my preteen sex dungeon.' There's a conspiracy theory that globalists are running sex dungeons. It's called Pizzagate. Look it up."

They look at each other and laugh. You can tell they have a rare bond. When Wareheim was younger, he was awkward. He was over six feet tall by the age of 11, always felt self-conscious and never had a girlfriend. After meeting Heidecker, he came to realize he shouldn't care what other people think. These days, he understands the insecurity and awkwardness and tries to use them to fuel his creativity. But no matter how mature or successful Wareheim and Heidecker become, the insecurity and awkwardness offer themselves up in spades. Heidecker admits he has a fear of death. "I was stabbed in my back by someone I know, and I didn't immediately feel it," he says. "I fear the moment of death, something we're all going to experience at some point." Wareheim has a fear of illness, and sometimes his dark thoughts take over. He believes he may have cancer. He doesn't actually have it, but he fears it. He thinks he'll eventually get something debilitating and lose his mind. "That shit is crazy," he concludes.

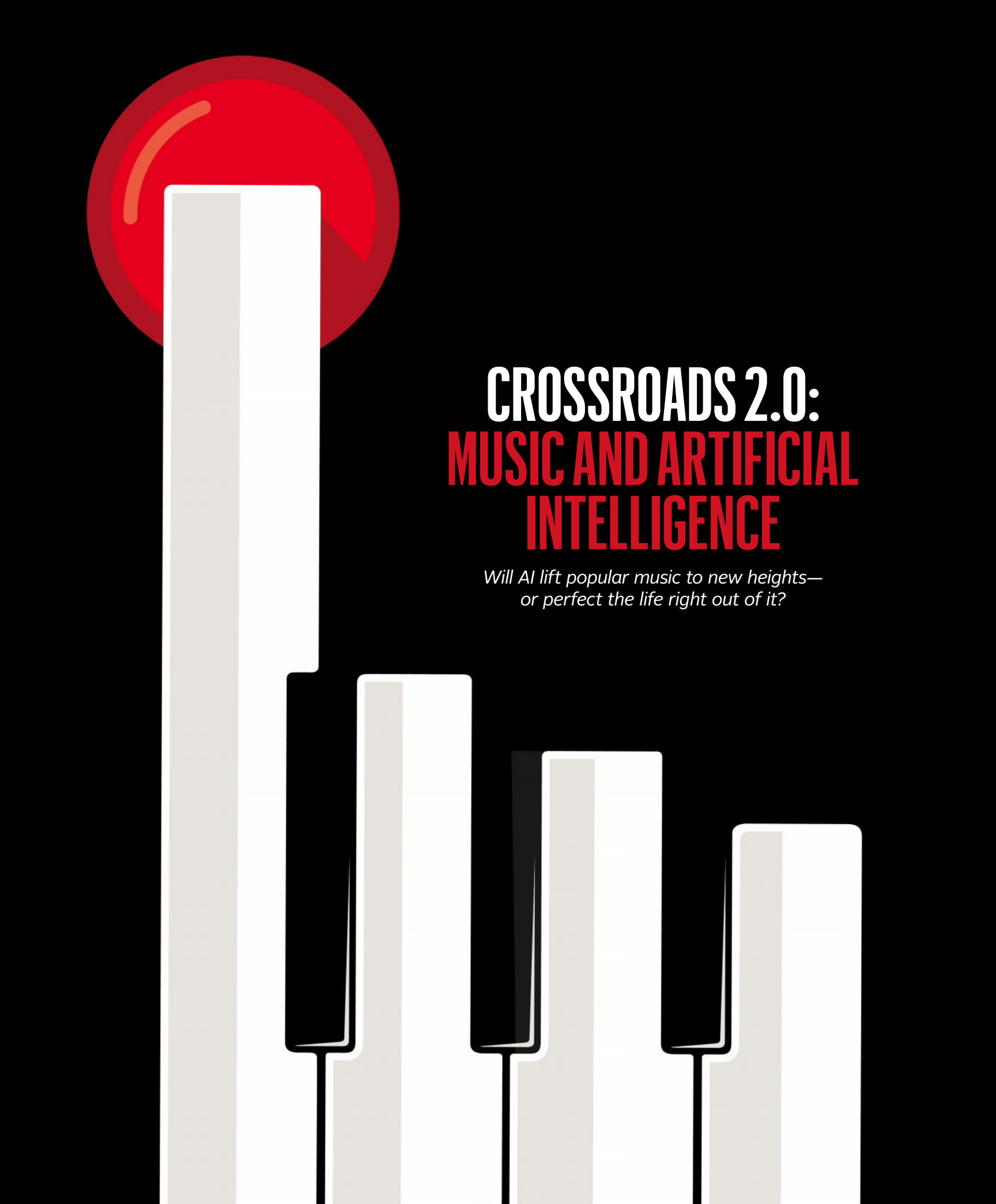
That jittery muse has led to some extreme methods of achieving their vision. Sometimes while taping *Awesome Show* the two had trouble telling the actors and amateur talent what they wanted them to do, so they would bark orders into a microphone from another room. This was partially because what they were asking was ridiculous and partially because they wanted the performers to have no idea what was going on so they could capture an honest moment. It wasn't a prank, though some clearly felt it was.

In one instance, Steve Schirripa, a.k.a. Bobby Bacala from *The Sopranos,* was doing a commercial spoof called "MyEggs," about a pill that allows users to produce eggs out of their behinds. Schirripa had to sit on a toilet and pretend he was...using it. He had no idea going in that he would have to pull down his pants in front of an entire crew. On top of that, he had to say "*Capisce?*" "He just looks at me with this 'Fuck no' look on his face," says Heidecker. "I felt bad. You can sense in the spot that there's depression and disappointment there." Wareheim adds, "But a lead on *The Sopranos* was sitting on a toilet, fake shitting. That's insane!"

Asked if they might ever revive the "intellectual" property that is *Awesome Show,* the two are vague. They suspect it would eventually become a parody of itself. "There are probably lots of notes I would give it now, but what's the point?" says Heidecker. "I'm not a very nostalgic person. I understand people who hate us. I get it. If you're not on the same page, you can quickly become disgusted with us. If you're not a fan, that's never going to get better. We just become more and more annoying."

"Yeah, you're always going to hate us," Wareheim says. "But, hey, I love us." ■

"Is it true? Is there really horrible swelling...everywhere?"



CROSSROADS 2.0: MUSIC AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Will AI lift popular music to new heights—or perfect the life right out of it?

Jesse Engel adjusts his laptop with the fervor of an obsessed conductor rifling through a score. He's tall, mid-30s, with a scruffy beard and dark hair dangling over his shoulders. With his skinny jeans and the kaleidoscopic design on his white T-shirt, he looks more like a touring bassist than a Google research scientist.

We're on the fifth floor of Google's San Francisco office, inside a well-equipped music studio, to learn about Project Magenta, an open-source endeavor that uses artificial intelligence and machine learning to create tools for artists. Magenta offers codes for users to tinker with, including artificial neural networks designed to resemble the neurons of the human brain and pretrained to perform various tasks. It also offers a community for creative types and techies to share their own experiments.

BY **AARON CARNES**

At a trio of keyboards (the musical kind) sits Douglas Eck, a senior staff research scientist at Google. Somewhat preppy-looking and 48 years old, he's the guy who conceived of Project Magenta in 2015. It was launched into the public sphere in June 2016.

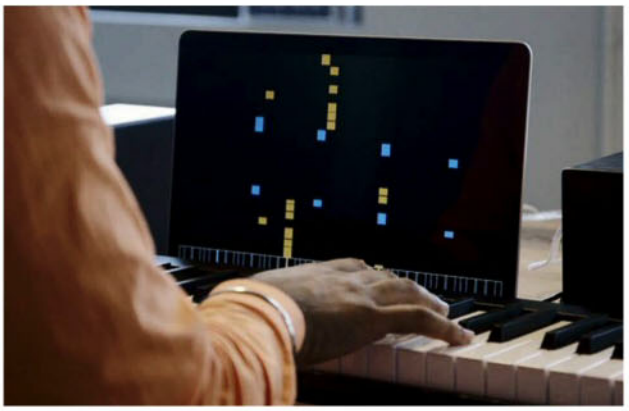
We're about to have a jam session. This wasn't planned; Eck and Engel were going to demo some software for me and my friend and bandmate Adam Davis. But Eck seems intent on keeping things random. How better to understand Magenta than to jam with it?

I'm behind an electronic drum set. Davis grabs a Fender Strat. Eck sits behind the keys, eager to start playing. On the theremin (an electronic instrument you play by waving your hands over it like a wizard) is Kory Mathewson, a summer intern who spends his free time performing improv comedy with robots. This, Eck tells me with a grin, was a factor in Mathewson's hire.

That leaves one last member of our band: a program called A.I. Duet, which uses Magenta technology. You play a melody on an attached keyboard, and the program recognizes overall patterns based on note selection, rhythm, syncopation and music it has heard previously. It then generates new lines, almost call-and-response style. The in-house version we're using can control the randomness of the response depending on how high you set the "temperature." Engel selects bass guitar for the sound and starts improvising melodies. Once he gets a response he likes, he locks it in. He picks up a black Gibson Les Paul guitar, and the jam begins.

What we come up with is okay, but I'm more impressed with the bass line coming out of A.I. Duet. If we were an actual band, I'm certain we'd jam with it again. Musicians are often strapped for fresh ideas, and this program seems perfect for spitting out an unending supply of them.

"It's like having another musician in the room," Davis says. He too has a go on Duet. As he settles into the instrument, he starts to color outside the lines, to the clear delight of our bandmates. ("We're really looking forward to seeing how people break this," Engel says.) He cranks the temperature all the way up, producing manic, scary melodies that barely resemble the ones he inputs. He plays "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" just to see what happens. At full temperature, it sounds like a Christmas song having a bad trip.



A typical A.I. Duet session.

"Technology is incredibly important for art," Eck says. "Think of strumming this guitar chord with your guitar unplugged. Now plug it into this awesome amp. You rely a lot on technology to get the job done."

What they're doing, he adds, is akin to building a better guitar pedal—even the electric guitar itself. That's the hope, at least. Right now, they're not sure how the technology will impact music or if it will be used as they intend. I'm reminded of Auto-Tune, the recording software whose original function was to correct pitchy vocal tracks for bland pop music; rappers like T-Pain and Kanye West then flipped it on its head, maxing out its properties and creating a strange new sound.

Whatever happens with AI music-generation technology, Eck has a feeling it will be monumental. "We'll follow the musicians," he says. "If someone picks up on something we're doing and does something awesome with it, we'll probably be like, 'Oh, let's do more of that!' "

Listening to Eck, I can tell his brain is geared to geek out on algorithms, but it's a passion for music that guides him to make tools for musicians of all stripes. When I ask him about his own music, I'm surprised to learn he didn't spend his salad days hunched over banks of synthesizers; he shyly tells me of his experiences strumming a guitar at half-full coffee shops.

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The marriage of artificial intelligence and music is not new, nor is the debate over the proper amount of human input. In the 1950s, avant-garde composers Lejaren Hiller and Leonard Isaacson used a computer to write "Illiac Suite." The score consists of statistically generated notes following certain musical principles—harmonic interdependence, for example—according to rules based on the composers' knowledge of traditional music.

Until recently, AI-assisted music stayed primarily in academia. Now Google, Sony, IBM and other companies are getting involved in major research projects. And start-ups like Jukedeck, which uses AI to generate jingles and background music for videos, and Brain.fm, which creates functional AI-generated music (designed to help you relax, focus, sleep, etc.), are cashing in on the technology.

The various groups are seeing some similar results, but each has its own agenda. Google is working on tools for artists and designing open-ended, experimental programs with the goal of fueling creativity. Jukedeck has focused its resources on ease of use, marketing to businesses looking to save money on video soundtracks. Jukedeck co-founder Patrick Stobbs tells me the company hopes to expand its customer base to include anyone who's interested in making music: It wants to use the technology to help would-be musicians write songs without having to learn to play an instrument.

"Much like Instagram has made it easier to create great photographs, we see Jukedeck as a creative tool that lets many more people make music easily, and with more power," he says.

A handful of music software apps using similar AI technology popped up almost a decade ago, with mostly cringe-worthy results. Microsoft's Songsmith generates Casio-keyboard-esque accompaniments to a cappella vocal tracks. The program inspired countless hilarious videos

ILLUSTRATIONS BY **NOMA BAR**

featuring, for example, Freddie Mercury's searing performance of "We Will Rock You" set to what sounds like vaguely Latin Muzak.

Much has changed since then, though technology and taste continue to clash. Last year the world got a glimpse of what AI-generative music will sound like when it rolls out in the near future. Producer Alex Da Kid collaborated with IBM's Watson supercomputer to create the catchy emotional ballad "Not Easy." Watson consumed five years of cultural data, including news headlines, internet searches, movie synopses and social media content, to analyze trends and people's emotions around them. It also processed more than 26,000 recent popular songs to find common themes and musical patterns. Using this information, the supercomputer determined the "emotional fingerprint" of recent history and the musical components that elicited strong emotional responses from listeners. Alex then used this data to choose the theme of heartbreak, as well as musical phrases and lyrical fragments that he liked.

With a Grammy nominee at the helm, the collaboration produced a song intended for as wide an audience as possible. "Not Easy" reached number four on the iTunes Hot Tracks chart within 48 hours while managing to be completely forgettable, save for the story behind it. In trying to take the emotional temperature of millions of people, it seemed to express...nothing. The Auto-Tune comparison arises again: In the hands of those aiming to perfect popular music, AI technology could very well achieve its ultimate success by digitizing the life out of it.

"WE'RE REALLY LOOKING FORWARD TO SEEING HOW PEOPLE BREAK THIS."

Sony Computer Science Laboratories in Paris, with funding from the European Research Council, began a five-year project creating AI-assisted pop in the summer of 2012. The results are somewhere between "Not Easy" and Magenta. Sony CSL director François Pachet, a computer scientist and jazz and pop musician, has been involved with music and AI since the 1990s. He and his team have been working more directly with artists than Google has, and their objective—to create innovative pop-based music with indie artists using a set of algorithms called Flow Machines—emphasizes output.

One Flow Machines–assisted song, "Daddy's Car," went viral last September. A collaboration with French composer Benoît Carré, it sounds strikingly similar to mid-1960s Beatles—perhaps because for the song's creation, Flow Machines was fed an exclusive diet of Fab Four tracks.

" 'Daddy's Car' was a bit like pastiche," says Sony CSL communications officer Fiammetta Ghedini. "It's a style exercise. You have an expectation about what would happen if the Beatles were together again."

Flow Machines' understanding of "style" is data-dependent—meaning you train it on specific music and it predicts the kinds of choices someone composing in that style might make. In other words, it understands the rules of music based solely on the chosen data set and the constraints the programmer sets up. The program gave Carré several Beatles-esque melodies and chord suggestions from which to assemble the song.

To help me understand the artistic potential of Flow Machines, Ghedini directs me to a different, less popular song Carré wrote with the software, called "Mr. Shadow." Its data set consisted of 429 songs by "classic American songwriters" including Cole Porter, George Gershwin, Richard Rodgers and Vernon Duke. I listen to it several times in a row; the only description I can give is "unsettling avant pop." The chord sequences are foreboding, the melody simultaneously dreamy and menacing. One YouTuber comments: "Perfect music for when terminators kill humans with Gatling guns in a couple of decades." I don't know if I enjoy the song, but I feel I'm getting a glimpse of a different breed of music, and I want more.

A 2016 Paris concert featuring several artists who have collaborated with Flow Machines, much of it on YouTube, provides that glimpse. The outputs are all artistically fascinating and unique, and vastly more interesting than Alex Da Kid's song. Carré hopes to release an album of his music with Flow Machines later this year. Other artists may follow suit.

Google has been working with artists on a limited level. Eck prefers that his tools be applied to experimental music rather than toward churning out hit singles assembly-line style or producing functional background music, even though those are potentially big markets. (Jukedeck has made great strides toward creating an unlimited library of royalty-free video tracks, which will be good for production budgets but bad for composers.) He hopes to affect the artistic direction of music, and the best way to do that, he believes, is to give tools to cutting-edge artists who may not appeal to mainstream tastes.

"We should be actively trying to make music not everyone likes," Eck tells me. "If it reaches a certain audience, even if it turns off another, that's a win. There's always that novelty effect you get with something new and crazy. Do they come back next week and go, 'Oh, there's another song from that AI. I want to hear that one too'?" Here too pop music provides an analogue: Just as megastars from Madonna to Beyoncé have drawn inspiration from the fringes, so will tomorrow's pop royalty weave the innovations of AI-assisted underground artists into their MOR chart toppers.

Eduardo Reck Miranda, a U.K.-based professor who's been involved in the field since the mid-1980s, has a special place in his heart for the weird crevices in music that AI can illuminate.

Originally from Brazil, Miranda was a composer first but was drawn to the technology as a means to get his music performed. His enthusiasm for the topic is infectious. He tells me about his composition "Symphony of Minds Listening," for which he developed AI software to remix Beethoven's Symphony No. 7, using brain scans to deconstruct how people listen to the music.

"Can machines actually do it? That was the question we were asking," he says. "But then, when we realized machines *can* actually do it, and look at how boring the music is, the question shifted: How can those machines do something useful?"

Much of the technology at the root of this debate predates Miranda's, Eck's and Pachet's experiments. And much of the credit for that technology belongs to David Cope—a modern-day mystic and a man who may understand the relationship between AI and the creative brain better than anyone else.

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For some 30 years, Cope was a faculty member at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Now 76, the soft-spoken ex-professor continues to compose music and pursue other artistic endeavors, mostly using AI.

As I walk up the stairs inside Cope's cozy Santa Cruz home, he issues a warning: "Get ready for a real wacko moment in your life." Without further explanation, he opens his

office door to reveal a room that, in direct contrast to the rest of the house, is in total disarray. Hanging from the ceiling are dozens of wind chimes. Books and random objects are tossed about everywhere, as though they've just survived a tornado. In the center of the room is an exercise bike.

The chaos, he tells me, is intentional: It enables him to look at any two objects and try to find a relationship between them. Just as his software is for music generation, the disorder is a creative prompt that uses the surprising power of randomness. It says a lot about the fundamentals of how this all works.

Cope has been writing algorithms since he was a teenager. He has penned approximately 100 books, with sections on computer-generated music showing up as early as 1977. In 1980 he began a long-term project called Experiments in Music Intelligence, later shortened to EMI and then to Emmy to avoid copyright issues with the record label. He started developing a new program, Emily Howell, in the 1990s. He doesn't usually admit this, but he gave it a human name in part to goad the naysayers who claim machines will put human composers out of work. He allows himself a little laugh at that. "They do what we tell them to do," he says. "They have no self-awareness. They have no consciousness. I define AI as the study of using computers to understand the human brain and how it works. That's all it is."

He asks me to consider what composers do when they write. I'm not sure.

"We *steal,*" he says. "Meaning that the most important part of your algorithm isn't an algorithm at all. It's a bunch of music." I interpret this as the patchwork of melodies, moods and styles that artists stitch together in the process of making their own work. Cope realized that computers needed to operate the same way.

In 1988 he created a data set using hundreds of examples of his own music. Within approximately 24 hours, Emmy had composed "Cradle Falling," which Cope maintains is one of the best pieces of music he's written. Listening to this composition and other Emmy selections, he says, proved his theory that composers steal: "It brought out things I didn't realize were so explicit in my music, which is those composers who affect me most."

I recognize that what Google and Sony are doing with deep learning is a direct extension of Cope's data-dependent approach. Miranda agrees, but he adds that the approach is incomplete, which is in part why his creative process has always been experimental.

"A single piece of AI software is not able to fully embody how we make music," Miranda says. "The best we can do is to narrow the problem to specific aspects."

Which leads to another confounding quirk inherent in creative generative models: AI music has no clear metric of success. Language-translation software has made huge leaps in recent years because of machine-learning technology. We can all agree on how successful it is because the results are objective. But how do we agree on the value of music produced by AI software—chart success? Grassroots popularity? Critical acclaim? Eck and his team at Google define it by sustained interest from artists. When musicians continue to use these tools after the initial novelty wears off because they believe the results they're getting are good—regardless of what audiences think—that's when AI will take its permanent place in the vast, cluttered kingdom of music.

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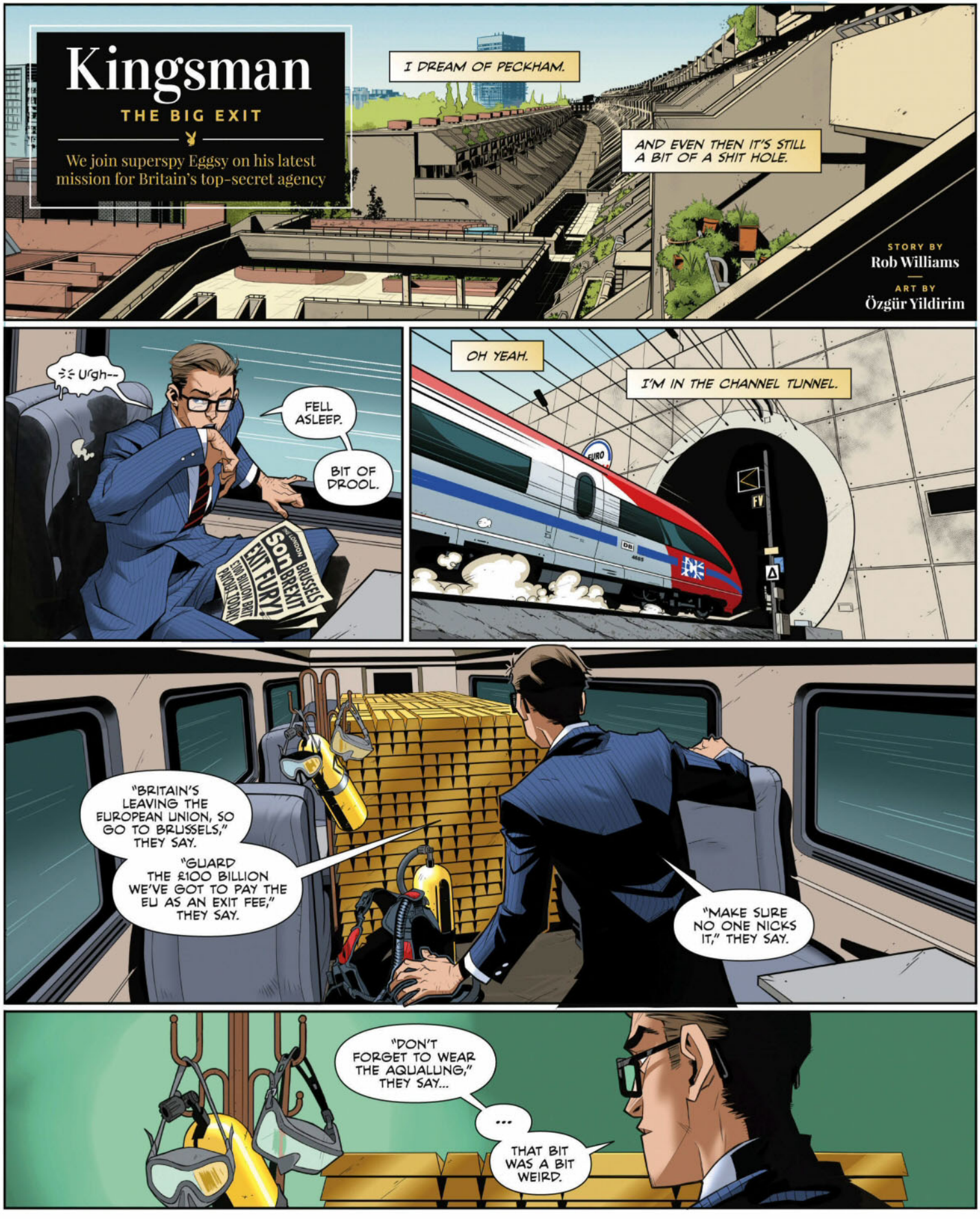
After we leave Google, Davis and I discuss the experience. "I liked seeing the edge of where things start to break down," he says. "At certain points it would go off the rails. It wouldn't know what to do from the information it was given. That created really interesting music."

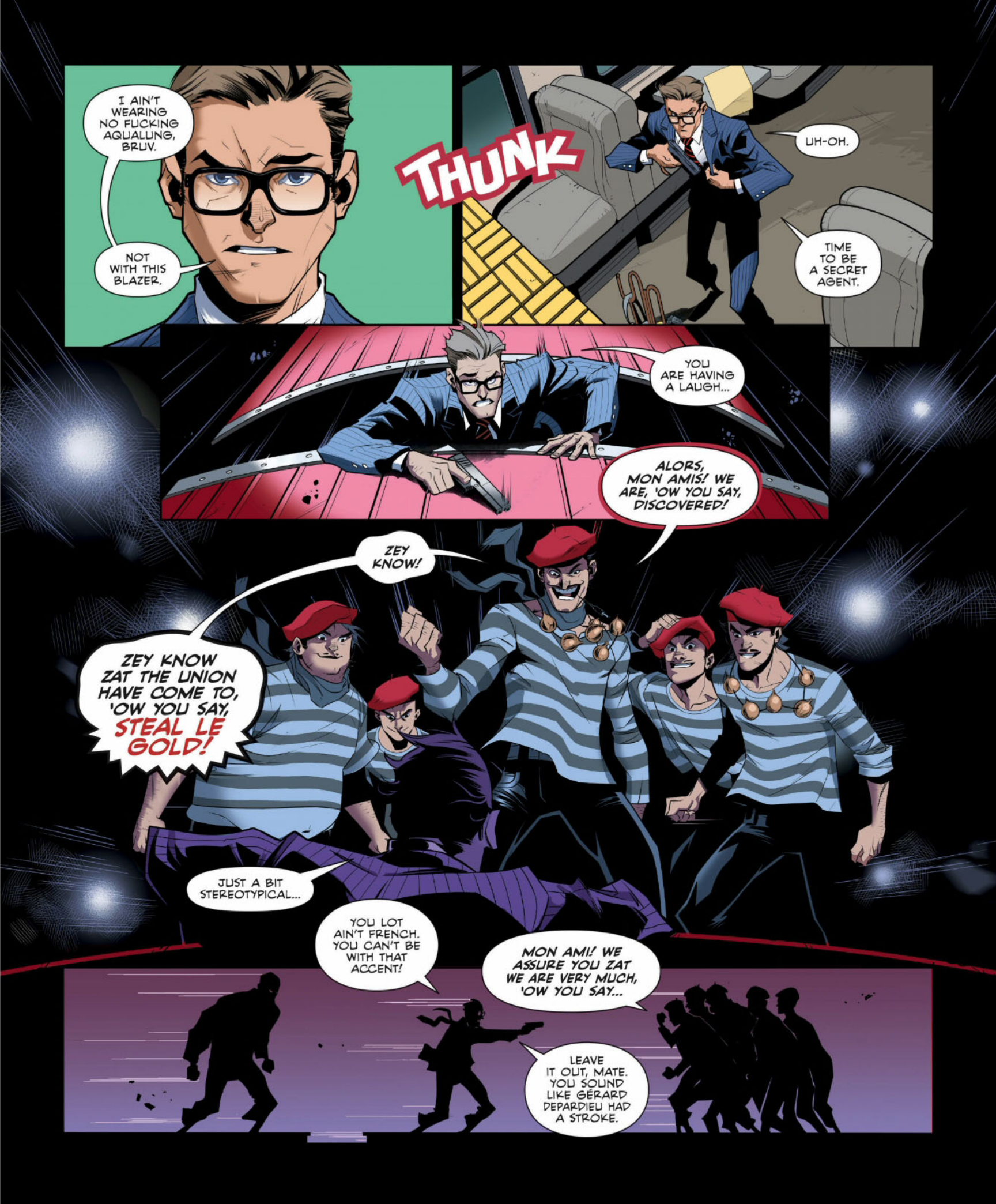
Jason Freidenfelds, a senior communications manager at Google, believes that AI's impact in music will exceed any one technological advancement.

"It may be as big a deal as the original shift from people making music primarily with their own bodies to crafting instruments that had their own unique properties and sounds," he says. "AI may rival that leap from simple objects to complex instruments. Now the instruments themselves will have intelligence. They won't just produce unique sounds but unique ideas for new timbres or melodies that musicians can then riff on."

Later, Freidenfelds sends me two new Magenta-generated piano tracks, made with no human input whatsoever. Their complexity and nuance shock me.

Many artists and music fans are legitimately scared that AI technology will put honest folks out of work while dragging creativity to the lowest common denominator. But Davis's urge to mess with the tools and find the cracks is exactly what innovators like Eck, Engel, Miranda and Pachet are counting on. Computers, after all, make errors, just like us. And the weird, imperfect and unpredictable human instinct is the engine that will give AI the power to redefine music. ■

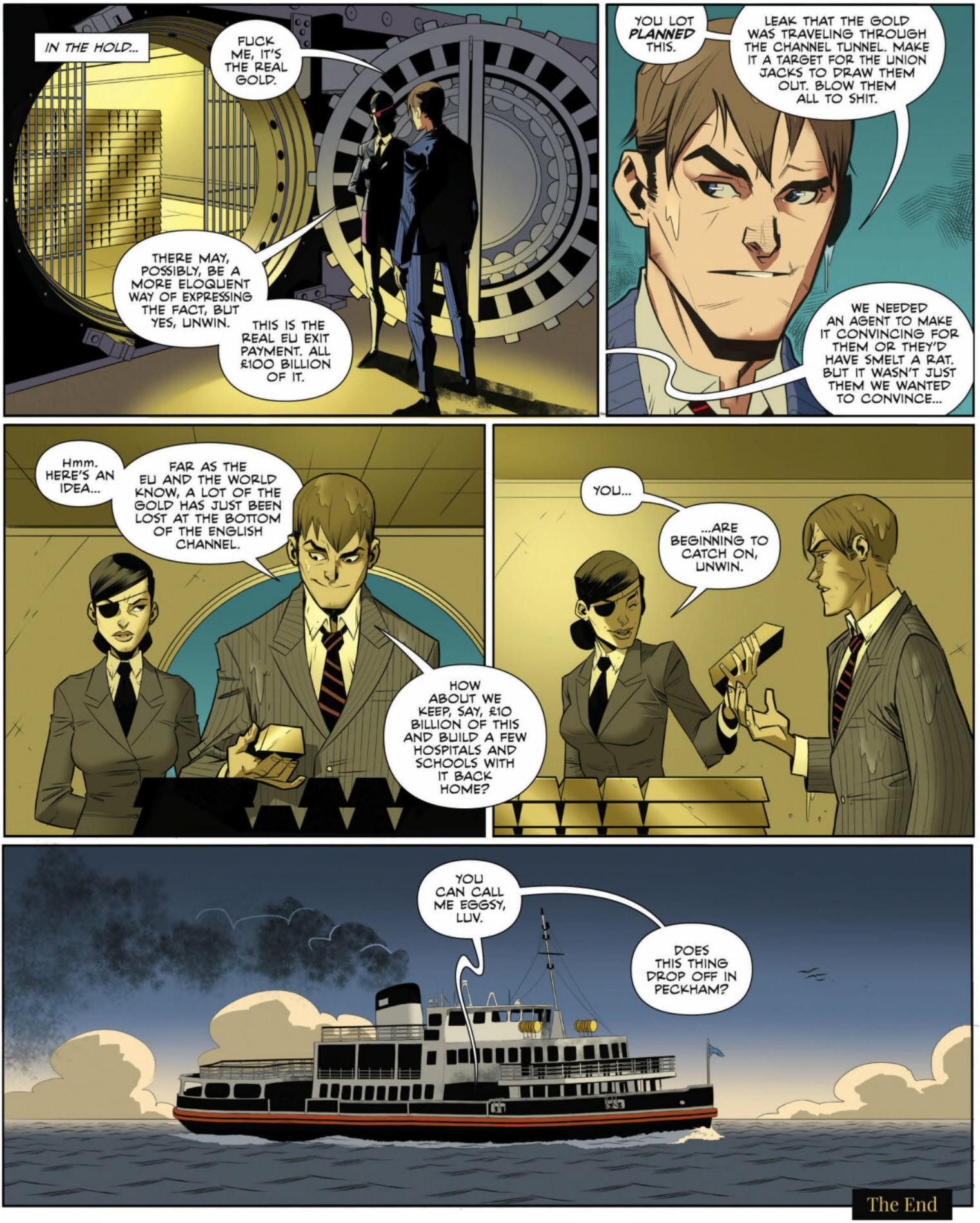

Kingsman
THE BIG EXIT
We join superspy Eggsy on his latest mission for Britain's top-secret agency
I DREAM OF PECKHAM.
AND EVEN THEN IT'S STILL A BIT OF A SHIT HOLE.
STORY BY
Rob Williams
ART BY
Özgür Yildirim
Urgh--
FELL ASLEEP.
BIT OF DROOL.
SON OF BREXIT EXIT FURY!
OH YEAH.
I'M IN THE CHANNEL TUNNEL.
"BRITAIN'S LEAVING THE EUROPEAN UNION, SO GO TO BRUSSELS," THEY SAY.
"GUARD THE £100 BILLION WE'VE GOT TO PAY THE EU AS AN EXIT FEE," THEY SAY.
"MAKE SURE NO ONE NICKS IT," THEY SAY.
"DON'T FORGET TO WEAR THE AQUALUNG," THEY SAY...
...
THAT BIT WAS A BIT WEIRD.


I AIN'T WEARING NO FUCKING AQUALUNG, BRUV.
NOT WITH THIS BLAZER.
THUNK
UH-OH.
TIME TO BE A SECRET AGENT.
YOU ARE HAVING A LAUGH...
ALORS, MON AMIS! WE ARE, 'OW YOU SAY, DISCOVERED!
ZEY KNOW!
ZEY KNOW ZAT THE UNION HAVE COME TO, 'OW YOU SAY, STEAL LE GOLD!
JUST A BIT STEREOTYPICAL...
YOU LOT AIN'T FRENCH. YOU CAN'T BE WITH THAT ACCENT!
MON AMI! WE ASSURE YOU ZAT WE ARE VERY MUCH, 'OW YOU SAY...
LEAVE IT OUT, MATE. YOU SOUND LIKE GÉRARD DEPARDIEU HAD A STROKE.


GET 'IM, DAVE! DO 'IM! SMASH HIS FUCKING FACE IN!
KKKKKK--
NOT FRENCH.
LADS, GO!
GET THE FUCKING GOLD!
I KNEW IT! YOU BUNCHA STEROID-BOTHERERS SOUND LIKE YOU'RE FROM MARGATE!
THNNNKKKKK!!!
YOU AIN'T FUCKING FRENCH!
NO, WE AIN'T FRENCH. THIS IS COVER, INNIT! WE NICK IT, THE FROGS GET THE BLAME. WE ARE--
THE UNION JACKS!
BRITAIN OR DEATH, MATE!
AND THERE IS NO WAY WE ARE HANDING OVER £100 BILLION TO THAT BUNCHA CHEESE-SNIFFING PIZZA-MAKERS!
UH, THAT MIGHT BE THE ITALIANS!
YOU'RE A BIT CONFUSED, DAVE.
IN ALL SORTS OF WAYS.
WAKKKKKK!!
THAT'S IT, DAVE. KEEP 'IM BUSY! CHUCK HIM OFF THE, 'OW YOU SAY, TRAIN!
WE'VE DONE IT, LADS! WE'VE GOT THE GOLD! WE'VE GOT £100 BILLION WORTH OF--


THE GOLD...
IT...
IT'S FAKE.
IT'S A BOMB.
ZUT ALORS!
BOOOOOOOOOM!!!
WHAT? IT BLEW UP! THE GOLD BLEW UP. DAVE BLEW UP! WHAT IN FUCK'S NAME IS GOING O--
RRRRRUUUUUUNMMBBBLLE
OH SHIT.
THE TUNNEL ROOF.
FUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUCK!!
"ONE LAST THING BEFORE YOU GO, UNWIN..."


"DON'T FORGET TO WEAR THE AQUALUNG."
Ah--
MY LIFT'S TURNED UP.
UNWIN!
STAY THERE. WE'LL PICK YOU UP!
WHERE DO THEY THINK I'M GOING TO GO?
LE FAY.
WELL DONE, UNWIN. YOU PLAYED THAT RATHER EXPERTLY, I MUST SAY.
JUST ENOUGH FIGHT TO CONVINCE THEM THE TARGET WAS GENUINE. JUST ENOUGH INCOMPETENCE TO LET THEM HAVE IT.
--Uh. CHEERS FOR THAT...


IN THE HOLD...
FUCK ME, IT'S THE REAL GOLD.
THERE MAY, POSSIBLY, BE A MORE ELOQUENT WAY OF EXPRESSING THE FACT, BUT YES, UNWIN.
THIS IS THE REAL EU EXIT PAYMENT. ALL £100 BILLION OF IT.
YOU LOT PLANNED THIS.
LEAK THAT THE GOLD WAS TRAVELING THROUGH THE CHANNEL TUNNEL. MAKE IT A TARGET FOR THE UNION JACKS TO DRAW THEM OUT. BLOW THEM ALL TO SHIT.
WE NEEDED AN AGENT TO MAKE IT CONVINCING FOR THEM OR THEY'D HAVE SMELT A RAT. BUT IT WASN'T JUST THEM WE WANTED TO CONVINCE...
Hmm. HERE'S AN IDEA...
FAR AS THE EU AND THE WORLD KNOW, A LOT OF THE GOLD HAS JUST BEEN LOST AT THE BOTTOM OF THE ENGLISH CHANNEL.
HOW ABOUT WE KEEP, SAY, £10 BILLION OF THIS AND BUILD A FEW HOSPITALS AND SCHOOLS WITH IT BACK HOME?
YOU...
...ARE BEGINNING TO CATCH ON, UNWIN.
YOU CAN CALL ME EGGSY, LUV.
DOES THIS THING DROP OFF IN PECKHAM?
The End

L.A. WOMAN

With over 1 million followers, she already lights your fire on Instagram. Now follow Carmella Rose behind the closed doors of a Laurel Canyon audiophile's paradise as she channels the wild spirit of the Lizard King

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **JENNIFER STENGLEIN**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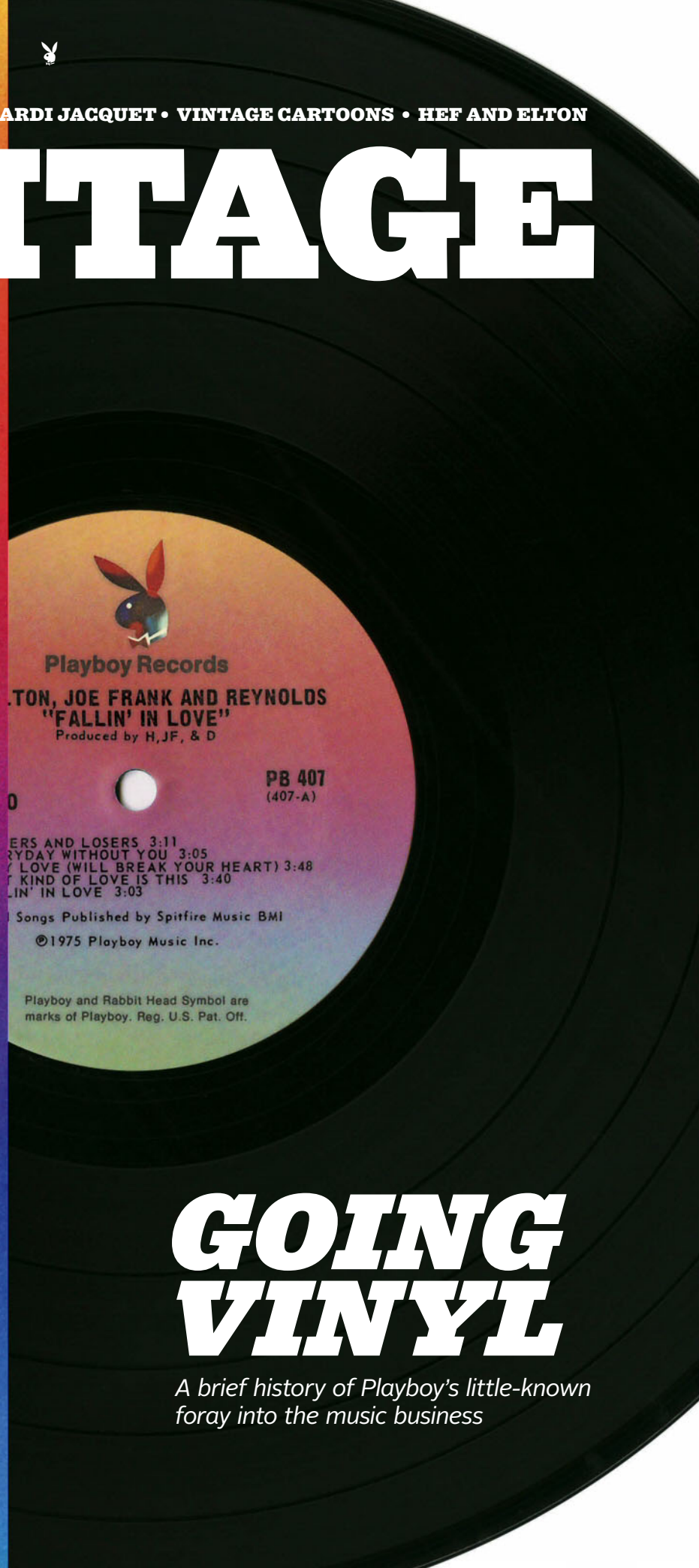
CLASSIC PLAYMATES ROSANNE KATON AND MARDI JACQUET • VINTAGE CARTOONS • HEF AND ELTON

HERITAGE



GOING VINYL

A brief history of Playboy's little-known foray into the music business

This is the story of an independent record label you may never have heard of, for it flamed out—freighted with some number one songs and albums—after about seven years. The label? Playboy Records.

Even the man who would become the label's biggest star, country singer Mickey Gilley, had no idea Playboy Records existed before he signed with it in 1974. When Nashville producer Eddie Kilroy suggested the company might be interested in Gilley's single "Room Full of Roses," Gilley thought he was joking. "I said to him, 'Do you mean to tell me Mr. Hugh Hefner is in the record business? Well, I knew he had a *magazine*!'" Gilley adds that he used to include the anecdote in his stage banter. "It'd get a big laugh."

BY **CAT AUER**

But why did the man with the magazine dip his toe into the record business in the first place? Back in the early 1970s, Hugh Hefner's empire was booming. The company had gone public in late 1971, with Playboy Enterprises, Inc. comprising five divisions: the magazine; other publishing ventures including a book imprint; the Playboy Clubs, hotels and casinos; a products and services division that operated a modeling agency, a limousine service and more; and an entertainment division, which ran a production house and a small arthouse theater chain. Total sales had ballooned from $89 million in 1968 to $159 million in 1972. So when the entertainment division decided to get into music, it seemed like a natural move.

"Essentially, we were diversifying into new areas we felt had great commercial potential," Hef says of those days. "And a music label was another way I felt we could help our audience connect with the good life they were reading about in PLAYBOY magazine."

Playboy Records formed in the fall of 1971, staffing up in its original office on Sunset Boulevard. The location was in "the heart of the music industry," says Dick Rosenzweig, who as the eventual West Coast head of operations was involved with the label from the mid-1970s through its end in 1978. In 1972 Playboy Records released about half a dozen vinyl LPs and more than twice as many 45s. The fare was mainly pop, soft rock and folk rock, but the label also dabbled in blues, soul and funk. Artists who released Playboy-anointed music that flagship year include Tim Rose, Jim Sullivan, Bobby Scott and Sam Russell. The first single, a tune called "Leavin' It's Over" by a trio of brothers called Hudson, hit the number 110 spot, just below *Billboard*'s Hot 100.

The label made a prescient call in 1972, licensing several pop songs from Polar Music,

Opposite page: Barbi Benton performing circa 1975. **Top left:** Under the Chinese zodiac, 1975 was the year of the rabbit, a fact the Playboy Records marketing team used to its promotional advantage—along with a new country look for the Rabbit Head. **Above right:** The label's biggest star, Mickey Gilley, performs at the Academy of Country Music Awards in 1976. **Above left:** ABBA hit the big time—but not on Playboy Records.

a Swedish company. The act in question was called Björn and Benny, and its first seven-inch on Playboy, featuring the songs "People Need Love" and "Merry-Go-Round," came out that year, followed by three more in 1973. By then the group had changed its name to Björn and Benny with Anna and Frieda—which was later revised to ABBA. None of the songs caught on stateside, a failure that longtime ABBA manager Stig Anderson attributed to the young label's weak distribution network. ABBA, of course, was unscathed. The group won the Eurovision Song Contest in 1974 with "Waterloo" and went on to megastardom.

"We blindsided Nashville and had a wild ride while we were there."

With no major successes in the pop realm, the label made a play for the country market. In 1974 Tom Takayoshi, Playboy Records executive vice president, phoned Eddie Kilroy to get a sense of how the company could find a winner in that world—right around the time Mickey Gilley was looking for a home for "Room Full of Roses."

"All the record companies in Nashville I took it to either didn't show up or said we can probably record something later, maybe. I knew what that meant—basically a no," Gilley remembers. "As I was getting ready to leave, I called Eddie Kilroy. He says he has a company that'll take it, and I says, 'Who?' I went over to his office and he threw a little 45 with a bunny head on it at me, and I just couldn't believe it."

"Mickey and I flew out to L.A., and Playboy signed Mickey, hiring me about the same time," says Kilroy. "We got off on the right foot because that first Playboy single out of Nashville was number one." With Kilroy producing from a brand-new Playboy Records outpost in Nashville, he and Gilley followed "Room Full of Roses" with a string of number one country songs and albums—successes that helped buoy the otherwise struggling label. "We blindsided Nashville in 1974 and had a wild ride while we were there," Kilroy says.

"It was really a fun trip, because Nashville was a stronghold controlled by the establishment, by some of the old major labels," remembers Kilroy, who would eventually be a president at Playboy Records. "Well, along comes this little label called Playboy, with a staff consisting of myself and a 17-year-old in her first job. There were two people in our office, with a number one record! People in Nashville said, 'Wait a minute, that can't be happening. We've got 300 people, including all

of our field people at each label, and this itty-bitty label with one artist is number one.' It was driving them nuts."

The Nashville office was far outpacing its West Coast counterpart in terms of hits, but that's not to say the Los Angeles office didn't produce an occasional winner. In 1975, Playboy Records had its first and only number one pop song, "Fallin' in Love" by Hamilton, Joe Frank and Reynolds. The song is less obscure than you might think: It was the subject of a lawsuit filed by Playboy in 2010—more than 30 years after the label was shuttered—when Drake sampled its opening riff in "Best I Ever Had" without permission. (The suit was settled in 2011.)

• • •

Naturally, there were some missteps along the way. Playboy Records said no thanks not once but twice to Tom Petty and his band. Pete Welding, a rep at the L.A. office, turned them down by mail. "He rejected us, but he was nice enough to send us a song-by-song analysis of why he was rejecting us.... I took this to be really encouraging," Petty told Paul Zollo in *Conversations With Tom Petty.* "We went to Playboy Records to see Pete Welding, but he no longer worked there. We walked in, and we said we'd come all this way, and they put the tape on, and the guy turned it off in 30 seconds, didn't even hear the whole song, and said, 'No, we pass.'" Petty didn't have to look far for a taker—both Shelter Records and London Records made offers.

To some, it seemed the Los Angeles office had a quality-control problem. "They had a really bad reputation in L.A. If an independent producer had an artist and couldn't place him anywhere, the joke around L.A. was 'Take it to Playboy. They'll buy anything,'" says Kilroy. "They didn't have anybody with what we'd call ears, who could say, 'Yeah, this is a hit, that isn't a hit.' And that's the most important thing."

But the label also had plenty of high points. One came in 1973, when Welding and Lawrence Cohn, an executive, earned a Grammy nomination for *Leadbelly,* the only live concert recording of famed folk musician Huddie Ledbetter, a gem taped decades earlier that Playboy Records brought back to life. And in the mid-1970s, the Nashville office started pulling in accolades as well as putting out hit albums. Mickey Gilley won most promising male vocalist at the 1974 Academy of Country Music Awards, beginning a run of nominations and wins out of Nashville that culminated in 1976 with the label being called the "record company of the year" by the Country Music Association and Mickey Gilley winning best single, song, entertainer, male

From top: Benton sings "Help Me Make It Through the Night" for a very special Playboy Club audience member—Hef; a Sunset Strip billboard advertises Benton's third Playboy Records album, *Something New.*

vocalist and album of the year at the Academy of Country Music Awards.

"Mickey won everything but female vocalist of the year," says Kilroy.

The label also signed Barbi Benton, who was not only an actress on the popular television show *Hee Haw* but also Hef's longtime girlfriend. Benton had been singing in some capacity all her life, but the decision to pursue a country career was strategic, she says. "I decided that if I'm going to sing professionally, I should start with country music, because I had a built-in audience of millions," Benton says, referring to the *Hee Haw* viewership. Although she was the girlfriend of the man in charge of it all, Benton says getting her career rolling wasn't exactly easy.

One day Hef walked in on Benton when she was doing a vocal exercise that required her to intentionally sing beyond her range. "Hef sat me down and said, 'You'll never be a singer,' " she remembers. "I said, 'I already am.' " She doubled up on singing lessons and doubled down on her career aspirations and was soon asked to perform at the San Francisco Playboy Club. Hef brought a large entourage to support her. Not long after, Benton began recording in the Nashville office and was nominated as most promising female vocalist in 1975 by the ACM. Her single "Brass Buckles" reached the top of the country charts, and she made several appearances on *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson*.

The Hudson brothers' single "Leavin' It's Over" was Playboy Records' first; it just missed the *Billboard* 100.

"Hef felt our entertainment operations were a little bit out of control."

"When Barbi told me she wanted to be a singer, I admit I had my doubts," Hef says. "But she worked hard at it, practicing every day, and her efforts paid off in spades. I was very proud of her achievements and still am."

Shel Silverstein, who wrote "A Boy Named Sue" (made famous by Johnny Cash in 1969) and who was a close friend of both Hef and Benton, as well as a longtime contributor to PLAYBOY magazine, wrote many songs for and with Benton. It was a Silverstein tune, "I Can't Touch the Sun," that Benton chose to perform for her first appearance on *The Tonight Show*.

• • •

By 1977, despite its successes with country music, the label had been losing money year after year. "Hef felt our entertainment operations were a little bit out of control," remembers Dick Rosenzweig. At Hef's request, Rosenzweig moved to Los Angeles from the Chicago headquarters, taking on the role of head of West Coast operations.

"I felt the only thing to do was not just close it down but to see if I could sell it to another label," Rosenzweig says. He oversaw a deal under which Playboy Records changed hands by 1978. Business is business, and the writing had been on the wall.

"The last year, our net [in Nashville] was maybe $670,000," remembers Kilroy. "I don't think it was enough to keep the interest of Playboy Enterprises. You put that up beside some of the other things they had...." Still, the decision to sell was about more than the bottom line. Says Rosenzweig, "Had we continued with the record company, we could've kept the Nashville office with Mickey Gilley, Barbi Benton and others and done well, but I don't think we felt that Playboy was a country-and-Western label."

It may not have lasted long, but the label was a stepping-stone for several musical careers. Eddie Kilroy went on to be a president at MCA Nashville. Barbi Benton continued recording and still lives and breathes music. If she's not busy singing—a lot of opera these days—she might be found playing piano, guitar or banjo or teaching a group ukulele class.

Playboy Records' biggest star, Mickey Gilley, signed with Epic, striking it even bigger in 1980 when his version of "Stand By Me" was included in the John Travolta movie *Urban Cowboy* (much of which was filmed at Gilley's eponymous bar). Not only can you see his star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, but you can still watch him perform. Gilley will be doing shows throughout the fall in Branson, Missouri—where fans might even hear that line about the magazine that, once upon a time, launched a record label. ■

ROSANNE KATON

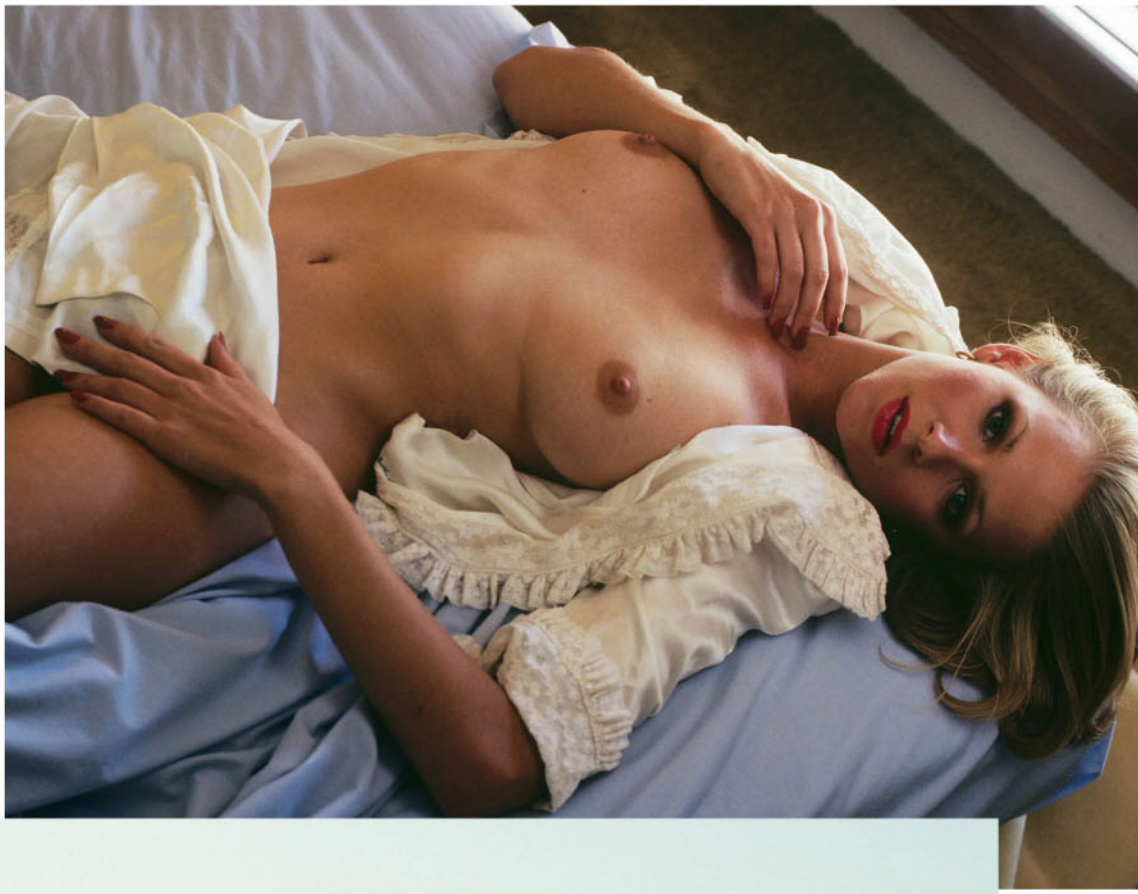
September 1978 Playmate

Before posing for PLAYBOY *in 1978,* ***Rosanne Katon*** *had already established a thriving acting career. (In fact, her co-stars, in different projects, included Playmates Jean Bell and Lillian Müller.) The role of Playmate was a natural fit for the New Yorker, who was frequently cast as a sex kitten in racy comedies and who projected sex appeal and substance in equal measure. She was independent and knew what she wanted. "I have no desire to have anyone support me. If anything, I want a guy who's smarter than I am, not richer," she said. "I like men who are very quiet about their sexuality—who don't have to knock you down with it." Rosanne continued to act and in 1981 was the first African American selected as Miss Golden Globe. She also pursued stand-up comedy and appeared in our June 1991 Funny Girls pictorial. For decades, Rosanne has been a humanitarian and activist, working closely with a nonprofit disaster-relief organization. (We told you she had substance.)*

Mardi Jacquet

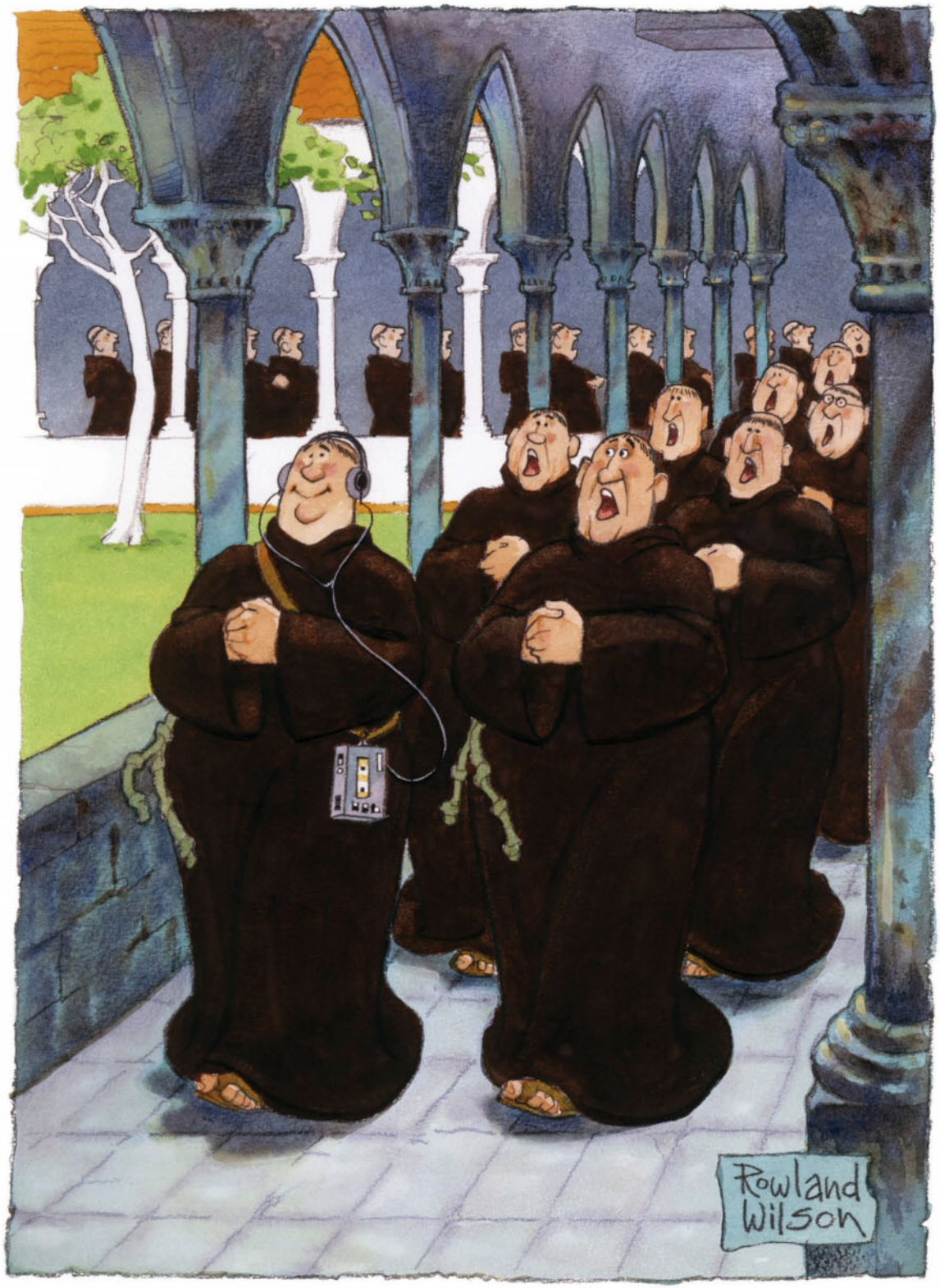
October 1980 Playmate

"I exist for excitement, for the thrill of the moment. I guess I'm your classic maniac," proclaimed October 1980 Centerfold ***Mardi Jacquet.*** *Few Playmates (few humans, for that matter) project a renegade spirit quite like hers. Mardi worked on a horse ranch, detailed cars and cleaned apartments before posing for* PLAYBOY. *Her favorite pastimes? Taking desert joyrides in her Ford Maverick, partying all night and tubing down the Verde River near Scottsdale, Arizona, where she settled after growing up in California. "My motto is this: If you don't have spirit, you don't have anything."*



CLASSIC CARTOONS

Tune in to our archives for some vintage chuckles



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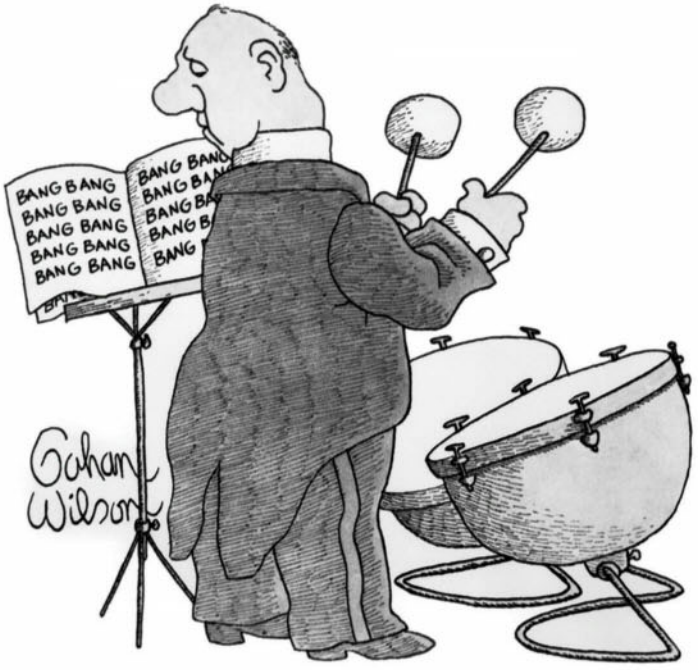

"Well, the crowds have gone. Summer lingers on, mellowing into cool, clear, crisp nights, and the soft, ripe colors of autumn surround us. Wanna fuck?"

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60096988

LIMIT 4 - Coupon valid through 12/19/17*

SUPER COUPON
TWO TIER COLLAPSIBLE EASY-STORE STEP LADDER

SAVE 50%

Customer Rating

- 225 lb. capacity

$19.99 $29.99

Compare $39.99

ITEM 67514

54762315

LIMIT 7 - Coupon valid through 12/19/17*

COVERPRO — SUPER COUPON
10 FT. x 20 FT. PORTABLE CAR CANOPY

Customer Rating

SAVE $106

$99.99 $129.99

ITEM 63054/69034 62858 shown

Compare $205.99

54763482

LIMIT 3 - Coupon valid through 12/19/17*

SUPER COUPON
HEAVY DUTY FOLDABLE ALUMINUM SPORTS CHAIR

Customer Rating

SAVE 50% Compare $39.99

$19.99 $29.99

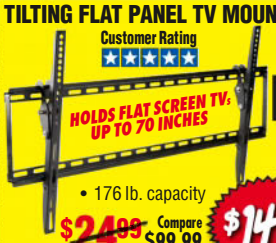
ITEM 62314/63066/66383 shown

60263317

LIMIT 6 - Coupon valid through 12/19/17*

SUPER COUPON
TILTING FLAT PANEL TV MOUNT

Customer Rating



SAVE $85

- 176 lb. capacity

$14.99 $24.99

Compare $99.99

ITEM 62289/61807 shown

60015214

LIMIT 5 - Coupon valid through 12/19/17*

WARRIOR — SUPER COUPON
29 PIECE TITANIUM DRILL BIT SET

Customer Rating

SAVE 83%

$9.99

ITEM 62281 61637 shown Compare $60 $17.99

60125742

LIMIT 9 - Coupon valid through 12/19/17*

PREDATOR — SUPER COUPON
6.5 HP (212 CC) OHV HORIZONTAL SHAFT GAS ENGINE

SAVE $230

Customer Rating

$99.99

ITEM 60363/69730

ITEM 69727 shown CALIFORNIA ONLY

$119.99 Compare $329.99

54768553

LIMIT 5 - Coupon valid through 12/19/17*

HaulMaster — SUPER COUPON
MOVER'S DOLLY

SAVE 59%

- 1000 lb. capacity

Customer Rating

$7.99

Compare $19.97

ITEM 61899/62399/63095 63096/63098/63097/93888 shown

$10.99

54777153

LIMIT 8 - Coupon valid through 12/19/17*

CHICAGO ELECTRIC POWER TOOLS — SUPER COUPON
10" SLIDING COMPOUND MITER SAW

Customer Rating

- Powerful 15 amp motor

SAVE $94

$84.99 $114.99

ITEM 61971/61972 98199 shown Blade sold separately.

Compare $179

54777738

LIMIT 4 - Coupon valid through 12/19/17*

HARDY — SUPER COUPON
POWDER-FREE NITRILE GLOVES PACK OF 100

- 5 mil thickness

SIZE	ITEM
MED	68496/61363
LG	68497/61360
X-LG	68498/61359

SAVE 53%

Customer Rating

Item 68498 shown

YOUR CHOICE $5.99 $7.99

Compare $12.99

54778497

LIMIT 9 - Coupon valid through 12/19/17*

PITTSBURGH AUTOMOTIVE — SUPER COUPON
PNEUMATIC ADJUSTABLE ROLLER SEAT

- 300 lb. capacity

Customer Rating

$19.99

SAVE 42% $25.99

Compare $34.99

ITEM 61160/61896/63456/46319 shown

60170157

LIMIT 6 - Coupon valid through 12/19/17*

PORTLAND — SUPER COUPON
1750 PSI PRESSURE WASHER

Customer Rating

NEW

- 1.3 GPM
- Adjustable spray nozzle

SAVE $99

$79.99 $99.99

Compare $179.33

ITEM 63255/63254 shown

54782092

LIMIT 5 - Coupon valid through 12/19/17*

UNION SAFE COMPANY — SUPER COUPON
1.51 CUBIC FT. SOLID STEEL ELECTRONIC DIGITAL FLOOR SAFE

NEW

SAVE $75

$99.99 $129.99

Compare $175

ITEM 91006/62678/62977 shown

Customer Rating

54793156

LIMIT 3 - Coupon valid through 12/19/17*

CENTECH — SUPER COUPON
AUTOMATIC BATTERY FLOAT CHARGER

Customer Rating

$4.99

ITEM 69955 69594 42292 shown

SAVE 87%

$9.99 Compare $39.99

54786217

LIMIT 9 - Coupon valid through 12/19/17*

drill master — SUPER COUPON
4-1/2" ANGLE GRINDER

Customer Rating

$9.99

SAVE 60%

Compare $24.98 $14.99

ITEM 69645/60625 shown

54789640

LIMIT 7 - Coupon valid through 12/19/17*

PORTLAND — SUPER COUPON
9.5" BAR, 7 AMP ELECTRIC POLE SAW

Customer Rating

$64.99

SAVE $34

$79.99 Compare $99.98

ITEM 68862/63190/62896 shown

60312295

LIMIT 5 - Coupon valid through 12/19/17*

*Original coupon only. No use on prior purchases after 30 days from original purchase or without original receipt. Valid through 12/19/17.

At Harbor Freight Tools, the "Compare" or "comp at" price means that the same item or a similar functioning item was advertised for sale at or above the "Compare" or "comp at" price by another retailer in the U.S. within the past 180 days. Prices advertised by others may vary by location. No other meaning of "Compare" or "comp at" should be implied. For more information, go to HarborFreight.com or see store associate.

CHICAGO, 1976
Elton John and Hugh Hefner at the Playboy Mansion.

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HOLY SMOKES, BATMAN!

BATMAN CLASSIC TV SERIES

Batman Classic TV Series Illuminated Figurines!

- Hand-crafted, limited-edition collectibles capture the crazy colors and comic book cool of the Classic TV Series!
- The Dynamic Duo's go-to crime fighting accessories, including the Batcomputer and Batphone, light-up — and the action bursts do, too!
- Officially-licensed Bradford Exchange design originals complete with Certificates of Authenticity

Batman
Edition One

Robin
Edition Two

POW!

Batman figurine shown smaller than actual size of about 7½ inches high. Requires 2 AA batteries, not included.

Over, please

ORDER NOW! ✶ bradfordexchange.com/904710

RESERVATION APPLICATION SEND NO MONEY NOW

THE BRADFORD EXCHANGE COLLECTIBLES

9345 Milwaukee Avenue · Niles, IL 60714-1393

YES. Please reserve the **Batman Classic TV Series Illuminated Figurine Collection** for me as described in this announcement.
Limit: one per customer. Please Respond Promptly

*Plus $10.99 shipping and service per edition.** Editions strictly limited to 295 casting days. Please allow 4-8 weeks after initial payment for shipment. Sales subject to product availability and order acceptance. **See Bradfordexchange.com

Mrs. Mr. Ms. _____
Name (Please Print Clearly)

Address _____

City _____

State _____ Zip _____

Email (optional) _____

904710-E30291

PACKED WITH PUNCH!

The Batman Classic TV Series Illuminated Figurine Collection

Gotham City's Dynamic Duo steals the show again in an all-new collection based on the Batman Classic TV Series. Each edition stars a different hero or villain. And, because set decoration is important, each edition features light-up elements plus an illuminated "BAM!" "BIFF!" or "POW!" for good measure. Editions are limited, but there's no need for fisticuffs to ensue … order your collection now and never miss one!

What cliffhanger? Make 'em ALL yours! ORDER NOW!

Make each edition yours in two installments of $34.99, the first due before shipment, for a total of $69.99* each. Your purchase is risk-free, backed by our unconditional, 365-day money-back guarantee. You can cancel at any time by simply notifying us. Send no money now. Return the Reservation Application today!

CUT ALONG DOTTED LINE

THE BRADFORD EXCHANGE

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THE BRADFORD EXCHANGE
9345 N MILWAUKEE AVE
NILES IL 60714-9891

BATMAN CLASSIC TV SERIES

DON'T WAIT – ORDER ONLINE NOW!

bradfordexchange.com/904710

KISS ROCK LEGENDS SHOT GLASS COLLECTION

An EXCLUSIVE, Officially-Licensed KISS Collection Only From The Bradford Exchange

24K Gold and Platinum Accents

- **Custom-designed glasses with official gold and platinum record art plus images of the boys in action**
- **24K gold or real platinum rims ring the 16 KISS chart toppers**
- **Custom wooden display with *Destroyer* art — a $130 value — is yours for the same price as a set of glasses**

Shot glasses are approximately 2¼" tall. Wooden display case is yours for the same low price as a set of four glasses and measures 16¾" wide 19¾" high. Hanging hardware included.

www.bradfordexchange.com/rock

SEND NO MONEY NOW

KISS

THE BRADFORD EXCHANGE
HOME DECOR

9345 Milwaukee Avenue · Niles, IL 60714-1393

YES. Please accept my order for the **KISS Rock Legends Shot Glass Collection** for me as described in this announcement. I need send no money now. I will be billed with shipment. ***Limit: one per order.***

Please Respond Promptly

Mrs. Mr. Ms.

Name (Please Print Clearly)

Address

City State Zip

Email (optional)

*Plus $9.99 shipping and service per edition. Display ships third. Limited-edition presentation restricted to 95 firing days. Please allow 4-8 weeks for shipment. Sales subject to product availability and order acceptance. Product subject to change.

904619-E30292

KISS HERE'S TO THE BOYS' VERY BEST!

Presenting the KISS Rock Legends Shot Glass Collection — Only From The Bradford Exchange

Grab more than a little custom cool with a huge new KISS tribute: the first-ever **KISS Rock Legends Shot Glass Collection**. Exclusively designed and only from The Bradford Exchange, it's a one-of-a-kind toast to every gold and platinum KISS album.

Chart toppers saluted in real gold or real platinum!

The 24 glass collection includes 16 album art shot glasses rimmed in either 24K gold or real platinum to honor the album's chart-topping success. Additional glasses bring the set to 24 and amp everything up with official logos and imagery of the boys doing what they do best. Offered in sets of four, and crafted of high-quality glass, each shot glass finds a home in the custom display with *Destroyer* art.

Strictly limited — Order now!

Act now to acquire each 4 shot glass set in the officially-licensed **KISS Rock Legends Shot Glass Collection** in two installments of $29.98 each, for a total of $59.95* each. Send no money now. You will be billed with shipment. Your purchase is risk-free, backed by our 365-day money-back guarantee and you may cancel at any time simply by notifying us. The display ships third for the same price as a set of glasses. Mail the coupon today!

Custom KISS shot glass collection is right at home on any wall and proudly puts your band loyalty on display!

www.bradfordexchange.com/rock

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THE BRADFORD EXCHANGE

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THE BRADFORD EXCHANGE
9345 N MILWAUKEE AVE
NILES IL 60714-9891

Gold record shot glasses have 24K gold rims and platinum record shot glasses have platinum rims.

1966 Ford GT-40 Mark II
50th Anniversary Die-Cast Tribute

Superior interior & exterior detail in 1:18 scale

•

Car boasts official race graphics of the 1966 GT-40

Engineered to 1:18 Scale!

Measures an impressive 9" long

Fastest way to order:
HamiltonCollection.com/LeMans

LIKE US ON

Precision - engineered die-cast replica includes a removable base!

SEND NO MONEY NOW!

LIMITED-TIME OFFER

Orders will be accepted only on a first-come-first-serve basis. So please respond as soon as possible to reserve "1:18-Scale 1966 Ford GT-40 MK II #2" in your name.

MAIL TO:

Over, please

The Hamilton Collection
9204 Center For The Arts Drive, Niles, Illinois 60714-1300

☐ **YES!** Please reserve the **"1:18-Scale 1966 Ford GT-40 MK II #2"** for me as described in this announcement.

Name_____
(Please print clearly.)

Address_____

City_____State_____Zip_____

Email (optional)_____

(Orders subject to acceptance and product availability.)

Signature_____

SEND NO MONEY NOW!

09-06536-001-E30201

*Add a total of $21.00 for shipping and service.** Deliveries to FL and IL will be billed appropriate sales tax. Allow 6 to 8 weeks after initial payment for shipment.

09-06536-001-JIS

Honor Ford's legendary domination with a superior GT-40 die-cast replica!

Fifty years ago, the strikingly modern 1966 Ford GT-40 beat out Ferrari at the prestigious 24-hour Grand Prix d'Endurance at Le Mans. The GT-40 not only took the checkered flag, but swept the race — *finishing 1-2-3!*

Now celebrate the historic 50th anniversary of this epic victory with the **"1:18-Scale 1966 Ford GT-40 MK II #2,"** a superior die-cast replica showcasing the innovative engineering of the sleek GT-40 endurance racer!

Precise 1:18-scale die-cast engineering!

Crafted to the highest quality by Shelby Collectibles, this 1:18-scale die cast boasts opening doors that reveal an articulated interior; fine dashboard instrumentation; opening trunk with a detailed engine compartment; chrome-colored accessories; and more.

Rubber Goodyear tires and working steering give this car a smooth ride, plus race-day graphics perfectly mirror the GT-40 two-door coupe that finished first at Le Mans!

Satisfaction 100% assured.

Our *365-Day Guarantee* assures your satisfaction or your money back. Own this 50th anniversary tribute to the famous 1966 GT-40 that proved Ford had achieved the pinnacle of engineering excellence!

Demand will be strong; Reply today!

The finely engineered **"1:18-Scale 1966 Ford GT-40 MK II #2"** die cast can be yours for just four monthly payments of $24.99*; with only the first payment due prior to shipment. **Send no money now;** just mail the coupon to reserve in your name today!

Opening doors and trunk, genuine race graphics and opening hood are a few of the fine details of the GT-40!

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BUSINESS REPLY MAIL

FIRST-CLASS MAIL PERMIT NO. 93008 CHICAGO IL

POSTAGE WILL BE PAID BY ADDRESSEE

THE HAMILTON COLLECTION
9204 CENTER FOR THE ARTS DRIVE
NILES IL 60714-9789

*Add a total of $21.00 for shipping and service. Deliveries to FL and IL will be billed appropriate sales tax.

Edition limited to 95 casting days.

Produced by Shelby Collectibles, Inc. under license with Ford Motor Company. Presented by The Hamilton Collection.
**See HamiltonCollection.com

09-06536-001-JIS

A Hawthorne EXCLUSIVE Celebrating True American ORIGINALS!

THE CHEVROLET MUSCLE CAR EXPRESS

An illuminated, real working HO-scale electric train collection with REMOVABLE Chevrolet® muscle car replicas!

Locomotive Lights Up!

A fine collectible.
Not intended for children under 14.

MASTERPIECE RAILWAYS®

CHEVROLET GM

EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO RUN YOUR TRAIN!

Along with Shipment Two, the "Engine," you'll receive a FREE 14-piece track set, power-pack and speed controller— ***a $100 value!***

Each *Removable* Car is a Sculpted Tribute to a Chevy® Muscle Car MASTERPIECE

YES! Please enter my order for the *Chevrolet® Muscle Car Express* electric train collection, beginning with the "Diesel Locomotive" as described in this announcement.

SEND NO MONEY NOW.

Certificate of Authenticity & 365-Day Money-Back Guarantee

www.bradfordexchange.com/ChevyTr

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THE BRADFORD EXCHANGE
HAWTHORNE VILLAGE DIVISION

9345 Milwaukee Avenue
Niles, IL 60714-1393

Signature _____

Mrs. Mr. Ms. _____
Name (Please Print Clearly)

Address _____

City _____

State _____ Zip _____

E-Mail _____

*Plus $9.99 shipping and service. All sales are subject to acceptance and product availability.
Please allow 4-6 weeks after initial payment for shipment.

917847-E30202

CHEVROLET

GM

Throw it into high gear with the Chevrolet® muscle cars you know and love!

Shipment One	Shipment Two	Shipment Three	Shipment Four
"Diesel Locomotive"	"Engine" with FREE Track Set, Power Pack and Speed Controller	"Flat Car with 1972 Chevelle® SS™ 396"	"Flat Car with 1970 Camaro Z/28®"

In tribute to the automotive genius whose four-wheeled marvels continue to take the world by storm, Hawthorne is proud to introduce the *Chevrolet® Muscle Car Express.* This heirloom-quality train—officially licensed by Chevrolet® and General Motors—traces the history of these popular cars in all their full glory. Emblazoned with electrifying, full-color graphics and imagery, each flatcar carries its own modeled-to-scale removable Chevrolet® muscle car reproduction, carefully detailed to look like the classic cars from all decades of these historic automobiles.

An incredible train at an exceptional value.

Begin your train collection with the illuminating "Diesel Locomotive." It can be yours for three easy payments of $26.66*, the first billed before shipment. Soon, you can look forward to adding coordinating train cars each billed separately at the same attractive price and sent about every other month—including the flat bed cars with sculpted Chevrolet® muscle cars. Your Second Shipment will include the FREE track set, power-pack and speed controller—a $100 total value! Your collection is backed by our best-in-the-business 365-day guarantee, and you may cancel at any time.

Not available in any store! Order today!

This is a limited-time offer and strong demand is expected. You need *send no money now.* Just sign and mail the post paid Reservation Application today

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THE BRADFORD EXCHANGE

LIMITED TIME OFFER!
Mail this today to reserve your incredible train collection!

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EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO RUN YOUR TRAIN!

Along with Shipment Two, the "Engine," you'll receive a FREE 14-piece track set, power-pack and speed controller—a $100 value!

GM OFFICIAL LICENSED PRODUCT

www.bradfordexchange.com/ChevyTr

MARVEL

SPIDER-MAN

Leather Aviator Jacket

Official Licensed Marvel Product

Not Sold in Stores!

MARVEL

Official Marvel licensed product

Buy Yours Online at
www.bradfordexchange.com/26718

PRIORITY RESERVATION **SEND NO MONEY NOW**

THE BRADFORD EXCHANGE
APPAREL & ACCESSORIES

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YES. Please reserve the **Marvel Spider-Man Leather Aviator Jacket** for me as described in this announcement.

Please Respond Promptly

- ❑ **Medium** (38-40) 01-26718-011
- ❑ **Large** (42-44) 01-26718-012
- ❑ **XL** (46-48) 01-26718-013
- ❑ **XXL** (50-52) 01-26718-014
- ❑ **XXXL** (54-56) 01-26718-015

Mrs. Mr. Ms.
Name (Please Print Clearly)

Address

City State Zip

E-mail (optional)

E30201

*Plus $17.99 shipping and service. Please allow 6-8 weeks after initial payment for shipment. Sales subject to product availability and order acceptance.

MARVEL SPIDER-MAN

A WEB-SLINGING ADVENTURE IN STYLE

Here's an expertly-crafted leather jacket featuring the amazing Spider-man that has our style sense tingling. The back of this officially-licensed jacket features an applique patch of Spider-Man in a classic pose atop a large embroidered web design. Another Spider-Man symbol with an embroidered spider logo adorns the jacket's chest. Custom styling includes a detachable gray faux Sherpa collar, two front snap pockets, zippered side pockets, knit hem, black woven lining, and a hanging loop on the back.

A Remarkable Value... Satisfaction Guaranteed

Available in five sizes from M-XXXL, this bold leather bomber-style jacket is a remarkable value at $299.95*, payable in 5 easy installments of $59.99 each and backed by our 30-day, full money-back guarantee. To reserve yours, send no money now; just return the Priority Reservation. You won't find this officially licensed Marvel jacket anywhere else—so don't miss it, order today!

www.bradfordexchange.com/26718

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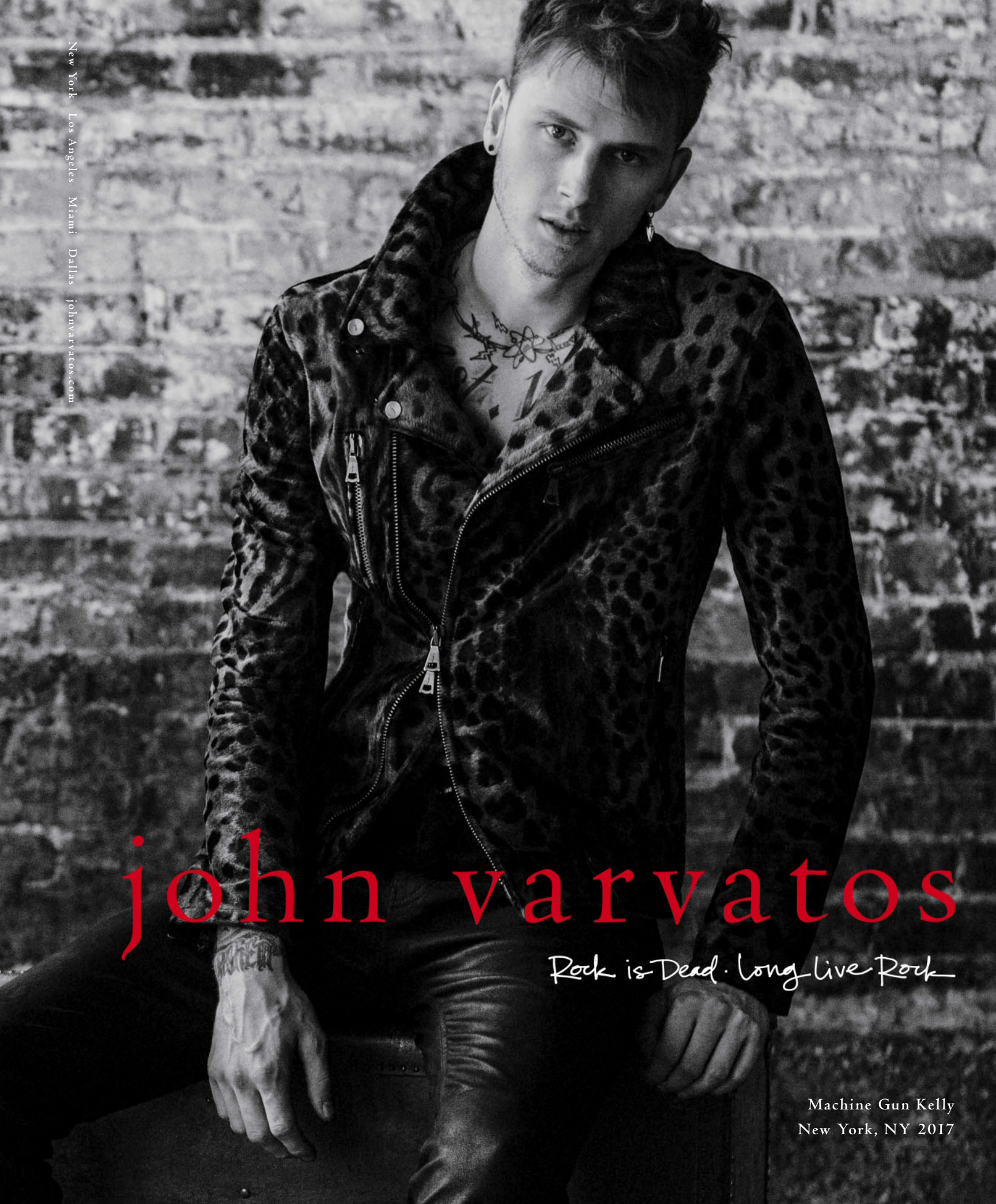
Embroidered Spider-Man logo is featured on the front of the jacket

A DESIGN ORIGINAL FROM THE BRADFORD EXCHANGE

MARVEL

Official Marvel licensed product



Machine Gun Kelly
New York, NY 2017