

THE RIFLE

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THE RIFLE

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RAKING LEAVES

The rake was always slightly too heavy or slightly too light, never quite the right size for your hands that particular year, because you had grown since the last time you picked it up and nobody had thought to buy a new one. You worked with what was in the garage. That was the rule of most things at that age.

The leaves came down faster than you could keep up with, which was the whole problem with the job and the whole reason it never actually felt finished. You would clear a section, look up, and find that the wind had already started undoing you from the other end of the yard. Somebody's father, somewhere down the block, had a leaf blower, and the sound of it carried across three or four yards on a Saturday morning like a small argument nobody was winning. You had a rake. Your father believed in the rake.

There was a right way to do it, and every father had his own version of the right way, delivered without much patience for the wrong way. Long, even strokes. Pull toward yourself, not across. Build the pile in the same spot each time instead of scattering three small piles you would only have to consolidate later. You learned this the way you learned most things from a father in October, by doing it wrong first and being shown, sometimes more than once, exactly how wrong.

The pile itself was the entire point of the labor, as far as you were concerned, whatever the actual point was supposed to be. You built it taller than it needed to be. You built it wider. And when it was finally big enough, the kind of big that made an adult look over and shake his head in a way that was not quite disapproval, you ran at it the way you had been waiting to run at it since the third rake stroke, and you went in, and for about four seconds there was nothing in the world except the smell of dry leaves and a little bit of dirt in your collar and the specific, complete satisfaction of having wrecked something you built with your own hands.

Then you did it again. And your father, who had seen this coming and had planned for it, and who had built the pile bigger than strictly necessary for exactly this reason, did not tell you to stop, not the first time, not even the second. There was a window, understood without being discussed, where the wrecking was allowed to happen before the bagging started.

The bagging was the part nobody enjoyed. Paper bags that split if you filled them too full, which you always did, because a half-filled bag felt like failure. The rustle of leaves settling as you pressed them down to make room for more. Rows of brown paper bags lined up at the curb by the end of the afternoon, standing there like a harvest of something, which in its way it was, the yard's last crop before the ground went hard and quiet for a few months.

Your hands smelled like dirt and dry leaf dust for the rest of the day, through dinner, through the bath your mother made you take before you were allowed near the couch. The smell did not wash off easily. It was still there, faintly, the next morning, a small reminder that the work had happened and that more of it was coming, because the trees were not finished either, and neither were you.

STACKING THE WOOD

The truck came in September, always September, a cord and a half dumped in a loose, ugly pile at the top of the driveway that looked, for about an hour, like more wood than any house could possibly need and, by January, would look like it had never been enough at all. Somebody had to move it. That somebody was you.

You learned early that there was a wrong way to build a woodpile and that the wrong way was the way that looked fastest. Just heaping logs on logs, however they landed, was a beginner's mistake, the kind that got you a pile that toppled the first time you pulled a log from the wrong spot, the whole stack coming down around your boots in a clatter that brought your father to the window whether he said anything or not. The right way was slower. Bark side up on the top row, to shed the rain. Ends squared where you could manage it. A rhythm to the work once you found it, log, turn, place, log, turn, place, until your arms stopped thinking about it and just did it.

The wood itself told you things if you paid attention, which nobody explained to you and which you figured out anyway, the way you figured out most things that mattered. Ash split clean, almost eager, the halves practically falling apart at the first good swing of the maul. Elm fought you the whole way, stringy and stubborn, twisting instead of splitting, the kind of log that made you understand why some of the older wood already stacked from years back had never been touched, quietly avoided by everyone who knew what it was going to cost them in effort. You learned the smell of each kind too, sharp and sweet with the fresh cut of maple, something almost like vinegar off a piece of oak that had sat too long. None of this was in a book. It came from doing it enough Septembers in a row that your hands knew before your head did.

The work was cold-weather work even though it happened before the cold weather arrived, your body working hard enough in the sixty-degree afternoon that you'd strip down to a t-shirt by the second hour, sweat cooling fast the second you stopped to catch your breath, which taught you not to stop for long. Splinters were a given. So was the specific ache across your shoulders the next morning, the kind that told you exactly which muscles had done the actual work versus which ones you thought had been doing the work.

By the time the pile was stacked, rows deep along the side of the garage or the back fence, tarped against the weather with the tarp weighted down at the corners against wind that would otherwise have it flapping and useless by morning, there was a specific satisfaction in stepping back and looking at it that had nothing to do with how you felt about any other chore all year. This was not cleanup. This was not maintenance. This was preparation, in the oldest sense of the word, the visible proof that the household had done what it needed to do before the season that did not forgive unpreparedness arrived. Every cold night that winter, when the fire caught and the room started to warm, some part of you that had stacked that wood in September knew exactly what that warmth had cost, and took a certain quiet pride in having paid it.

STORM WINDOWS

The ladder came out of the garage on the first genuinely cold Saturday, the one where everybody in the house agreed without discussing it that summer was actually, finally, over. The screens had to come down. The storms had to go up. It was not a debate. It was a date on a calendar nobody had written down anywhere, understood the way weather is understood by people who live close enough to it to feel it coming a few days before it arrives.

Every window had its own storm, numbered on the frame in pencil or grease pencil from some system your father had worked out years earlier and trusted you to have memorized, which you had not, which meant a certain amount of the afternoon was spent matching numbers to windows, carrying the wrong one halfway across the yard before realizing it belonged two windows over. The screens came out first, lighter, easier, propped against the side of the garage in a row that always looked, by the fourth or fifth screen, like some kind of makeshift fence protecting nothing in particular.

The storms themselves were heavier than they looked, wood-framed on the older houses, aluminum on the newer additions, and carrying one up a ladder while your father held the bottom, or worse, carrying one up alone because your father was two windows ahead of you and had told you to catch up, required a specific kind of balance that had nothing to do with strength and everything to do with not thinking too hard about how far up you were. You learned to set the bottom edge into the track first, then tip the top in, a motion that either worked cleanly on the first try or fought you for five minutes while your fingers went numb against the aluminum in the wind.

There was a smell to it, somehow, a cold, dusty, slightly metallic smell that came off the storms after a summer in the garage, mixed with the smell of the caulk gun your father kept for the gaps that had opened up since spring, sealing the cracks where the old glazing had cracked and let a thin line of daylight through. He checked every latch personally. A storm window that did not latch tight was worse, in his estimation, than no storm window at all, because it would rattle all winter in a way that kept everyone in the house awake and cost you exactly the warmth you had put the thing up to save.

By the end of the day the house looked different, sealed somehow, the way a person looks different in a heavier coat, the same shape but bulkier now, ready for something. Inside, the rooms went a little quieter almost immediately, the wind that had rattled the screens all summer now pressing uselessly against glass instead. Your mother would notice it that first cold night, the specific silence of a house properly buttoned up against weather, and say something about it at dinner, and your father would nod like a man who had done a job correctly and knew it, which he had, and you had helped, cold fingers and mismatched numbers and all.

DRAINING THE HOSE

Nobody ever told you why it mattered until the year somebody's hose burst, split clean along a seam that had frozen solid the winter before, water still trapped inside it from a September nobody had thought about carefully enough. After that, you understood. A hose left full over the winter did not survive the winter. Water expands when it freezes, and a length of rubber has no say in the matter, and once you had seen the evidence, a hose gone stiff and cracked and useless by spring, you never needed the lesson repeated.

So the draining became its own small ritual, tucked in among the bigger jobs of getting the yard ready, easy to forget precisely because it looked so simple. You walked the hose out straight, no coils, no kinks, laid across the yard in the longest line the property allowed, and then you lifted one end and walked toward the other, letting gravity do the actual work while you did the only part that mattered, keeping the whole length elevated enough that the water had nowhere to go but out. It ran cold over your boots if you were not careful about the angle, and you were, by the third or fourth year of doing this, careful about the angle.

The spigot got its own attention after that, an outdoor shutoff valve if the house had one, closed tight, and the exterior faucet opened afterward to let whatever was left in the short run of pipe drain out into the air rather than sit there and do to the house's own plumbing exactly what it would have done to the hose. Some houses had a bleeder cap for this specifically, a small brass fitting your father would point out like it was a secret worth knowing, and it was, because a burst pipe inside a wall was a considerably worse problem than a split hose lying uselessly in the garage.

Once drained, the hose got coiled, loose, not tight, because a hose coiled too tight developed its own memory of the shape and fought you every spring afterward when you tried to lay it out straight again. It went up on the hook inside the garage, out of the weather, out of the way, a job so small it barely felt like it counted among the bigger work of the season, the leaves and the wood and the storm windows.

But it counted. Every spring, the hose that had been drained properly came off the hook supple and ready, uncoiled without a fight, water running clean the first time you turned the spigot back on. And every spring, somewhere on the block, somebody who had skipped the ritual the previous fall was standing over a coil of cracked, useless rubber, learning the lesson the hard way that you had already learned, and remembered, and passed down the exact same way it had been passed down to you, in a driveway, on a cold afternoon, without much explanation beyond do it this way and you will not regret it.

BRINGING IN THE GARDEN

The tomatoes went first, always the tomatoes, because the first hard frost was coming whether the vines had finished their work or not, and a green tomato picked in October and set on a windowsill would ripen slow and pale into something at least usable, while a green tomato left on the vine through a frost was simply lost, mush by morning, the whole plant blackened overnight into something that looked like it had been burned rather than frozen. You went down the row with a bucket, picking everything, green, orange, red, the ones you would have left another week in August now stripped off without hesitation because there was no more week to wait for.

The vines themselves came out after, pulled from the ground whole where you could manage it, roots and all, the whole plant dragged unceremoniously to the compost pile or the burn barrel depending on which system the household believed in that particular year. There was a specific finality to it, pulling something you had planted and watered and tied to a stake all summer, watching it come up out of the dirt with a soft tearing sound, roots trailing dirt, done. The stakes themselves got pulled and cleaned and stacked somewhere dry, tomato cages nested inside each other, all of it put away for a spring that felt, on the day you were doing this work, impossibly far off.

The rest of the garden emptied out at its own pace. Peppers held on longest, stubborn little plants that would keep producing right up until the frost finally took them, and you learned to watch the forecast the way a farmer watches it, not for any romantic reason but because the difference between a Tuesday frost and a Thursday frost was the difference between one more picking and none. Squash vines, sprawling and enormous by September, collapsed into something manageable once you started cutting them back, revealing a tangle of stems that had been quietly claiming another two feet of yard every week since June without anyone noticing until the reclaiming had to happen.

Then came the turning of the soil, the actual bed itself, worked over with a spade or a tiller depending on the size of the operation, breaking up the summer's compaction and mixing in whatever your family believed in, compost, leaves, the ash from whatever had already been burned, working it under before the ground went hard enough that working it under stopped being possible at all. This was the part that felt less like harvest and more like a kind of promise, dirt turned dark and loose and ready, put to bed the way you would put a room to bed before a long trip, not used again until someone came back to it.

By the time the garden was fully cleared, the yard looked different, the summer's most obvious project reduced to bare, raked dirt and a few stakes leaning against the fence. It was not a sad sight, not exactly, though it had a little of that in it if you looked long enough. Mostly it looked like a job finished properly, the last harvest in, the ground squared away, one more piece of the yard's long list checked off before the weather turned and made the whole question of gardens, for a few months, entirely academic.

THE HUNT

November fifteenth arrived every year on its own schedule, indifferent to what day of the week it landed on, and the whole rhythm of the Upper Peninsula bent around it the way a river bends around a rock that has always been there and always will be. Schools felt it. Deer season was not a holiday on any calendar printed anywhere, and yet the hallways emptied out just the same, a quiet understood by every teacher who had grown up there and taught there and knew better than to schedule a test for the sixteenth.

The morning before was its own kind of ritual, separate from the hunt itself. Rifles came out of closets and gun safes and got the attention they had been waiting all year for, cleaned and oiled at the kitchen table under a bare bulb, the smell of solvent mixing with whatever your mother had cooking for the thermos that would go out into the woods with you before first light. Wool socks. Blaze orange laid out the night before like church clothes, because in a sense that was exactly what it was. Boots checked for the leak that had bothered somebody's foot the year before. A father checking a son's rifle one more time than strictly necessary, not because he doubted the boy but because the checking was its own way of saying something neither one of them would have said out loud.

The woods before dawn on opening morning held a stillness that the rest of the year could not manufacture, cold enough that your breath hung visible in the flashlight beam, quiet enough that you heard your own heartbeat before you heard anything that might actually be a deer. You climbed into a stand built the summer before, or found the same stump you had used every year since you were old enough to be trusted with a rifle, and you waited, which was the actual substance of the hunt far more than the shooting ever was. Waiting taught patience in a way nothing else in a young life did. Waiting taught you to notice, the difference between wind moving a branch and something else moving it, the particular silence that fell over the woods just before deer came through, birds gone quiet first, the forest itself seeming to hold its breath the way you were holding yours.

Not every hunt ended in a deer, and the ones that did not were not failures, whatever a boy might have felt in the moment, sitting cold and empty-handed as the light went gray and the morning hunt ended without a shot fired. What mattered, and what took most hunters years to understand even though their fathers had told them plainly enough, was the sitting itself, the being out there, in weather that asked something real of you, beside people who mattered, doing something that connected you backward through generations of Yoopers who had put meat in the freezer this same way in this same woods since long before anyone thought to call it a tradition instead of simply calling it November.

And then, if the hunt went well, there was the work after, the field dressing, the drag back to the truck that always felt longer than the walk in, the hanging in the garage, the whole extended family gathering for the processing the way families elsewhere gathered for nothing in particular. It fed a household through the winter, literally, venison in the freezer standing in for money that a UP household in a hard year did not always have to spare at the grocery store. That was the practical truth underneath the ritual. But sitting alongside the practical truth, close enough that you could not always tell where one ended and the other began, was the thankfulness itself, plain and unspoken, for the woods, for the family gathered around the table a few weeks later at Thanksgiving eating what the hunt had provided, for one more season out there together before the real cold set in and the snow buried the tracks until next November came around again, right on schedule, indifferent as always to anything but its own quiet arrival.

TRICK OR TREATING

The costume never survived contact with October weather the way it looked like it would in the store. A Superman cape over a winter coat because your mother had made the coat non-negotiable the moment the forecast dropped below forty, the whole careful illusion of the costume undone by a puffy blue parka underneath it that nobody had accounted for when the cape was purchased in September under a sun that made winter feel theoretical. You went anyway. Nobody stayed home over a coat.

The pillowcase was the serious equipment, chosen over any of the smaller plastic pumpkins the younger kids carried, because a pillowcase held real volume and real volume was the entire point of the evening as far as you were concerned at nine or ten years old. You had a route. Everybody had a route, refined over years of trial, which streets gave out full-size bars, which houses turned their porch lights off early and therefore did not count, which house at the end of the block gave out something homemade that your mother inspected before letting you eat it, the same inspection every year, the same sigh of relief when it turned out to be fine, the same story about the one bad apple somewhere in America years ago that had ruined homemade treats for everyone since.

The group thinned out as the evening went on, littlest kids peeling off first with a parent in tow, back home by seven, the porch light at their own house already lit for the neighborhood kids still working the block. By the time it was down to just you and your friends, old enough to go without a parent walking behind you but young enough that this still felt like a genuine, hard-won freedom rather than an obligation, the whole night took on a different character, darker streets, colder air, breath visible under a plastic mask that fogged up faster than you expected and had to be pushed up on top of your head just to see where you were going.

Every house had its own personality on Halloween night in a way it did not have the rest of the year. The house with the elaborate decorations that some father had clearly spent the better part of October building, fog machine and all, that you approached with genuine nervous excitement even though you knew, technically, it was just Mr. Anderson from two doors down in a rubber mask. The house that gave out apples, greeted every year with the specific, theatrical disappointment of children who had been promised candy and received produce, an injustice discussed at length on the walk to the next house. The house at the very end of the route that always seemed a little too dark, a little too quiet, that you approached anyway because turning back was not something anyone in the group was willing to admit to wanting.

By the time you got home, the pillowcase heavier than your arm wanted to admit, the sorting began on the living room floor, categories established without discussion, the good stuff separated from the stuff you would trade, the stuff you would trade separated from the stuff nobody wanted that would sit in a kitchen drawer until Easter. Your mother took her tax, the same one every year, one item, negotiated rather than simply claimed, and you let her have it, because the whole night had been good enough that the tax felt fair. Outside, the porch light stayed on a little longer than usual, the last few trick-or-treaters still working the block, and somewhere down the street a dog was barking at a plastic skeleton it had apparently decided, after a full week of walking past it without incident, was tonight, finally, a genuine threat.

CANNING AND PRESERVING

The kitchen stopped being a kitchen for about two weeks every September and became something closer to a small factory, every surface claimed, the good pot out of the basement and onto the stove, the smell of vinegar and hot sugar hanging in the air so constantly that you stopped noticing it until you walked outside and the absence of it startled you. This was not cooking in the ordinary sense. This was putting the summer away, one jar at a time, against a winter that would otherwise arrive with nothing green in the house at all.

Tomatoes came first, always tomatoes, bushels of them from the garden or from whoever in the family had grown more than they could use, blanched in batches, skins slipping off under cold water the way they were supposed to if you had timed the boil right, and if you had not, you learned quickly, peeling stubborn scalded fruit with a paring knife and a certain amount of muttering. The jars themselves got their own ritual first, washed and sterilized, lined up on a towel like soldiers waiting for orders, lids simmering separately in a smaller pot because a lid that had not been properly heated would not seal, and a jar that did not seal was worse than no jar at all, a summer's tomatoes gone to waste sitting on a shelf looking fine until the day you opened it and knew immediately, by smell alone, that it had gone bad months earlier.

The canner itself, the big water bath pot with the rack inside it, took over the largest burner for the duration and stayed there, a fixture, boiling water rolling steadily while jars went in and came out on a rhythm your mother or grandmother kept by feel more than by clock, though there was always a clock involved somewhere, a kitchen timer set and reset all afternoon. You learned the sound a properly sealed jar made hours later, cooling on the counter, that single sharp ping of the lid pulling down tight, and you learned to listen for it the way you listened for anything that told you a job had been done correctly. A jar that did not ping got checked, and re-processed if it needed it, because there was no room in this particular economy for a jar that only looked sealed.

Beyond the tomatoes came whatever else the garden or the season offered up in more than the household could eat fresh. Green beans, pickled with dill and garlic in a brine that filled the house with a sharper, more acidic smell than the tomatoes had. Peaches and pears in light syrup, the knife work tedious and the payoff, months later, opening a jar in February to something that tasted unmistakably like August. Applesauce, made from the drops nobody wanted to eat whole, cooked down and put up in a batch large enough to last through Christmas and past it. Jam, the sweetest and messiest of all of it, sugar burnt onto the bottom of the pot at least once every season no matter how carefully anyone stirred, the whole kitchen smelling like the inside of a candy store for the better part of an afternoon.

By the time the shelves in the cellar or the back pantry were full, rows of jars catching the light, red and gold and green, there was a specific kind of security in looking at them that had nothing to do with taste and everything to do with knowing. Whatever winter brought, however bad the roads got or however long the cold snap ran, there was food in the house that did not depend on getting to a store. That was the actual point of all the vinegar smell and the burnt sugar and the two solid weeks of a kitchen that was not, for that stretch, quite a kitchen anymore. It was a hedge against the season that was coming, built one sealed jar at a time, and opened all winter long with the specific, quiet gratitude of a household that had done the work in September so it would not have to worry in January.

VETERANS DAY

The eleventh of November fell where it fell, sometimes a school day, sometimes a Saturday, and the town treated it with a seriousness that did not depend on which. The parade was short, always short, a town that size did not have the numbers for anything longer, but short did not mean small in any way that mattered to the people standing along the route with their hands over their hearts as the flag went by. The high school band played the same handful of marches it had played every year, slightly out of tune in the cold the way any outdoor band is slightly out of tune in November, and nobody minded, because the point was never the precision of the trumpets.

The veterans themselves walked or rode depending on age and ability, a shrinking number every year that everyone noticed and nobody said out loud, men from a war you had read about in a textbook walking alongside men from a war still recent enough that some of them had brothers or sons who had served in it too. Legion caps. Medals that caught the gray November light. A stiffness in some of the walks that had nothing to do with age and everything to do with something that had happened decades earlier in a place with a name most of the crowd could not have found on a map, and everyone standing along the curb understood, without it being explained, that the stiffness was part of what they were there to honor.

At the cemetery afterward, or at the memorial downtown depending on the town, the ceremony slowed all the way down. Taps, played by whichever high schooler had drawn the assignment that year, always a little uneven on the high notes, always somehow more affecting for being a little uneven, a teenager doing his honest best with an instrument at a task considerably heavier than anything else he would be asked to do with it that year. The reading of names, for the towns small enough that reading all the names was still possible, a list that got longer every year in the wrong direction, veterans who had marched in last year's parade now added to the roll being read rather than standing to hear it read.

The wreath went down at the base of the monument the same way it had gone down every year, laid by whoever held the honor that particular November, a mayor, a Legion commander, once, memorably, a ninety-one-year-old veteran of a war fought before most of the crowd's grandparents were born, walking the wreath forward himself over the objections of everyone who offered to carry it for him. Nobody objected twice. Some things a man had earned the right to do himself, however long it took him to do it, and the whole crowd stood in a silence that had nothing impatient in it at all, waiting exactly as long as he needed.

Afterward, the diners and the VFW hall filled up the way they did every November eleventh, free coffee for anyone who had served, handshakes from strangers, a kind of quiet, unhurried gratitude that did not need a speech to explain itself because everyone standing in that room already understood exactly what it was for. Outside, the flags along Main Street stayed at attention in the cold wind, and the town went back to whatever a Tuesday or a Saturday in November usually looked like, changed for one morning into something it did not often let itself be, out loud, in public, together.

THANKSGIVING

The kitchen had been full since before anyone else was awake, your mother or your grandmother up with the bird itself, working backward from a two o'clock dinner through a schedule kept entirely in her head, no timer written down anywhere because the timer had never needed to be written down, forty years of Thanksgivings compressed into an internal clock more reliable than anything you could have set on the stove. The smell reached the upstairs bedrooms before anyone else did, sage and roasting turkey and something with cinnamon in it, and that smell alone was enough to get even the teenagers out of bed on a morning when nothing else would have.

The house filled slowly through the late morning, cars in the driveway and along the street outside, the same relatives every year plus whichever cousin's new boyfriend or girlfriend was being introduced around the room with the particular gentle scrutiny reserved for someone meeting the whole family at once. Coats piled on the bed in the back room until the pile was taller than made sense. The football game on low in the background in whichever room had the good television, half-watched by the uncles who claimed to be very invested in it and were, in fact, mostly there for an excuse to sit somewhere quiet for twenty minutes before the work of setting the table began in earnest.

The table itself was an engineering project by the time it was actually large enough, the good table extended with the leaf that lived in the closet the rest of the year, folding chairs brought in from the garage for the kids, a card table set up in the next room over for the youngest cousins, who considered this arrangement, every year, without exception, a genuine insult, and who were, every year, without exception, told that they would sit at the card table until they were old enough not to complain about the card table, at which point the complaining would stop mattering because they would have graduated to the real table and taken up the position of the older cousins who had once complained in exactly the same way.

Grace came before anything else, said by whoever in the family had been designated to say it, sometimes brief, sometimes considerably less brief depending on which relative had drawn the assignment that year, heads bowed around a table crowded enough that elbows were already negotiating for space before the first plate had even been passed. Then the food moved around the table in the same order it always moved, turkey first, then the stuffing, then whichever dish somebody's aunt had brought that was technically optional and treated as anything but, and for a while the only sound in the room was forks and the specific, satisfied quiet of a family eating well together.

The thanks itself, when it came, rarely arrived as a formal announcement. It showed up sideways, in a toast someone made half-jokingly and meant completely, in a grandmother's hand resting for a second too long on a grandchild's shoulder while she refilled a water glass, in an uncle telling the same story he told every year about a Thanksgiving decades earlier that the younger cousins had heard so many times they could recite it themselves, and did, sometimes, along with him, to his evident delight. It was there in the leftovers packed into a dozen mismatched containers at the end of the night for everyone to take home, more food leaving the house than had actually been eaten, because sending people home with something was its own kind of grace, wordless and practical and entirely sincere. By the time the last car pulled out of the driveway, the house gone quiet again the way it had been quiet before dawn, the whole day had said what it meant to say without anyone needing to make a speech about it at all.

EARLY DARK

Nobody warned you how it would feel the first week the clocks fell back, only that it was coming, a Sunday morning ritual of walking around the house resetting everything by hand, the stove, the microwave, the clock on the mantel that had been running seven minutes fast since June and that nobody had bothered to fix because who cared, in summer, about seven minutes. Then Monday came, and by the time the bus dropped you at the end of the driveway the sky was already doing the thing it would keep doing for the next four months, going gray and then blue-black while you were still finishing homework, the porch light already on by the time you walked in the door from anything.

The afternoons were the part that took the longest to get used to. You had spent all autumn watching the light lean lower and lower without it costing you anything you noticed, a slow tax you paid a minute or two at a time, easy to miss. And then the clocks moved and the whole bill came due at once, an entire hour taken out of the part of the day you actually used, the after-school hour, the hour for the last inning of a game in the yard, the hour that had always been there and now, suddenly, was not. You came out of the last class or the last chore and the world had already decided the day was over, whether you were ready to agree with it or not.

Supper moved earlier without anyone deciding it should, because nobody wanted to sit at a table in the dark waiting for something that could just as easily happen at five thirty. The kitchen window went from a view of the backyard to a mirror, your own reflection looking back at you over the sink instead of the maple tree and the swing set, and you learned to stop looking at it too long, because there was nothing out there to see anymore, only your own face and the light behind you.

Headlights became a permanent feature of the evening commute even for trips that used to happen entirely in daylight, the grocery run, picking someone up from practice, the whole choreography of a family's evening now conducted under a sky that had quit an hour before it used to. Deer showed up more, or seemed to, catching your father's high beams at the edge of the road on drives that would have been perfectly visible and perfectly safe a month earlier, another small cost of the early dark that nobody totaled up out loud but that everyone in the car felt, a little tension in the shoulders on every curve past the tree line.

What surprised you, every single year, was how quickly the household adjusted anyway. Lamps came on earlier. Homework moved to the kitchen table under better light. Board games came out on nights they would not have, because there was simply more evening to fill now that the outdoors had closed its doors early. The early dark asked something of a household, a slightly different rhythm, a slightly smaller world for a few months, and every year the household answered without much complaint, because complaining about November in a place like this was like complaining about the lake being cold. True, and beside the point. You put on another layer, you turned on another lamp, and you got on with it, the way everyone around you always had.

THE WOODSTOVE LIT

There was a day every year, never marked on any calendar but always agreed upon by the whole house at roughly the same moment, when somebody said out loud what everyone had been thinking for a week: time to light the stove. It was never the first cold day. The first cold day got you a sweater and maybe a blanket on the couch and a certain amount of stubborn insistence that the furnace alone could handle it. It was later than that, the day the cold stopped feeling like weather and started feeling like a fact of the house itself, cold in the floorboards, cold in the door handles, cold in a way that a sweater could not really answer.

The stove itself had spent all summer and fall as furniture, a black iron box in the corner of the room that held nothing but cold ash and the faint smell of the last fire from the previous winter, still lingering in a way that surprised you every year, how something could smell like smoke for eight months without ever being touched. Getting it ready was its own small project. The ash from last year's final fire had to come out first, a job that produced more fine gray dust than seemed possible from a stove that size, dust that found its way onto every surface within four feet no matter how carefully you carried the bucket. The flue got checked. The damper got tested, opened and closed a few times to make sure it still moved the way it should, because a stuck damper was the kind of thing you wanted to discover before you had a fire going, not during one.

Then came the actual lighting, which had its own hierarchy of materials, newspaper first, twisted or crumpled depending on which method your father swore by, kindling next, the thin dry sticks kept in a separate bin specifically for this purpose, split small enough to catch quickly, and only then the real wood, the split logs from the pile you had stacked back in September, still carrying a little of that September smell even now. The match. The particular quiet of everyone in the room watching the newspaper catch, then the kindling, then waiting, always with a small worry that this time it would not take, that something had gone wrong with the flue or the wood was too green or the world had simply decided this was the year the ritual failed.

It never failed, not really, though there was always a tense minute of coaxing, a door cracked to feed it air, someone leaning in with a look of real concentration on a task that amounted to watching wood burn. And then the catch, the real catch, when the kindling handed the fire off to the logs and the logs accepted it, and the stove began, for the first time in eight months, to tick and pop and warm, the iron itself heating up enough that you could feel it from across the room within twenty minutes.

That first fire changed the whole house's character for the season. The living room became the place everyone gravitated toward without discussing it, chairs pulled a little closer than they had been in June, a dog stretched out directly in front of the stove door with the specific unbothered confidence of an animal that knows exactly where the warmest spot in any room will be before any human has figured it out. The woodstove lit was not just a chore completed. It was a season formally beginning, the house declaring, in the oldest language it had, that winter was here and had been prepared for.

FROST ON THE WINDSHIELD

The first morning it happened, you were not ready for it, not really, even though you had been told, even though the weatherman the night before had used the word frost in a tone that should have registered as a warning rather than background noise. You walked out the door already running late and found the car wearing a thin white coat it had not been wearing the night before, every window opaque, the whole vehicle rendered temporarily useless by a process that had happened silently, overnight, while everyone in the house was asleep and unbothered.

The scraper lived in the glove compartment all summer, forgotten, shoved under the owner's manual and a handful of napkins from a fast food place nobody remembered visiting, and finding it again for the first time each year came with its own small relief, the plastic edge still intact, not the cracked, snapped-in-half version from three winters ago that everyone had meant to replace and never had. You started with the windshield because the windshield mattered most, long even strokes the way your father had shown you, working from the top down so the ice you scraped free did not just resettle on the section you had already cleared.

The frost itself came in patterns you had stopped questioning by a certain age but that struck you, the very first year you really looked at one, as genuinely strange. Feathered edges. Fern shapes spreading out from some invisible starting point near the corner of the glass, a structure that looked deliberate, almost decorative, for something that had assembled itself out of nothing more than cold air and a little moisture overnight. You scraped through it anyway, because a car could not be driven through a work of accidental ice art, however briefly beautiful it was before your breath and the scraper destroyed it.

Your hands went numb faster than seemed reasonable for a job that only took a few minutes, the cold radiating up through the plastic scraper in a way that made you switch hands every thirty seconds or so, tucking the free one into your armpit for whatever heat it could steal back before switching again. Somebody's breath fogged the one patch of windshield you had already cleared, undoing a few seconds of work, and you learned, eventually, to hold your breath during the final pass, a small trick that saved you nothing in real time but felt, somehow, like outsmarting the whole morning.

The car took its own sweet time warming up once you finally got inside, the defrost roaring on high while you sat there in your coat, breath still visible for the first minute or two, waiting for the heat to actually reach the vents instead of just blowing cold air with more enthusiasm. That wait, three or four minutes that felt considerably longer, became its own small daily ritual for the whole cold season, a forced pause at the start of every morning whether you wanted one or not, the car insisting you sit still and let it catch up before it would agree to take you anywhere. By the time the defrost cleared the last patch of fog from the corner of the windshield, the day had already asked something of you that August never had, and you drove off a little more awake for it, whether you wanted to be or not.

FIRST ICE ON THE BAY

Nobody could tell you the exact day it happened, only that it had, because none of you had actually watched it happen. You went down to the water on some ordinary errand or just to look, the way people who live near a big lake go down to look at it for no particular reason at all, and found it different than it had been a week earlier, a thin skin of ice reaching out from the shoreline, gray-white and uneven, stopping somewhere out past where you could judge distance accurately, the open water beyond it still dark and moving and entirely unconvinced that winter had arrived.

The first ice was never trustworthy, and everyone who had grown up along that shoreline knew it in their bones before anyone had to say it out loud. It formed thin and brittle near the edges where the water was shallow and slow, then thickened unevenly, patches of it solid enough to bear a gull's weight sitting right alongside patches that would not have held a stone without cracking. Kids were told, every single year, the same warning, delivered with a seriousness that never quite matched how casually the rest of the year's warnings were handed out, that first ice was for looking at, not walking on, a rule broken exactly as often as it was obeyed by boys convinced that this particular stretch, this particular week, was somehow the exception.

The sound of it was the thing that stayed with you longest, a groaning, cracking, almost musical complaint that traveled out across the ice whenever the temperature shifted or the wind pushed against it, long low notes that could carry for what sounded like a mile across open water on a still evening, a sound with no real equivalent anywhere else in nature, half animal and half machine, unsettling the first several times you heard it and then, eventually, just another part of the season's soundtrack, no more alarming than wind in the pines.

Fishermen watched the ice more closely than anyone, judging thickness by eye and by the sound a test strike made when they dropped an axe head or an ice chisel onto a spot near shore, waiting, some of them for weeks, for the ice to thicken enough to trust with a shanty and a auger and the particular patience that winter fishing demanded. The bay's first ice fishermen of the season became a kind of informal announcement in themselves, word passing through town that so-and-so had already gotten a shanty out past the point, which meant, unofficially, that the season had truly begun, whatever the calendar or the thermometer said about it.

By the time the ice had thickened enough to trust, the whole character of the bay had changed, open water become a hard white plain, boat docks standing awkwardly out of a surface that no longer needed them, the horizon line between water and sky replaced by a horizon line between ice and sky that stretched flat and pale for as far as you could see. It was a genuine transformation, water becoming solid ground, and even after a lifetime of watching it happen every November, there remained something in it that felt worth walking down to the shore to see for yourself, the same errand, the same water, entirely changed.

THE LONG DARK

There is a particular week, somewhere past the middle of November, when the accumulated weight of the shortening days finally announces itself, not as any single dramatic loss but as a kind of low, steady pressure that settles over a household the way weather settles over a valley, present in every room whether anyone names it or not. The sun rises reluctantly and sets early, and the hours in between feel narrower than the clock says they are, a compressed, gray version of daylight that asks you to get everything done in less light than the season before had offered, and gives you no say in the matter.

Older members of the household knew this stretch by feel long before anyone had a clinical name for it, and handled it the way people in this part of the country have always handled things that cannot be fixed, only managed. Lamps went on earlier and stayed on later. Somebody made sure the coffee was strong. Small rituals took on outsized importance, not because any one of them mattered much on its own, but because the accumulation of small, dependable comforts was the only real defense against a darkness that could not otherwise be argued with. A fire in the stove. A specific chair by the window that still caught what little afternoon light there was. A radio left on low in the kitchen, voices in the room even when nobody was actively listening, just to keep the quiet from getting too complete.

Children felt it too, though they rarely had words for it, only a vague sense that the days had gotten smaller and that the walk home from the bus stop, which had been a bright errand in September, was now conducted mostly in the dark, headlights sweeping the road, porch lights marking the last stretch home like a runway. Parents adjusted without discussing it, dinner earlier, homework under better light, bedtime a little more firmly enforced, because a tired child in December was a harder thing to manage than a tired child in June, when the evening light itself seemed to hold everyone's patience a little longer.

There was no single remedy offered for the long dark, and this publication does not pretend there is one, beyond noting plainly that a stretch of the calendar asking this much of people deserves acknowledgment rather than the usual brisk, wordless endurance it typically receives. If the weight of these weeks ever becomes more than low pressure, more than the ordinary seasonal heaviness a good fire and a strong lamp can answer, that is worth taking seriously and worth talking to someone about, a doctor, a pastor, a friend who has been through it, rather than simply waiting for the solstice the way earlier generations were taught to.

For most households, though, the long dark eventually does what it has always done, which is turn. The solstice arrives, the exact bottom of the year, the single day when the light stops losing ground and begins, almost imperceptibly at first, to take a little back. Nobody feels the difference on the day itself. But a few weeks later, someone notices that the drive home is not quite as dark as it was, that the kitchen window still shows a little color in the sky at an hour that had been fully black a month earlier, and the long dark, having done what it always does, begins its slow, wordless retreat, the same way it arrived, without ceremony, simply less each day than the day before.

A WORD FROM THE EDITOR

Well, gentlemen. Here we are again.

The Rifle arrives this time on the Winter Solstice, the shortest day of the year, the hinge point where the dark finally stops winning and the light, slowly, begins its long walk back. It is a fitting day to close out an issue built entirely around the season just behind us, the one that asked more of us than any other quarter of the year: the harvest brought in, the wood stacked, the storms hung, the deer taken or not taken, the table set twice, once for Thanksgiving and once, in spirit, for the dead we remembered on the first of December.

Three issues behind us now, and a fourth in your hands. The mailbox keeps filling. New readers keep finding old readers, and old readers keep telling new ones, which is the only kind of growth this magazine has ever asked for or expected. To everyone who has been here since Issue One: thank you for staying. To everyone who came in through the door Danny Kaye is holding open on our cover this quarter: welcome. You picked a good issue to start with.

Autumn is the season of preparation, and this issue tries to earn that theme rather than just decorate it. We have raked the leaves and stacked the wood and drained the hose and put the garden to bed alongside you, because a magazine that talks about the mid-twentieth century ought to know something about the actual labor that filled it. We have sat in a deer stand before dawn on the fifteenth of November, and stood at a curbside monument on the eleventh, and passed the same dish twice around a crowded table on the fourth Thursday, because that is what an Upper Peninsula autumn actually looks like, whatever the calendar says the season is officially for.

And we have, as we do every issue, spent real time with the men and women the twentieth century tried hardest to file away as footnotes. Danny Kaye gets the full centerpiece treatment this quarter, the triple threat, the tongue twisters, the UNICEF ambassadorship that took him further and asked more of him than most of Hollywood ever bothered to notice. Alongside him: Anna May Wong, who Hollywood never quite let win. Josephine Baker, who wore two uniforms and was fully honest in neither one nor entirely dishonest in either. James Baldwin, who left the country that would not have him and never once stopped writing about it. Glenn Burke, whose gesture outlived the game that pushed him out of it. The Village People, six costumes and one enormous wink most of the country still has not caught. Howard Ashman, who taught a mermaid to sing while he was dying and never told the studio why he was in such a hurry. k.d. lang, who refused to pick a lane and built a four-decade career out of the refusal. And Justin Fashanu, the first, and for far too long the only.

This issue also carries something we have not carried before, a memorial for the men lost to AIDS, timed to sit alongside the first of December the way it ought to. It is a hard piece and an honest one, and it belongs in these pages precisely because it is hard.

Winter is coming in behind this issue the way it comes in behind every December in this part of the country, without much patience for argument. Get your wood stacked, if you have not already. Get your storms up. And when the first snow comes, the way it always does, quietly, overnight, while the porch light burns on nothing much at all, take a minute at the window before the plows start. That is what this whole issue has been asking you to do since the first page.

Happy solstice, gentlemen. Let's see what the light brings back.

The Editors

The Rifle

Winter Solstice, December 21, 2026



ANNA MAY WONG

The Star Hollywood Would Not Let Win

In 1937, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer needed an actress to play O-lan, the long-suffering Chinese farm wife at the center of *The Good Earth*, adapted from Pearl Buck's best-selling novel about rural China. Anna May Wong, by then the single most famous Chinese American performer in the world, the only Chinese American actress with anything resembling the name recognition the role demanded, tested for the part and was turned down. The studio cast Luise Rainer instead, a white Austrian actress, in yellowface makeup, opposite Paul Muni, also white, also in yellowface, playing her husband. Rainer won the Academy Award for Best Actress for the performance. Wong, according to accounts from those close to her at the time, understood exactly what had happened and why, and the rejection became one of the defining wounds of a career built almost entirely around watching doors open partway and then close.

The reason was not subtle, and it was not disguised as anything other than what it was. Hollywood's Production Code, formally adopted in 1930 and rigorously enforced by the middle of the decade, prohibited depictions of interracial romance on screen. Because *The Good Earth's* male lead was cast with a white actor, casting Wong, an actual Chinese American woman, as his wife would have meant showing a Chinese woman married to a white man in a way the Code's anti-miscegenation provisions would not permit. The studio's solution was to cast two white performers in yellowface rather than cast the one Chinese American actress in America qualified to play the role authentically. Wong was offered, as something close to a consolation, the part of Lotus, a conniving secondary character, and declined it. She told an interviewer around that time that she was tired of playing the only kind of Chinese woman Hollywood would let her play twice: the villainess or the victim, never the hero of her own story.

THE FIRST OF HER KIND

Wong Liu Tsong was born in Los Angeles in 1905, the daughter of a laundry owner in a Chinatown neighborhood that placed her, quite literally, within walking distance of the earliest silent film production

lots then springing up around the city. She began appearing as an extra in her early teens, drawn to the movie sets that had begun shooting in and around her neighborhood, and by seventeen had landed her first leading role, in *The Toll of the Sea* in 1922, one of the first films made in early two-strip Technicolor. She became, by any reasonable measure, the first Chinese American movie star, a category that had simply not existed as a possibility before her, and she carried that distinction through more than fifty films across a career spanning silent pictures, the transition to sound, and into television in the final years of her life.

Her rise came against a backdrop of formal, codified American racism specifically targeting Chinese immigrants and their American-born children. The Chinese Exclusion Act, first passed in 1882 and still in force for the entirety of Wong's early career, barred Chinese immigration to the United States outright and denied Chinese immigrants the right to become naturalized citizens, a policy that would not be repealed until 1943. Wong herself was born an American citizen, but she came of age and built her career inside a country whose immigration law treated people of her ancestry as categorically undesirable, a legal and cultural backdrop that shaped every door that opened for her and every one that did not. She traveled internationally throughout her career carrying documents and facing questions at borders that a white American actress of equivalent fame would never have encountered, a fact rarely mentioned in the standard telling of her career but foundational to understanding the actual conditions she worked under.

The distinction came at a cost that shadowed every year of her working life. American censorship codes and the informal but rigidly enforced racial logic of the studio system meant Wong was routinely passed over for substantial Chinese or Chinese American roles in favor of white actresses performing in yellowface, a practice so normalized in the period that the industry rarely bothered to justify it. When she was cast, the roles available to her fell overwhelmingly into two categories, the seductive, dangerous "dragon lady" or the doomed, self-sacrificing victim, stock figures that reduced an entire culture to a pair of interchangeable Western fantasies. Wong spent decades pushing against the edges of both categories, bringing a specificity and interiority to roles written with none, and became, in the process, one of the most visually striking and technically

accomplished screen actresses of her generation regardless of the material she was handed.

EUROPE, AND A DIFFERENT KIND OF STARDOM

By the late 1920s, frustrated with the ceiling Hollywood had built around her, Wong left for Europe, where the film industries of Britain and Weimar Germany offered her roles with a depth and range American studios would not. In Britain she starred in *Piccadilly* (1929), a silent film that remains one of her most celebrated performances, playing a scullery maid who becomes a nightclub sensation, a role that let her carry a picture as a genuine romantic and dramatic lead rather than a supporting racial type. The film's director, E.A. Dupont, built the picture explicitly around her, staging her nightclub dance sequence as the visual and emotional centerpiece of the entire production, a level of directorial confidence in her star power that no Hollywood studio of the period had been willing to extend. British critics and audiences responded with an enthusiasm that stood in sharp contrast to the limited, typecast opportunities she had left behind, and the picture is remembered today as one of the finest achievements of the late British silent era, carried almost entirely on her performance. In Germany, during the brief, culturally explosive years of the Weimar Republic's film industry, she worked alongside some of European cinema's most significant figures and found an audience and a critical reception considerably more generous than anything Hollywood had offered.

It was during this period that Wong's social circle intersected with Marlene Dietrich's, the two photographed together at parties and events in a Berlin nightlife scene known for its comparative openness around sexuality and gender presentation, fueling persistent rumors, never confirmed by either woman in any on-the-record way, about the nature of their relationship. Dietrich's own story runs elsewhere in this publication's pages across earlier issues, and this piece will not repeat that ground, except to note that Wong moved through the same rare, permissive corner of interwar European culture that let a number of performers of the era live with a fluidity American studio publicity departments would never have tolerated.

Wong returned to the United States periodically throughout the 1930s, working across both American and European productions, including a well received run of Paramount pictures in the early part of the decade, before *The Good Earth* rejection in 1937 became, for her, a kind of final confirmation of exactly how far Hollywood was and was not prepared to go.

A TRIP HOME, AND A CHANGED PURPOSE

In the aftermath of *The Good Earth*, Wong made an extended trip to China, her first visit to the country her family had emigrated from, a journey that by most accounts of those who knew her reshaped how she understood her own public role. She had spent more than a decade being asked by American audiences and American studios to represent an entire civilization she had, until that trip, never actually visited, filtered entirely through roles written by writers who had generally never visited it either. The trip took her across multiple cities, and she wrote and spoke afterward about the experience of being received in China as both a celebrated success story and a figure of some suspicion among segments of the Chinese public and press, who had watched her build an American career partly on roles they considered demeaning to Chinese people and Chinese womanhood specifically. The China she found on that trip, and the reception she received there, a mixture of pride in her achievements and pointed criticism from Chinese intellectuals and press over the demeaning roles she had accepted to build her career, gave her a more complicated and more informed relationship to the responsibility that had been placed on her from the start of her career without her consent.

She returned to the United States and spent much of the following years working to support Chinese war relief efforts following Japan's invasion of China, using her public platform in a way that shifted from pure entertainment toward direct humanitarian and political engagement, selling her own jewelry and personal belongings at points to raise funds, and lending her name and visibility to the cause in a period when American attention to the war in Asia remained limited.

THE LATER YEARS AND A QUIET CLOSE

Wong's later career moved into television as the medium expanded in the 1950s, including a starring role in *The Gallery of Madame Liu-Tsong* in 1951, believed to be the first American television show with an Asian American series lead, a distinction that receives far less attention than it deserves given how long American television took to repeat it. She continued working sporadically through the decade, her health declining, and died in 1961 of a heart attack at the age of fifty-six, having spent nearly forty years as the most visible Chinese American performer in an industry that had, for almost the entirety of that career, refused to let her play the leading roles her own life story would eventually make her the subject of.

Recognition arrived, as it so often does, well after it could do her any good. In 2022, the United States Mint issued a quarter bearing Wong's image as part of the American Women Quarters Program, making her the first Asian American to appear on U.S. currency, a fact that sits with a particular weight against the memory of a studio system that once decided her face could not be trusted to play a Chinese farm wife in her own culture's story. Hollywood itself has, in the decades since her death, issued a slow accumulation of posthumous honors, tributes, and retrospectives, the industry's standard method of settling accounts with performers it failed to fully support while they were alive to benefit from the acknowledgment.

What Wong actually achieved, watched plainly and without the sentimental gloss those later honors sometimes apply, is considerable enough on its own terms. She built and sustained a genuine international stardom across three film industries and two mediums, over a career of nearly four decades, while working inside a system explicitly and legally structured to prevent someone in her position from playing the very roles her own existence made her most qualified to play. She did this with a screen presence contemporary critics described as magnetic even in service of material unworthy of her, and she left behind, in *Piccadilly* and a handful of other performances where the material briefly rose to meet her, evidence of exactly what American cinema chose not to make room for. The industry did not fail to notice her talent. It declined, for the length of her working life, to build a place large enough for it.

There is a particular kind of historical injustice in watching an industry spend decades manufacturing yellowface performances rather than simply hiring the qualified Chinese American actress standing in the same city, on the same lots, available for the work. Wong's career is not primarily a story of failure, and treating it that way undersells everything she managed to build against active resistance. But it is, unavoidably, also a record of a system that had exactly what it needed and chose, again and again, across four decades, to manufacture an inferior substitute rather than let her play herself. She spent a career waiting for an industry to catch up to what audiences in London and Berlin had already seen plainly, and largely, it never did while she was alive to feel the difference.

JOSEPHINE BAKER

The Woman Who Wore Two Uniforms

In October 1925, a nineteen year old dancer from St. Louis stepped onto a Paris stage wearing very little and dancing like nothing the city had ever seen, and by the end of the evening a segregated, impoverished, largely self-taught performer from Missouri had become the most famous Black woman in the world. That single fact tends to dominate every retelling of Josephine Baker's life, the sensational Paris debut in *La Revue Negre*, the banana skirt, the *Danse Sauvage*, the scandal and the celebrity that followed. It is real, and it matters, but it is also the smallest part of a life that ran through two world wars, a spy network, a civil rights movement, and a twelve-child adopted family assembled as a deliberate political statement, before it ran out.

FROM ST. LOUIS TO A DIFFERENT COUNTRY ENTIRELY

Freda Josephine McDonald was born in St. Louis in 1906, into a poverty severe enough that she later described sleeping in cardboard shelters as a child and working as a domestic servant for white families by the age of eight, including at least one household where she recalled being scalded by an employer as punishment for using too much soap. She witnessed the East St. Louis race riot of 1917 as a child, watching her neighborhood burn from across the river as white mobs killed dozens of Black residents and destroyed entire blocks of homes and businesses, an event she referenced for the rest of her life as a formative wound and one she cited decades later, at the March on Washington, as the moment she understood exactly what she was up against in the country of her birth. She left school young, found work as a dancer on the vaudeville circuit, and by her late teens had made her way to New York, performing in the chorus of *Shuffle Along*, one of the first major Black-produced Broadway hits, before an offer to join a touring revue took her to Paris in 1925.

What she found in France was not a country free of racism, but a country whose racism operated differently, with more room, for a Black American performer specifically, than anything available to her at home. Paris in the 1920s had developed a genuine,

if complicated and often exoticizing, fascination with Black American culture, jazz, and performance, and Baker walked directly into the center of it. She became, within a matter of months, the toast of the city, earning more money than she had ever imagined, socializing with the era's major artists and writers, and discovering that a life largely closed to her in Missouri was, in Paris, suddenly and completely open. She became a French citizen in 1937 through marriage, a choice that was as much a political statement as a personal one, a formal renunciation of a country that had never fully claimed her.

THE PERFORMER BENEATH THE SPECTACLE

It is easy, looking back at the banana skirt and the exoticized publicity photographs Paris produced around her in the 1920s, to lose sight of the fact that Baker was a genuinely serious, technically accomplished performer whose artistry has often been flattened into a single scandalous image. She trained extensively as a dancer, absorbed and reworked the vocabulary of American jazz-age dance for European audiences who had never seen anything like it, and became, over the following decade, a recording artist, a film actress, and eventually the owner and headline performer of her own Paris nightclub, *Chez Josephine*, which she ran while continuing to tour internationally. She recorded songs in multiple languages, starred in several French films, and by the 1930s had transformed herself from a novelty sensation into a legitimate, sustained entertainment institution, one of the first American performers of any race to achieve that level of crossover success and lasting institutional presence in European show business specifically. That evolution, from spectacle to institution, required a level of business acumen and reinvention that her contemporary press rarely credited her with, more interested in the exoticized image than in the calculating, disciplined career management underneath it.

A SECOND CAREER, HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT

When the Second World War reached France, Baker did not leave. She joined the French Resistance, and the specific nature of her contribution deserves more attention than it typically receives. Using her celebrity as cover, she carried messages for French military

intelligence hidden in her sheet music and, according to later accounts, pinned inside her underwear, information that ordinary agents would have been searched and caught carrying. Her fame functioned as a kind of diplomatic immunity; customs officials and border guards wanted her autograph, not her secrets, and she used that mismatch of assumptions to move information across borders that would have been impossible for a less recognizable courier. Jacques Abtey, the French military intelligence officer who recruited her, later wrote that her celebrity gave her access to diplomatic receptions, embassy parties, and high-level social gatherings across Europe where sensitive conversations occurred freely around a guest nobody suspected of listening carefully. She performed for Allied troops throughout North Africa, held the rank of sub-lieutenant in the Free French Air Force's female auxiliary, and after the war was awarded the Croix de Guerre and the Legion of Honor, among France's highest military and civilian honors, recognition rarely extended to entertainers and rarer still to women.

This is the least remembered chapter of Baker's life among American audiences, in part because it happened almost entirely outside the United States and involved a country most Americans knew her from only as a nightclub sensation. The two uniforms of this piece's title are literal: the sequined stage costume that made her famous, and the intelligence courier's plain traveling clothes that made her useful to a war effort in ways her fame alone could never have predicted.

THE RETURN, AND THE COST OF IT

Baker's relationship with the United States remained fraught for the rest of her life. She returned periodically for performances and, increasingly through the 1950s and 1960s, for civil rights work, but she encountered, each time, the same segregated hotels, the same refused reservations, the same second-class treatment that had driven her to France in the first place. In one widely reported 1951 incident at the Stork Club in New York, Baker was refused service, a slight that escalated into a public feud with the columnist Walter Winchell, who was present that evening and, in Baker's account, failed to intervene on her behalf despite their prior friendship, a falling out that damaged her standing with parts of the American press for years afterward. She refused to perform for

segregated audiences, a policy she held to consistently at a time when doing so cost her bookings and money, and she used her celebrity specifically to force venues to integrate their audiences as a condition of her appearing at all, a leverage few other performers of the era, Black or white, were positioned to exercise.

In August 1963, Baker spoke at the March on Washington, one of the only women to address the crowd that day in an event otherwise dominated by male civil rights leaders, appearing in her French Resistance uniform rather than a stage costume, a deliberate choice that placed her military service and her celebrity in the same frame in front of the largest audience of her career. She was, by that point, one of the most famous Black women alive, and she used the platform to speak directly about the discrimination she had spent decades fighting on two continents, telling the crowd that she had walked into the palaces of kings and queens and into the houses of presidents, and that she had also walked in places where she could not get a cup of coffee, a line that landed with the specific authority of someone who had genuinely lived both extremes within a single lifetime. Coretta Scott King later approached Baker about the possibility of Baker taking on a leadership role in the movement following Martin Luther King's assassination, an offer Baker ultimately declined, citing concerns for her large family's welfare and the practical difficulty of relocating her life and children permanently back to the United States after decades in France, but the fact that the offer was made at all, from within the King family itself, speaks to how seriously her civil rights work had come to be regarded by the movement's own leadership.

THE RAINBOW TRIBE

Beginning in the 1950s, Baker adopted twelve children from different countries and ethnic backgrounds, a family she called her Rainbow Tribe and raised at Chateau des Milandes, her estate in southwestern France, explicitly as a demonstration that children of different races and religions could be raised together as siblings without conflict. The children came from Korea, Japan, Colombia, Finland, France, Algeria, Ivory Coast, Venezuela, and Morocco, and Baker was deliberate in choosing that specific range, describing the family publicly as a living experiment intended to prove a political point through the ordinary daily fact of children growing up

together as brothers and sisters regardless of where each had been born. She opened the chateau to the public specifically so visitors could see the children living, playing, and being raised together, treating her own family as a piece of public political theater in service of an argument about integration that she made with her actual life rather than only with speeches. The project was, by most later accounts including those of some of the children themselves, complicated in practice, the demands of managing both a large family and a declining performing career eventually straining the estate's finances past the point of sustainability, and Baker lost the chateau to bankruptcy in the early 1970s. Princess Grace of Monaco, a friend from Baker's Paris years, stepped in with housing and financial support that allowed Baker to continue caring for her children through her final years.

A CLOSING NIGHT

Baker returned to the stage one final time in 1975, in a retrospective revue at the Paris Bobino theater celebrating fifty years since her original 1925 debut, funded in part by Princess Grace and drawing rave reviews from critics who had watched her career from its earliest days and who noted, in their reviews, that the nearly seventy year old performer still commanded a stage with the same authority she had at nineteen. Four days after the show opened, Baker died peacefully in her sleep of a cerebral hemorrhage, having performed, essentially, until the very end of her life. Her funeral in Paris drew a crowd estimated at twenty thousand people, and she was given full French military honors, cementing, in death, the formal recognition of a career that had always operated as both performance and service, often within the same gesture, often to audiences who saw only one half of what she was doing at any given moment.

In 2021, Baker became the first Black woman inducted into the Pantheon in Paris, France's mausoleum for its most honored citizens, joining a small number of figures recognized as having shaped the nation's history and identity, among them Victor Hugo, Marie Curie, and Voltaire. The induction ceremony, attended by French President Emmanuel Macron, drew renewed international attention to the full breadth of her life's work, prompting a wave of American coverage that treated her intelligence career

and civil rights work as newly discovered facts rather than the well documented history they had always been, a small, telling illustration of how thoroughly the banana skirt image had crowded out everything else in the popular American memory of her. It is a fitting final resting place for a woman who left the country of her birth because it would not let her be everything she was, and who spent the rest of her life proving, across a stage career, a intelligence career, and a civil rights career that rarely overlapped in the public imagination, that the categories audiences tried to put her in were never large enough to hold her.





DANNY KAYE

The Triple Threat

For a certain generation, Danny Kaye arrived in three separate doors that all turned out to lead into the same room. First came the television screen, where a lanky, rubber-faced man sang about an inchworm measuring marigolds, indifferent to their beauty, and somehow made a children's song feel like philosophy. Then came the swashbuckling comedy of *The Court Jester*, where a man who could not fence, could not joust, and could barely keep his own disguises straight nonetheless became, through will and wit alone, the hero of the piece. And finally came *White Christmas*, where the manic energy of the earlier work settled into something warmer, more sentimental, the natural resting place of a performer who had spent two decades proving he could do absolutely anything asked of him.

Three different Danny Kayes, and yet the same man throughout. That consistency, across genres and decades and tonal registers, is the first thing worth understanding about him. He was not an actor who happened to sing, or a singer who happened to dance. He was, by any honest accounting, a triple threat in the fullest sense the term allows, and the industry around him spent thirty years trying to figure out exactly what to do with a talent that large.

THE MAKING OF A PERFORMER

David Daniel Kaminsky was born in Brooklyn in 1911, the son of Ukrainian Jewish immigrants, and by his own account discovered early that he could make people laugh without entirely understanding why. He left high school without graduating, worked the borscht belt circuit in the Catskills the way so many performers of his generation did, and learned his trade the old way, in front of live audiences who would tell him immediately and without mercy whether a bit worked. That apprenticeship shows in everything he did later. His comic timing was not a studio invention. It was earned on the straw hat circuit, refined over thousands of performances in front of paying customers who had no patience for anything that did not land.

The Catskills apprenticeship deserves more than a passing mention, because it shaped him in ways the polished Hollywood version of his career tends to obscure. The hotels of the borscht belt ran on volume and turnover, three shows a night, six nights a week, an audience that had paid for a vacation and wanted to laugh, not to admire technique. A performer either learned quickly what worked or found himself replaced by the following season. Kaye worked those rooms for years before anyone outside the circuit had heard his name, developing the instinct for pace and audience attention that no drama school could have taught him. He also spent time as a specialty entertainer on a cruise ship circuit and toured Asia early in his career, an experience biographers have pointed to as an early source of his lifelong ease with foreign audiences and unfamiliar cultures, a trait that would matter enormously decades later in his humanitarian work.

By the late 1930s he had married Sylvia Fine, a composer and lyricist who understood his gifts as well as anyone ever would, and the two of them built an act together that showcased something Broadway and Hollywood had rarely seen in quite that combination: a performer who could sing legitimate melody, execute precise physical comedy, and deliver rapid-fire, tongue-twisting patter lyrics with the kind of clarity most singers could not manage at half the speed. His 1941 Broadway turn in *Lady in the Dark*, in which he performed the number "Tchaikowsky," rattling off the names of fifty Russian composers in under forty seconds without dropping a syllable, made him a sensation almost overnight. Samuel Goldwyn brought him to Hollywood soon after, and the film career that followed, *Up in Arms*, *Wonder Man*, *The Kid from Brooklyn*, *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*, established him as one of the defining comic performers of the 1940s.

THE WAR YEARS

Kaye's rise to Broadway and then Hollywood stardom coincided almost exactly with America's entry into the Second World War, and like most major entertainers of the period, he devoted a substantial portion of his time and energy to wartime morale work rather than treating his growing fame as an excuse to sit the war out in relative comfort. He toured extensively for the USO and for war bond drives throughout the early 1940s, performing for servicemen at bases and

hospitals across the country and, at points, overseas, bringing the same manic energy and rapid-fire patter that was filling Broadway houses to audiences of exhausted, frightened, homesick young men who needed exactly that kind of release more than almost anyone else in the country. Contemporary accounts from those who saw him perform for troops during this period consistently describe an ability to read a room of servicemen, adjust material on the fly, and produce genuine, sustained laughter from audiences that arrived at his shows carrying considerably heavier burdens than a typical Broadway crowd, a skill that traced directly back to the unforgiving, read-the-room instincts the Catskills circuit had drilled into him years earlier.

This wartime work also cemented a habit that would define the second half of Kaye's career far more than his film work alone: the direct, unmediated encounter with audiences who were suffering, delivered not from a safe remove but in person, often in difficult or uncomfortable settings, using nothing but his own physical presence and comic timing as the entire mechanism of relief. The pattern established during the war years, entertainer travels to where the suffering actually is rather than waiting for the suffering to come to him, would resurface decades later in an entirely different context once Kaye became involved with UNICEF, and biographers have consistently drawn a direct line between the USO circuit of the early 1940s and the humanitarian ambassador role he would take on more than a decade later.

THE VESSEL WITH THE PESTLE

It is worth pausing on the tongue twisters specifically, because they were not a novelty act. They were the product of a genuine collaboration between Kaye and Sylvia Fine, who wrote the vast majority of his signature material, and they required a technical vocal control that few performers of any era have matched. The most famous of them all, the exchange from *The Court Jester* in which Kaye's character must remember which goblet contains poison, has survived as a piece of American comic writing almost independent of the film itself. The vessel with the pestle has the pellet with the poison. The chalice from the palace has the brew that is true. It is nonsense verse constructed with the precision of a locksmith, and Kaye delivers it at a

clip that makes the audience feel the character's own panic without ever losing a word to slurring or breath.

That number, and dozens like it across his film and stage career, reveal something about how Kaye approached performance generally. Nothing was thrown away. The manic energy that looked improvised was, in fact, meticulously built, rehearsed to a degree that let it appear spontaneous on screen. This is the paradox of the great physical comedians, that the appearance of chaos requires the most exacting control, and Kaye belonged in that company with Chaplin and Keaton even though his idiom was verbal as much as physical.

THE DANCER

The dancing tends to get overlooked in favor of the singing and the patter, but it should not be. Kaye trained seriously, and his film choreography, particularly in the Goldwyn pictures and later in *Hans Christian Andersen* and *White Christmas*, demonstrates real technical facility rather than the loose-limbed mugging that lesser comic performers relied on when a script called for movement. The "Choreography" number in *White Christmas*, a satirical dance sequence mocking the pretensions of modern ballet, only works because Kaye could actually execute the moves he was sending up. Parody requires mastery of the thing being parodied, and Kaye had it.

This combination, legitimate singing voice, legitimate dance training, and a gift for verbal comedy that has rarely been equaled, is what makes the term triple threat something more than a publicist's shorthand when applied to him. Most performers who earn the label are strong in one discipline and merely competent in the other two. Kaye was genuinely excellent in all three, and Hollywood built pictures specifically to showcase that range because there was no one else who could do what he did.

Hans Christian Andersen, released in 1952, is perhaps the clearest single demonstration of everything Kaye could do inside one picture. The film required him to carry an entire fable through song, through pantomime, through wordless emotional expression opposite puppets and children, and through the kind of gentle physical comedy that has to be calibrated precisely so it does not curdle into mockery of its own

fairy tale premise. Songs from that picture, "Wonderful Copenhagen" and "The Ugly Duckling" among them, remain standards of the American songbook, and the fact that a musical fantasy built around a fictionalized version of the Danish storyteller's life could work as well as it did rests almost entirely on Kaye's ability to be believable as a gentle, childlike figure without ever losing the audience's sense that a formidable comic talent was underneath the performance, holding it together.

THE TELEVISION YEARS

By the early 1960s, with his film career past its commercial peak, Kaye made the same move a number of major film stars of his generation made as the studio system itself began to fracture: he moved to television, and did so with the same total commitment he had brought to every earlier phase of his career rather than treating the medium as a step down. The Danny Kaye Show premiered on CBS in 1963 and ran for four seasons, built as a variety showcase that let Kaye deploy his full range week after week, comic sketches, musical numbers, physical set pieces, and the same unscripted, audience-facing warmth that had defined his live performing since the Catskills. The show won multiple Emmy Awards, including for Kaye's own performance, and introduced him to an entirely new generation of American households on a weekly basis in a way no single film, however successful, could have matched. It was on this program, and not in any of his feature films, that many American children in the 1960s first encountered him, a demographic fact that mattered enormously a few years later once Kaye's UNICEF ambassadorship depended so heavily on his ability to be instantly recognized and trusted by exactly that audience.

The television years also gave Kaye a platform for a less manic, more conversational register than his film work had generally allowed, interview segments and quieter musical moments that revealed a warmth and genuine curiosity about his guests that stood in useful contrast to the high-energy comic persona audiences already knew from the movies. Colleagues who worked on the show later described Kaye as exacting about production details in ways that echoed the same meticulous rehearsal habits that had made his film tongue-twisters land so precisely, a performer who understood that the appearance of effortless warmth on camera required just as much preparation as the

appearance of effortless comic chaos had required a decade earlier on a Goldwyn soundstage.

A LICENSE TO FLY

Sometime in the 1950s, Kaye earned a commercial pilot's license, a genuine, rigorously tested aviation credential rather than an honorary or ceremonial title, and he maintained real proficiency as a pilot for the remainder of his life, flying his own aircraft on tours and, later, on UNICEF missions to locations commercial carriers could not or would not reach. His skill and seriousness as an aviator became well known enough within the aviation community itself that the International Federation of Air Line Pilots' Associations made him an honorary member, a recognition rarely extended to anyone outside the profession and one that reflected genuine respect from working pilots rather than a celebrity courtesy. Kaye himself treated the license with the same seriousness he brought to vocal technique or dance choreography, logging substantial flight hours and maintaining currency on multiple aircraft types well beyond what a casual celebrity hobbyist would have bothered with.

The pilot's license turned out, in retrospect, to be one of the more consequential personal investments of his life, since it gave him, once his UNICEF work began in earnest, a capability almost no other celebrity ambassador of the era possessed: the ability to personally fly himself, along with relief personnel and supplies, into locations that would otherwise have required waiting on commercial or military transport that was frequently unavailable, delayed, or entirely absent from the more remote postings his ambassadorial work took him to. Footage of Kaye arriving at foreign airfields in full pilot's uniform, having flown the aircraft himself rather than simply been flown to the destination, remains among the most striking visual evidence of exactly how literally he took the responsibilities of the role.

AWARDS, HONORS, AND A CAREER OFFICIALLY RECOGNIZED

Kaye's body of work received formal recognition across multiple registers over the course of his career, honors that reflect both his performing artistry and, increasingly in his later years, his humanitarian work. The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences awarded him an honorary Academy Award in 1954,

citing his unique talents, service to the Academy, and his contribution to the international goodwill of the industry, a citation notable for explicitly acknowledging humanitarian impact alongside pure performing achievement even that early in his career. In 1982 he received the Jean Hersholt Humanitarian Award, the Academy's highest honor for humanitarian service among industry figures, a recognition that arrived squarely in the middle of his three-decade UNICEF tenure and specifically credited that ongoing work rather than treating it as a footnote to his film career.

In 1984 Kaye was among the recipients of the Kennedy Center Honors, joining a small group of artists recognized annually for lifetime contributions to American culture, an honor that placed his triple-threat performing legacy formally alongside the country's most celebrated cultural figures. He also received a Congressional Gold Medal in recognition of his service to children worldwide through UNICEF, one of the relatively small number of entertainers ever to receive that particular distinction, and was awarded honorary degrees from several universities over the course of his life, recognition that, taken cumulatively, traces the specific arc of his career from purely comic performer in the 1940s to a figure whose public identity by the 1980s rested as much on humanitarian service as on any single film or Broadway role.

THE MARRIAGE, AND WHAT THE RECORD SHOWS

Kaye and Sylvia Fine married in 1940 and remained married, with one well-documented separation in the early 1950s, until her death in 1991. Theirs was, by every account, a genuine and lasting professional partnership. Fine wrote his material, managed significant parts of his career, and shaped the persona that made him a star. Whatever else can be said about the marriage, that creative collaboration was real and enduring.

What *The Rifle* exists to note, in the same spirit that has carried through every issue, is that the private lives of mid-century entertainers were rarely as simple as studio biographies made them appear, and Kaye's is no exception. Persistent rumors of relationships with men, including a widely repeated claim involving Laurence Olivier, followed Kaye for decades. He never addressed these rumors publicly, never

confirmed them, and never denied them in any documented, on-the-record way. Biographers have combed through the available material for seventy years and arrived at no settled conclusion, only a body of secondhand testimony, industry gossip, and the kind of careful silence that an entertainer of his stature and era had every incentive to maintain.

This publication does not traffic in certainty where the record offers none. What can be said plainly is that Kaye lived, worked, and loved within an entertainment industry that offered almost no safe way for a man in his position to be anything other than exactly what the studio biography said he was. If there was more to his private life than the official record shows, and the accumulated testimony over the decades suggests there may have been, he carried it the way so many of his contemporaries did, behind a public face constructed for a public that would not have forgiven anything else. That is worth remembering, and worth reporting, without pretending to know more than can honestly be known.

A DAUGHTER***S ACCOUNT**

Kaye and Fine had one child, Dena Kaye, born in 1946, who grew up largely in the family's Beverly Hills home and later became a journalist, writing for a range of national publications over the course of her own career. Dena has spoken and written publicly, in the decades since her father's death, about the private version of Danny Kaye that the manic public persona rarely revealed, describing a father who was, by her account, considerably more reserved and introspective at home than the frenetic screen performer audiences knew, an accomplished amateur cook and gardener who found genuine calm in domestic routines that stood in sharp contrast to the constant motion of his professional life. She has also written candidly about the complexity of her parents' marriage, describing it as a genuine partnership built on deep mutual respect and professional collaboration even as she has acknowledged, without providing the kind of definitive account biographers have long sought, that the full private truth of her father's life was never something he discussed openly even within his own family. Her reflections, offered from the unique vantage point of an only child raised inside one of the more carefully managed public marriages of the era, remain among the most frequently cited firsthand sources for anyone attempting to understand the

private Danny Kaye behind the manufactured public image.

THE LATER YEARS

Kaye's career after the classic Goldwyn period took him in directions that revealed a restless, curious mind. He became, somewhat improbably, a serious guest conductor, leading major symphony orchestras including the New York Philharmonic in benefit concerts that combined genuine musical competence with his gift for physical comedy, flipping through scores upside down, conducting with a flyswatter, all while demonstrating that he could, when the joke ended, actually lead an orchestra, a skill he reportedly developed by studying scores intensively with professional conductors rather than simply relying on natural musicality, treating the discipline with the same rigor he had once applied to Sylvia Fine's tongue-twisting lyrics. He held a small ownership stake in the Seattle Mariners in the years around the franchise's founding, an unlikely footnote for a performer best known for tongue twisters and pratfalls, and one that reflected a genuine, lifelong passion for baseball that friends and family described as one of his few purely recreational enthusiasms, largely unconnected to any professional angle. He hosted a long-running television variety program that introduced an entirely new generation, the one that found him through the small screen rather than the movie house, to his particular blend of warmth and mania. He was also, by multiple accounts from those who knew him personally, an accomplished amateur chef with a particular passion for Chinese cuisine, reportedly capable of cooking for large groups with a level of skill and seriousness that went well beyond a celebrity hobby, a passion that friends connected to the same perfectionist instinct that shaped every other discipline he took seriously across his life.

He also returned, later in life, to the stage that had made him a star in the first place, taking the lead in the 1970 Broadway musical *Two by Two*, a retelling of the Noah story, in a run notable for the injuries Kaye sustained mid-performance and his subsequent decision to perform the remainder of the run from a wheelchair, ad-libbing around the staging rather than close the show. It was, by all accounts, exactly the kind of decision the Catskills-trained instinct would produce: the show goes on, the audience gets its

money's worth, and the performer figures out the mechanics of the joke afterward.

And in the final decades of his life, he became the public face of an institution that will get its own full treatment elsewhere in this issue: the United Nations Children's Fund, for which Kaye served for more than three decades as the first goodwill ambassador in the organization's history, traveling to dozens of countries, using his own money for travel expenses, and lending a level of genuine, sustained commitment to that work that went well beyond the ordinary celebrity endorsement. That story deserves its own space, and this issue gives it one.

WHY HE STILL MATTERS

Danny Kaye died in 1987, and the entertainment landscape he worked in, the one where a single performer could headline major studio pictures, star on Broadway, host network television, guest conduct symphony orchestras, and travel the world as a humanitarian ambassador, has largely disappeared. Specialization replaced range. The generalist entertainer, capable of doing a little of everything at a professional level, has become a much rarer figure, and performers with Kaye's specific combination of gifts, the trained voice, the trained body, the verbal precision, the warmth, are rarer still.

What remains is the work itself, still capable of reaching a child who has never heard of the Catskills or the Ziegfeld Follies, still capable of making an adult laugh at a joke about poisoned goblets that is now more than seventy years old. The inchworm still measures the marigolds. The vessel with the pestle still has the pellet with the poison. And the man who made both of those things permanent fixtures of American popular culture remains, seven decades later, exactly as difficult to categorize, and exactly as worth remembering, as he was the day he first stepped in front of an audience in the Catskills and discovered he could make them laugh.

UNICEF AND THE ORANGE BOX

A History of Trick-or-Treat for UNICEF

Somewhere in the accumulated memory of anyone who grew up in postwar America, there is a small orange cardboard box with a black jack-o-lantern printed on the side, carried door to door on Halloween night alongside the usual pillowcase of candy. The box asked for coins instead of sweets, a nickel here, a dime there, dropped in by neighbors who kept a little change by the front door specifically for the purpose. Most of the children carrying those boxes had no clear idea what the letters U N I C E F actually stood for, or what became of the money once it left their hands. They only knew it was part of the ritual, as fixed a piece of the evening as the costume itself.

The story of how that box came to be on Halloween night at all runs through a global humanitarian crisis, a Presbyterian church in Philadelphia, and, eventually, one of the most beloved comic performers in American entertainment, who spent more than three decades of his life lending that small orange box a level of credibility and reach that a coin drive organized by children could never have achieved on its own.

THE FOUND CHILDREN OF A BROKEN WORLD

The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund was established by the United Nations General Assembly on December 11, 1946, barely a year after the end of the Second World War, in response to a humanitarian catastrophe that is difficult to overstate. Europe and parts of Asia were littered with displaced, orphaned, and starving children, the collateral population of a war fought by adults and inherited by the young in the form of ruined cities, broken supply chains, and a generation of infants and toddlers facing malnutrition on a continental scale. The fund's original mandate was narrow and urgent: provide emergency food and healthcare to children in countries devastated by the war, regardless of which side those countries had fought on. This last point mattered enormously and marked a genuine departure from the punitive logic

that had shaped so much of the immediate postwar settlement. Children in defeated Germany, Austria, Italy, and Japan received the same emergency assistance as children in the countries that had defeated them, on the theory, radical for its moment, that a child bore no responsibility for a war fought by a previous generation and had done nothing to deserve starvation.

The organization's first executive director, Maurice Pate, an American businessman who had spent years running relief operations in Europe, insisted from the outset that the fund operate without political conditions attached to its aid. That principle, assistance to children as a category exempt from the politics surrounding them, became UNICEF's defining institutional character and remains, to this day, the reason the organization has been able to operate inside conflicts and behind political lines that would close the door to almost any other form of international intervention.

The scale of the original operation is easy to lose sight of from a distance of eighty years. In its first years, UNICEF's work centered on emergency food distribution, most visibly a massive milk and cod liver oil program aimed at combating malnutrition and rickets among European children, delivered through local health infrastructure that was itself often barely functioning. The organization also took on a large-scale campaign against tuberculosis, administering the BCG vaccine to millions of children across Europe in one of the first truly mass vaccination efforts of its kind, a model that would later inform UNICEF's approach to immunization campaigns worldwide. None of this work was possible through government channels alone. It depended from the very beginning on voluntary contributions from ordinary people in the countries able to give, which is part of why the organization invested so early and so heavily in building direct relationships with the public rather than operating purely as a government-to-government aid mechanism.

By 1953, with the most acute emergency phase of postwar European recovery largely behind it, the General Assembly voted to make the fund a permanent part of the United Nations system, broadening its mission from emergency relief specifically tied to World War Two toward the long-term wellbeing of children in the developing world

generally. The acronym UNICEF stuck even after the organization's formal name changed to the United Nations Children's Fund, a small piece of institutional memory preserved in letters that no longer quite matched what they stood for, in the way names sometimes outlive the reasons behind them.

A CHURCH IN PHILADELPHIA

The Halloween connection begins not with the United Nations at all, but with a Presbyterian minister in Philadelphia named Clyde Allison, who in 1950 asked children in his congregation to collect money for the world's children instead of, or alongside, the candy they gathered on Halloween night. The idea was modest and specifically local, a single congregation's attempt to connect an American children's holiday to the suffering of children overseas who had nothing resembling a Halloween of their own. The children carried milk cartons rather than the orange boxes that would come later, and the total raised that first year came to a little under seventeen dollars, a sum that would strike anyone as an unlikely seed for what followed.

The idea spread by the kind of informal, church-to-church, town-to-town transmission that characterized so much of American civic life in the 1950s, one congregation hearing about another's Halloween project and adopting it, small newspapers picking up the story as a heartwarming local item, UNICEF itself eventually noticing the pattern and formalizing it into an official national campaign in 1955. The distinctive orange box, printed with the UNICEF name and a simple graphic, became standard equipment for the program shortly after, distributed through schools and churches each October, and by the 1960s Trick-or-Treat for UNICEF had become one of the most recognizable youth philanthropy programs in the country, generating, over its decades of operation, well over one hundred and seventy million dollars for the organization's work with children worldwide.

There is something worth sitting with in the fact that this entire program, one of UNICEF's most durable and beloved fundraising mechanisms for the better part of a century, began as a single Sunday school teacher's small idea about what children with full stomachs might do for children without them, on the one night of the year built entirely around asking strangers for something.

THE FIRST GOODWILL AMBASSADOR

UNICEF formalized its Goodwill Ambassador program in 1954, and its very first appointee was Danny Kaye, a choice that in retrospect looks almost inevitable but at the time represented something genuinely new: the deliberate use of a beloved entertainer's public warmth as an instrument of humanitarian diplomacy, rather than a single celebrity endorsement or a one-time benefit performance.

Kaye's involvement began with a 1949 trip to Asia, undertaken initially for professional reasons, during which he visited children in hospitals and refugee situations and reportedly found the experience impossible to leave behind once the tour ended. When UNICEF approached him a few years later, he did not treat the appointment as an honorary title to be trotted out for the occasional gala appearance. Over more than three decades, Kaye traveled to more than thirty countries on UNICEF's behalf, often to remote, difficult, and unglamorous locations that a typical celebrity ambassador of that era would never have agreed to visit, and did so at his own expense, covering his own travel costs rather than drawing on UNICEF's limited operating funds. He filmed documentary footage of children in crisis situations that UNICEF used for fundraising and public education, sat for countless interviews explaining the organization's mission to audiences who had never heard of it, and by most accounts of people who worked alongside him treated the work with a seriousness that surprised people who knew him only from the manic energy of his film career.

There is a particular piece of footage, still circulated by UNICEF decades later, of Kaye landing at an airport in a full pilot's uniform, having become a licensed pilot specifically so he could personally fly relief supplies and personnel into locations that commercial carriers would not or could not reach. It is the kind of detail that could read as a publicity stunt in a lesser context, and in Kaye's case reads instead as consistent with everything else known about how literally he took the assignment.

What made Kaye particularly effective in the role, according to UNICEF's own institutional history, was precisely the skill set examined elsewhere in this issue: the physical comedian's ability to connect instantly and wordlessly with children regardless of language barrier, using pratfalls, funny faces, and the

same rubber-limbed physicality that had made him a Hollywood star to put frightened, traumatized, or simply shy children at ease in front of a camera and a stranger. A UNICEF fundraising appeal is, at its core, an attempt to make a distant child's suffering feel immediate and real to someone thousands of miles away with a checkbook. Kaye's gift, the same one Sylvia Fine had built an entire performing career around, turned out to translate directly into exactly that kind of connection, just aimed at a different purpose than a Broadway stage.

Kaye's UNICEF work continued essentially without interruption until his death in 1987, and the organization has cited his tenure repeatedly as the model against which every subsequent celebrity ambassador appointment, and there have since been dozens across film, music, and sports, has been measured. Few, by UNICEF's own account, matched the depth and duration of his personal commitment.

THE BOX AND THE AMBASSADOR, TOGETHER

It is worth noting plainly that Trick-or-Treat for UNICEF and Danny Kaye's goodwill ambassadorship developed on largely parallel, independent tracks, the former growing out of a Philadelphia congregation, the latter out of Kaye's own 1949 trip to Asia, and the two were not originally conceived as a single program. But by the time both had matured into fixtures of mid-century American civic and entertainment life, they reinforced each other in the public imagination almost inevitably: the same organization asking American children to carry small boxes on Halloween night was also the organization whose most visible public face was one of the most trusted entertainers in the country, a man audiences already associated with warmth toward children through a decade of film and television work built almost entirely around exactly that quality.

Trick-or-Treat for UNICEF continued as an annual program for decades, evolving with the times, shifting eventually toward digital donation platforms as the physical orange box became less practical in an era of contactless payment and shrinking door-to-door trick-or-treat participation, but the core idea, that the holiday built around children asking for something might also be a moment to ask something of children, has proven durable across three quarters of a century.

Somewhere tonight, in towns not so different from the ones where this tradition began, a child will still carry one of those boxes, or its modern digital equivalent, alongside a bag already heavy with candy, carrying forward a small ritual whose origins trace back through a Presbyterian Sunday school, a United Nations emergency fund born out of the wreckage of the Second World War, and a comic actor who once learned to fly a plane so he could deliver relief supplies personally rather than simply write a check from home.

It is worth asking, seventy-five years on, why this particular pairing of holiday and cause endured when so many other mid-century charitable rituals quietly faded. Part of the answer is simply timing: Halloween already asked something of neighbors, the door was already open, the child already standing on the step. Trick-or-Treat for UNICEF did not invent a new occasion for generosity so much as it borrowed an existing one and pointed it, for just a moment, somewhere other than the trick-or-treater's own pillowcase. That small redirection, asking a child in the middle of collecting candy to also collect for another child they would never meet, may be the entire program's quiet genius, and it required no one more sophisticated than a Sunday school class in Philadelphia to discover it.



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GLENN BURKE

The Gesture That Outlived the Game

On October 2, 1977, in the Dodger Stadium parking lot, teammate Dusty Baker hit his thirtieth home run of the season, capping a milestone year that made him the first pair of teammates in Dodgers history to each reach thirty home runs in the same season alongside Steve Garvey and Reggie Smith, and Glenn Burke, waiting on deck, raised his arm over his head to greet him at the plate. Baker, unsure what else to do with the gesture coming at him, slapped it. It was, by the most widely credited account of the origin of the high five, the first time the gesture had ever been performed in a Major League Baseball game, and within a season it had spread across the Dodgers roster and out into the wider culture, becoming, within a decade, one of the most universally recognized physical gestures in American life, performed by millions of people who have never once heard the name Glenn Burke.

That the man credited with inventing one of the most joyful, uncomplicated gestures in American sports was, at the very same time, hiding one of the most consequential facts of his own life from the sport that employed him, and would be pushed out of that sport within two years specifically because that fact became too difficult for the institution to accommodate, is the entire tragedy and significance of Glenn Burke's career compressed into a single, enduring irony that outlasted the man who lived it.

A DODGER WITH EVERYTHING IN FRONT OF HIM

Burke was born in Oakland in 1952 and grew up a gifted, versatile, multi-sport athlete, drafted by the Los Angeles Dodgers in 1972 after a standout amateur career that included serious basketball scholarship offers, including reported interest from major college programs, that he turned down to pursue baseball instead. He worked his way up through the Dodgers farm system over several seasons, earning a reputation among scouts and coaches for tools that projected as genuinely exceptional: speed on the bases and in the outfield that graded among the best in the organization, a strong throwing arm, and a natural athleticism that some within the organization

compared favorably to established major league center fielders of the era. He reached the majors with the Dodgers in 1976 and quickly established himself as a talented, athletic outfielder with genuine speed and defensive range, playing a role on the 1977 and 1978 Dodgers teams that reached the World Series in consecutive years, teams built around a core that included Baker, Steve Garvey, Ron Cey, and Davey Lopes, a talented and tightly bonded roster that, by numerous later accounts including Burke's own, generally knew he was gay and, at the player level, largely did not treat it as a problem. Burke was, by multiple teammates' later accounts, a well liked and often central figure in the clubhouse, known for his sense of humor and his ease connecting across the roster, qualities that made the organization's treatment of him feel, to teammates who spoke about it later, like a betrayal of someone who had done nothing but contribute positively to the team.

The problem, by Burke's own repeated later account, sat higher in the organization. Dodgers management, and specifically general manager Al Campanis, was aware of or strongly suspected Burke's sexuality, and according to Burke, the organization went so far as to offer him money, a reported seventy-five thousand dollars, to fund a honeymoon and a marriage to a woman, an offer explicitly designed to construct a public heterosexual cover story that would make his sexuality a non-issue for the franchise, a proposal that echoes, in its basic mechanics, arrangements documented elsewhere among mid-century entertainers whose studios or handlers pursued the same solution to the same perceived problem. Burke refused, reportedly telling the team he would find a wife himself if that was truly what they wanted, but not one selected and funded by the organization as a public relations arrangement.

TRADED, AND THE REASON EVERYONE UNDERSTOOD

In May 1978, the Dodgers traded Burke to the Oakland Athletics, a move Burke, his teammates, and virtually every serious account of the trade since have understood as being substantially motivated by his sexuality rather than by baseball considerations alone, made only more pointed by the fact that the trade sent him to Oakland just as he was becoming romantically involved with the son of Dodgers executive Al Campanis, a connection that reportedly accelerated the

organization's desire to move him out of the clubhouse. The trade stunned teammates who considered it baseball malpractice on pure merit grounds alone, sending away a twenty-five year old outfielder with genuine defensive value and speed for what many analysts of the period considered a lesser return, a decision that only made full sense to those who understood what was actually driving it.

Burke arrived in Oakland to find conditions considerably worse. The Athletics were managed at the time by Billy Martin, who, according to Burke's own account, introduced him to teammates by openly using an anti-gay slur in reference to him, setting a tone of hostility that Burke described as making his final major league season substantially more difficult than anything he had experienced in Los Angeles. The Oakland organization of that period was also considerably less talented and less stable than the Dodgers had been, a losing team in the midst of organizational upheaval, which meant Burke faced both the personal hostility of his new environment and the demoralizing experience of playing out the string on a team without the competitive purpose that had defined his final Dodgers seasons.

Burke played his final major league season in 1979, his career effectively ended at twenty-seven, an age at which a player with his athletic tools would ordinarily have been entering the prime years of a long professional career rather than searching for one that would still have him. He attributed the abbreviated career directly to the hostility and organizational pressure surrounding his sexuality rather than to any decline in his playing ability, an assessment that the broader arc of his short, talented career does little to contradict.

LIFE AFTER BASEBALL

Burke came out publicly in a 1982 *Inside Sports* magazine article, becoming the first Major League Baseball player to do so, a distinction that carried enormous personal cost with almost none of the institutional or financial support that might have accompanied the same disclosure in a different era. He settled in San Francisco's Castro District, then at the height of its emergence as the center of American gay culture and community life, and became a fixture of the Gay Games, the international athletic competition for LGBTQ athletes first held in 1982, winning

medals in both the 100 meter dash and the long jump at the 1986 Gay Games in San Francisco, competing at a level that made clear his athletic ability had never actually diminished, only the institutional world willing to employ it. He also played in a gay softball league in San Francisco during these years, a lower-stakes but still competitive outlet that let him continue playing the game he loved in an environment that, unlike the major leagues, asked nothing of him beyond his ability to play.

The years that followed were considerably harder. Burke struggled with drug addiction, a struggle he later connected directly to the trauma of being pushed out of the sport he had built his entire identity around at twenty-seven, still in what should have been the prime of a long career. He was involved in a serious car accident that further limited his mobility, and spent time homeless and in the California prison system on drug related charges during a period he later described candidly in interviews as among the lowest of his life, telling one interviewer that baseball had taken away not just his job but his sense of who he was, leaving very little behind to rebuild from once the addiction and the legal trouble compounded on top of the initial loss. He was diagnosed with HIV and developed AIDS, and in the final years of his life found some support and community through the Family Housing organization founded to assist LGBTQ people in San Francisco facing homelessness and illness, a network of former Castro neighbors and fellow Gay Games competitors who helped ensure he was not entirely alone in his final years, even as his health and financial circumstances remained precarious. He died in 1995 at the age of forty-two, having lived to see his own story begin, just barely, to receive the wider recognition it had been denied during his playing career, though the full weight of that recognition would arrive only after his death.

RECOGNITION, LATE BUT REAL

Major League Baseball's relationship to Burke's legacy has shifted substantially in the decades since his death. The league posthumously honored him at multiple points, including recognition during Pride Month observances that would have been unthinkable within the sport during his own playing career, and established the Glenn Burke Legacy Fund and recognitions tied to his name intended to support LGBTQ inclusion efforts within the sport. The

Dodgers themselves have since acknowledged and apologized for the organization's treatment of him, a reversal that arrives, as these institutional reckonings so often do, long after it could offer Burke himself any comfort or restitution. A 2010 ESPN documentary, *Out: The Glenn Burke Story*, and a subsequent 2015 Fox Sports documentary brought his story to a considerably wider audience than it had received during his lifetime, and baseball writers and historians researching the origin of the high five have, over time, increasingly credited Burke specifically, restoring his name to a piece of cultural history that had, for years, circulated without any acknowledgment of who had actually thrown that first raised hand in a Dodger Stadium parking lot in 1977. The Oakland Athletics, the team where his career effectively ended amid open hostility, later retired a commemorative recognition of Burke as part of their own Pride Night programming, a symbolic gesture that closes, imperfectly but genuinely, a loop that began with a manager using a slur to introduce him to his new teammates.

There is something worth sitting with in the fact that the gesture survived so completely while the man who created it was pushed to the margins of the sport that produced the moment in the first place. Millions of people have thrown a high five without any knowledge of its origin, a piece of pure, uncomplicated joy that has entirely outrun the story of the joyless institutional hostility that ended the career of the man who threw it first. Burke's own account of that moment in the parking lot, offered in later interviews, carried no bitterness about the gesture's anonymous global spread, only a clear-eyed accounting of everything that followed it: a short career cut down not by his talent but by an organization's unwillingness to let that talent exist alongside the truth of who he was.

Glenn Burke was, in the fullest sense, a pioneer twice over, first as an athlete gifted enough to reach the highest level of American professional sports, and second, at far greater personal cost, as the first player at that level willing to tell the truth about himself publicly, in an era when doing so meant walking away from the game rather than being permitted to stay inside it as he was. That his most enduring cultural contribution is a gesture of pure celebration, thrown up instinctively in a parking lot after a teammate's home run, rather than any single statistic from his shortened career, feels like the correct proportion for a

man whose real legacy was never really about the numbers at all. It was about what he offered the people around him, freely and without condition, right up until the institution decided it could no longer offer the same in return.



THE VILLAGE PEOPLE

Six Costumes, One Enormous Wink

For an enormous swath of the American public across five decades, the Village People have functioned as pure, uncomplicated novelty, a costume act built around a construction worker, a cowboy, a police officer, a Native American chief, a sailor, and a leather-clad biker, singing anthems that filled wedding receptions, sports arenas, and roller rinks without most of those audiences ever pausing to ask what, exactly, the joke underneath the costumes actually was. The joke, as understood perfectly well within the gay disco culture the group emerged from and was built specifically to celebrate, was never especially hidden. It was hiding, instead, in plain sight, disguised as party music catchy enough that millions of straight Americans sang along to "Y.M.C.A." at company picnics for decades without registering that the song's narrator is describing a place a young man can go to meet other men in a considerably more specific sense than the YMCA's own recreational programming literature would suggest.

THE PRODUCER*****'*****S VISION

The Village People were the creation of Jacques Morali, a French record producer who had relocated to New York in the mid-1970s and immersed himself in the city's disco scene, and specifically in the Greenwich Village gay club culture that gave the group its eventual name. Morali, who was gay himself, conceived of the group after spending time observing the specific archetypes of masculine costume and persona that recurred throughout gay clubs and gay pornography of the era, the cowboy, the cop, the construction worker, the leatherman, recognizing in these recurring figures both a genuine cultural phenomenon within gay male desire and an opportunity to build a musical act around them that could operate on two entirely different registers simultaneously depending on which audience was listening, a duality that would define the group's entire commercial existence going forward.

Working with co-producer Henri Belolo and lead vocalist Victor Willis, who portrayed the police officer and wrote or co-wrote much of the group's

biggest material, Morali assembled the six-member lineup around dancer and eventual construction worker performer Felipe Rose, whom Morali reportedly first noticed at a Greenwich Village club dressed in Native American regalia, an image that became the seed of the entire concept. The group's other original members were selected specifically to embody the remaining archetypes with the same visual and physical specificity, and the resulting act debuted in 1977 with a self-titled album that found modest initial success, built substantially around club and disco audiences already fluent in exactly the cultural references Morali was drawing on, before the group's second and third albums, *Macho Man* and *Cruisin'*, both released in 1978, established them as a genuine mainstream commercial phenomenon reaching an audience many times larger than the specific gay disco scene the concept had originated from. That crossover happened remarkably quickly, within roughly a year of the group's formation, a speed that speaks both to disco's own explosive mainstream popularity in the period and to the sheer catchiness of the material Morali, Belolo, and Willis were producing, regardless of whether individual listeners understood everything embedded in the lyrics and imagery they were dancing to.

THE HITS, AND WHAT WAS ACTUALLY BEING SUNG

"Y.M.C.A.," released in January 1979, became the group's signature and most enduring hit, reaching number two on the *Billboard* Hot 100 and becoming, over the following decades, one of the most performed and recognized songs in American popular culture, adopted by sports arenas, wedding DJs, and eventually presidential campaign rallies with an enthusiasm almost entirely detached from the song's actual point of origin. Willis has stated in later interviews that the song was written with a specific awareness of the YMCA's historic function within certain urban gay communities as a place where men could meet other men with a degree of plausible deniability the broader culture was not yet prepared to grant more explicit venues, a subtext audiences absorbing the song at face value, as an innocuous celebration of a wholesome community institution, entirely missed and, in most cases, continue to miss. The song's accompanying dance, spelling out the four letters with arm movements, became its own independent cultural phenomenon, performed at stadiums and celebrations

with no awareness whatsoever of the lyric content it was choreographed around, a physical ritual that has, in its own way, traveled even further from the song's origins than the lyrics themselves.

"Macho Man," released in 1978, operated with a similarly layered structure, presenting on its surface as a straightforward celebration of masculine physical fitness and appeal while functioning, within the gay disco context it emerged from, as a direct and specific celebration of the hypermasculine gay clone aesthetic that had become dominant within urban gay male culture over the course of the 1970s, the mustache, the tight jeans, the gym-built physique that had become, by the end of the decade, something close to a uniform within certain gay urban communities. "In the Navy," released later in 1979, pushed the group's specific brand of hypermasculine archetype into overtly patriotic territory, complete with an actual promotional partnership briefly pursued with the United States Navy for recruitment purposes, including filming portions of the song's music video aboard an actual Navy vessel with the service's cooperation, before the Navy withdrew from the arrangement amid public controversy over the group's association with gay culture, an episode that captures with unusual clarity the precise gap between how mainstream American institutions understood the group and how the group's original audience understood it, and one of the more remarkable examples in American pop culture history of a federal military branch coming within a step of actively promoting a song built, at its foundation, around gay disco iconography.

A DOUBLE LIFE IN PLAIN SIGHT

The Village People's commercial success through 1978 and 1979 placed the group in a genuinely strange cultural position: an act built explicitly around gay cultural archetypes and, at least among its core creative team, gay authorship, achieving mainstream, family-friendly, cross-generational popularity at a moment in American history when open gay identity in almost any other context carried serious professional and social risk. The group's mainstream label and management apparatus generally avoided direct public discussion of the material's gay origins and subtext throughout this period of peak commercial success, allowing millions of listeners to enjoy the music entirely on its surface level while gay audiences

who understood the references continued to embrace the group as an authentic, if commercially camouflaged, product of their own culture. Willis in particular has spoken in later decades about the strange experience of watching material he wrote with a specific, knowing audience in mind become adopted by exactly the kind of mainstream American institutions, sports leagues, family entertainment venues, suburban wedding receptions, that would have wanted nothing to do with the material's actual origins had those origins been stated plainly at the time rather than left to be inferred by whichever listeners were positioned to catch the reference.

This dynamic mirrors a pattern that recurs throughout the entertainment figures profiled across every issue of this publication: material created by and for a gay audience, successful enough to cross over into the mainstream, sustained in that mainstream position specifically by the broader public's willingness not to look too closely at what it was actually enjoying. The Village People differ from most other cases in this pattern principally in scale. Few other examples of coded gay cultural material achieved anything approaching the sheer, sustained, multi-generational commercial ubiquity that "Y.M.C.A." in particular has maintained, a song that has been performed at Republican and Democratic political events alike, played at essentially every American sporting event with any kind of between-inning entertainment programming, and absorbed so completely into mainstream American culture that its original context has become, for most listeners, close to invisible, a level of cultural saturation that puts it in genuinely rare company among any song written in the twentieth century, regardless of genre or origin.

SIX CHARACTERS, SIX PERFORMERS

Part of what made the group's visual concept work as effectively as it did was the specificity of casting behind each archetype. Felipe Rose, the Native American chief figure whose Greenwich Village club appearance inspired the entire concept, was of genuine Puerto Rican and Lakota Sioux descent, giving the costume, whatever its own complicated relationship to cultural representation and stereotype, at least some grounding beyond pure costume fantasy. Randy Jones originated the cowboy role, bringing an actual background in dance and theater to a persona built around the archetypal American Western masculine

figure. Glenn Hughes, the leatherman, arrived from a genuinely lived New York leather bar scene rather than from any theatrical background, giving that particular archetype among the most authentic grounding of any character in the lineup, and remained with the group until his death from lung cancer in 2001, the only original member to die during the group's active touring decades, a loss the surviving members addressed publicly and with evident personal grief given how long the six men had performed and toured together by that point. David Hodo played the construction worker, Alexander Briley the sailor, alongside Willis as the police officer and eventual co-founder Belolo shaping the business and creative direction from behind the scenes rather than on stage.

Each performer brought a level of commitment to the specific physicality of his archetype that elevated the act considerably beyond a simple novelty costume gimmick, treating the roles with the same seriousness a genre film actor might bring to an established type, aware that the effectiveness of the joke, and the sincerity of the tribute to gay male culture underneath the joke, depended entirely on the costumes and personas reading as convincing rather than as parody performed at arm's length from the culture being represented.

THE GROUP TODAY

The Village People, in various lineup configurations following the departure and replacement of most of the group's original members over the decades since 1980, have continued performing and recording into the present day, remaining a fixture of nostalgia tours, casino performances, state fair bookings, and novelty appearances that keep the group's original catalog in continuous rotation more than four decades after its release, a longevity few other disco-era acts of any kind have managed to sustain. Victor Willis, the original police officer and the group's primary lyricist, has been particularly active in recent decades in reclaiming and asserting his authorship of the group's biggest hits, including a public and partially successful effort to recover songwriting rights and royalties that had, for years, been credited disproportionately to producers rather than to Willis's own lyric writing, a dispute that has occasionally surfaced public disagreement between Willis and other figures in the group's history over how the

material's meaning and ownership should be understood and credited, and that has, in its own way, become part of the ongoing public record of exactly how much creative and cultural weight sat behind material so often dismissed, at the time and for years afterward, as disposable novelty pop.

What the Village People ultimately represent, across nearly five decades of continuous cultural presence, is one of the most successful and most thoroughly hidden pieces of gay cultural expression ever to achieve genuine mainstream American ubiquity, a group whose most famous song has been sung by millions of people at millions of events who never once paused to ask why, exactly, a song about a wholesome youth organization felt so specifically and enthusiastically aimed at young men looking for other young men. The costumes did the work that direct statement could not have accomplished in 1978, offering gay audiences unmistakable, joyful recognition while offering everyone else a colorful, high-energy party act built around broadly appealing American archetypes, cowboys and sailors and cops, safely legible on the surface regardless of what they signified underneath. The wink was always there. Most of America simply never noticed it winking back, and forty-five years on, still mostly doesn't, singing along at weddings and ballgames to a song whose original audience understood exactly what kind of Y they were being invited to.

HOWARD ASHMAN

The Man Who Taught the Mermaid to Sing

Every child who has ever sung along to "Under the Sea" or "Be Our Guest" has, without knowing it, been singing words written by a man who was dying while he wrote them. Howard Ashman, the lyricist and creative force behind the Disney Renaissance that produced *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and *Aladdin*, was diagnosed with HIV in 1988, the same year *The Little Mermaid* was released, and spent the final years of his life working at an extraordinary pace on the films that would define an entire generation's childhood, keeping his diagnosis private from almost everyone at the studio whose future he was, in the most literal sense, rescuing. Few figures in the history of American popular entertainment have left behind a body of work so thoroughly beloved by audiences who have almost no idea what its author was living through, or dying from, while he created it.

FROM BALTIMORE TO OFF-BROADWAY

Ashman was born in Baltimore in 1950 and developed an early love of theater and puppetry, reportedly staging elaborate puppet shows for family and neighbors as a child, an early expression of the same instinct for narrative craft and character that would define his professional work decades later. That early interest carried through his education at Boston University and Goddard College, and later graduate work at Indiana University, where he studied theater before moving to New York to pursue a career in the city's off-Broadway scene, initially working in less glamorous roles including as a proofreader and an editor to support himself while establishing his footing as a writer and director. His first major success came as the writer and director of *Little Shop of Horrors*, adapted from the low-budget 1960 Roger Corman film, which opened off-Broadway in 1982 with music by a young composer named Alan Menken, beginning a creative partnership that would define both men's careers for the next decade and produce, in *Little Shop* alone, one of the most enduringly popular and frequently revived musicals of the late twentieth century. *Little Shop of Horrors* became a genuine sensation, running for five years off-Broadway and establishing Ashman as one of the most distinctive

voices in American musical theater, known for a combination of genuine wit, structural discipline, and an ability to write songs that functioned simultaneously as character development and pure entertainment, a combination Disney would come calling for within a few years, drawn specifically by the same qualities that had made a low-budget horror comedy into an unlikely long-running theatrical institution.

Through the mid-1980s, Ashman continued developing new theatrical work and honing the same storytelling instincts that had made *Little Shop* such a distinctive success, building a reputation within New York theater circles as a director and writer with an unusually disciplined sense of how a musical number needed to function within a larger dramatic structure. It was an invitation from Disney animation head Jeffrey Katzenberg, who had seen *Little Shop of Horrors* and recognized in Ashman exactly the kind of theatrical storytelling sensibility the studio's animation division badly needed after a fallow period through the 1970s and early 1980s, that would ultimately define Ashman's legacy far beyond what his theatrical work alone might have achieved.

REBUILDING THE HOUSE OF MOUSE

Ashman and Menken's first Disney project, *The Little Mermaid*, released in 1989, is now understood by animation historians as the film that single-handedly launched what became known as the Disney Renaissance, a run of critically and commercially successful animated musicals through the 1990s that revived a studio division many in the industry had considered creatively moribund following a string of underperforming releases through the late 1970s and 1980s. Ashman did not simply write lyrics for the film. He served as a genuine creative architect of its structure, insisting on a Broadway-style musical construction, songs that revealed character and advanced plot rather than functioning as interchangeable interludes, an approach that ran directly counter to how Disney animated musicals had typically been built in prior decades, where songs often existed as pleasant but structurally disconnected diversions from the main narrative. "Part of Your World" and "Under the Sea," both Ashman and Menken collaborations, became instant standards, and "Under the Sea" won the Academy Award for Best Original Song, the first of two Ashman would win in

his lifetime. Ashman also served as the film's co-producer, a credit that reflected how far his creative authority extended beyond the songs themselves into the film's overall shape and pacing.

Ashman's next project, *Beauty and the Beast*, released in 1991, represented an even more ambitious application of the same theatrical principles, and Ashman is widely credited by those who worked on the film, including director credits that acknowledge his role explicitly, as having shaped the film's entire narrative structure, not merely its songs. He proposed the character of Gaston as a foil specifically because the story, in its earlier development stages, lacked a clear antagonist, an addition that gave the film's central conflict a human face and stakes it had previously lacked, and the film's title song and "Be Our Guest," among others, demonstrated the same gift for turning exposition and character interaction into genuinely entertaining, structurally essential musical sequences rather than pauses in the story's momentum. *Beauty and the Beast* became the first animated film ever nominated for the Academy Award for Best Picture, a milestone that owed an enormous debt to the specific Broadway-caliber storytelling sensibility Ashman had insisted on bringing to the project from its earliest development meetings.

A SECRET CARRIED THROUGH THE WORK

Ashman was diagnosed with HIV in 1988, during the production of *The Little Mermaid*, at a moment when an AIDS diagnosis carried both a near-certain terminal prognosis and a level of social stigma that made disclosure, even within the relatively more progressive entertainment industry, a genuine professional risk, particularly for someone whose primary employer was a family entertainment company built around a wholesome public image it guarded with considerable care. Ashman chose to keep his diagnosis private from almost everyone at Disney, continuing to work at the studio's Los Angeles facilities and later relocating production work to accommodate his declining health without most of his collaborators understanding the actual reason behind the accommodations. He continued writing and overseeing productions even as his health deteriorated significantly, working on *Beauty and the Beast*'s music and lyrics from a hospital bed and eventually from his home in Fishkill, New York, where key portions of the production

team, including composer Alan Menken and directors Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise, traveled to work with him directly as his ability to travel to the studio diminished, holding story meetings and recording sessions in his living room in the final months of the production.

By the time of *Beauty and the Beast*'s completion, most of his close collaborators understood what was happening, even without direct discussion of the diagnosis, and the production made increasingly overt accommodations, moving recording sessions and story meetings to Ashman's location, without ever publicly acknowledging the reason, an unspoken arrangement that let the work continue at the level of quality the film needed while shielding Ashman from a level of public scrutiny and speculation about his health that he had made clear, through his own consistent silence on the subject, he did not want. Ashman died on March 14, 1991, eight months before *Beauty and the Beast*'s theatrical release, at the age of forty. He never saw the finished film with an audience. Disney added a dedication to the film's credits reading, in part, that it was dedicated to Ashman's genius, giving a voice to a mermaid and soul to a beast, a tribute that acknowledged the scope of his contribution without directly naming the cause of his death, in keeping with the same discretion he had maintained throughout his final years of work, a discretion the studio itself, whether out of respect or its own institutional caution around the subject, chose to preserve rather than break on his behalf.

ALADDIN, FINISHED WITHOUT HIM

At the time of his death, Ashman had already begun work on *Aladdin*, including drafting several songs and shaping much of the film's early structure and tone, work that was ultimately completed by lyricist Tim Rice after Ashman's death, with several of Ashman's original songs, including "Friend Like Me" and portions of the film's opening number, retained in the finished film, a rare instance of a major animated feature's musical identity being assembled by two different lyricists working, in effect, across the boundary of the first lyricist's death. *Aladdin*, released in 1992, won Ashman a second posthumous Academy Award nomination and cemented, alongside *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast*, a body of work that had, in barely four years, rebuilt Disney's animation division from a struggling afterthought into

the commercial and creative engine that would define the studio for the following decade and beyond, a transformation that later executives and animators at the studio have consistently credited back to the specific creative template Ashman established before his death.

WHAT HE LEFT BEHIND

Ashman's influence on Disney animation, and on the American musical theater tradition more broadly, has only grown clearer with time and distance. The specific formula he insisted on, songs as structural, character-driven storytelling devices rather than decorative interludes, became the template essentially every subsequent Disney animated musical would follow, from *Pocahontas* through *Frozen* and beyond, an influence so thoroughly absorbed into the studio's creative DNA that it has become largely invisible, simply how the films are assumed to work rather than a specific innovation traceable to one collaborator's insistence on Broadway discipline. Composers and lyricists who worked at the studio in subsequent decades have spoken openly about inheriting a set of storytelling rules Ashman established, rules so thoroughly institutionalized within the animation division's culture that many who apply them today have never studied his specific working methods directly, only absorbed them secondhand through the finished films and the internal Disney culture those films produced.

Documentary treatments of Ashman's life and career, including the 2020 Disney Plus documentary *Howard*, directed by Don Hahn, have introduced his full story, including his sexuality and his AIDS diagnosis, both largely unaddressed in official Disney materials for decades after his death, to audiences who grew up on his songs without ever learning who had written them or what he had been living through while doing so. The documentary drew directly on his own recorded voice, interviews and demo recordings preserved from his lifetime, letting Ashman narrate significant portions of his own story decades after his death, a fitting final act for a man whose entire professional gift was giving voice, quite literally, to characters who could not otherwise have spoken for themselves.

What Ashman accomplished in the final three years of his life, producing, while managing a fatal illness he disclosed to almost no one at his own workplace, the

specific creative architecture that rescued an entire animation studio and reshaped American musical theater's relationship to popular film for the following three decades, stands as one of the more remarkable final chapters of any career profiled in these pages. He gave a mermaid her voice and a beast his soul while quietly losing his own life to a disease the culture around him was still largely unwilling to discuss in the open, working, by every account of those closest to him during the production, with an urgency and focus that colleagues at the time attributed simply to professional dedication rather than to the specific, private race against a terminal illness it actually was. The songs he left behind have gone on singing, in the voices of millions of children who never knew his name, for more than three decades since, carrying, inside melodies built for the youngest possible audience, the full creative output of a man who understood, better than almost anyone else working in American entertainment at the time, exactly how little time he had left to say everything he still wanted to say.

K.D. LANG

The Voice That Refused to Pick a Lane

In August 1993, k.d. lang appeared on the cover of *Vanity Fair*, seated in a barber's chair, lathered and posed as though mid-shave, while supermodel Cindy Crawford stood behind her in a swimsuit, playfully pretending to hold the razor. The image, staged and shot with full editorial deliberateness by photographer Herb Ritts, ran under the headline "k.d. lang cuts up," and became, within days of publication, one of the most reproduced and discussed magazine covers of the decade, a genuinely audacious piece of visual wit that put an openly lesbian country and pop star in a mainstream glossy magazine at a moment when almost no other performer at her level of commercial success had been willing to be photographed anywhere near that directly. The cover circulated widely enough, and generated enough conversation across both entertainment and news media, that it became a genuine cultural touchstone independent of the album cycle it was ostensibly promoting, referenced and parodied for years afterward, including in subsequent magazine retrospectives on landmark twentieth century magazine covers, as shorthand for a specific moment of newly confident, playful lesbian visibility in mainstream American media.

What made the image work, beyond its considerable visual cleverness, was that lang had come out publicly only weeks earlier, in a June 1992 interview with *The Advocate*, becoming one of the highest-profile musicians in America to do so voluntarily rather than through outing or scandal, at a career moment when doing so carried genuine and largely unpredictable commercial risk. The *Vanity Fair* cover was not a cautious follow-up. It was a full-throated, playful, entirely public declaration that lang intended to be exactly who she was without apology, staged with a wit that made the statement land as celebration rather than confession.

FROM CONSORT, ALBERTA, TO NASHVILLE***S DISCOMFORT**

Kathryn Dawn Lang was born in 1961 in Edmonton, Alberta, and raised primarily in the small town of Consort, Alberta, a rural prairie community that

shaped both her early musical sensibility and her later, deliberately theatrical relationship to country music's traditional imagery. She studied music briefly at Red Deer College before leaving to pursue performance more directly, drawn increasingly to the vocal tradition of classic country singers even as her own performance style developed a knowingly exaggerated, art-school inflected relationship to the genre's visual conventions, an aesthetic distance from pure genre reverence that would characterize her approach to nearly every style she touched across the following four decades. She began her recording career in the early 1980s fronting a band called the Reclines, a name chosen as a tribute to Patsy Cline, whose vocal influence on lang's own singing style would remain audible and openly acknowledged throughout her career, cited by lang herself in interviews across decades as the single most formative influence on how she approached phrasing and emotional delivery in a vocal line. Lang's early work leaned heavily into a campy, exaggerated, self-aware version of traditional country performance, complete with rhinestone-cowgirl styling and deliberately theatrical stage presentation, an approach that read, to some segments of the traditional country music establishment, as gently mocking rather than reverent, a tension that would follow lang throughout her uneven relationship with Nashville's mainstream country institutions even as her actual vocal talent became undeniable.

That vocal talent, a rich, technically extraordinary contralto capable of both country twang and a more expansive, classically influenced pop and torch song delivery, eventually could not be ignored regardless of how the country establishment felt about her image or, eventually, her sexuality. Her 1988 album *Shadowland*, produced by the legendary Nashville producer Owen Bradley, who had also produced Patsy Cline decades earlier, connected lang directly to the country tradition she had always claimed as her core influence, pairing her with the same production sensibility that had shaped the very recordings she had grown up idolizing, a full-circle collaboration that lent her earlier campy homages a new layer of legitimacy within the genre itself. Her duet with Roy Orbison on "Crying" the same year won a Grammy and introduced her voice to an audience considerably wider than the alternative country scene she had emerged from, pairing her still-developing mainstream profile with one of the most respected

vocalists of an earlier generation and signaling, to industry observers, that lang's talent had outgrown the novelty framing her early rhinestone-cowgirl image had sometimes attracted.

INGENUE, AND A CROSSOVER NO ONE EXPECTED

Lang's decisive commercial and artistic breakthrough came with 1992's *Ingenue*, an album that moved decisively away from country music toward a lush, orchestral pop and torch song sound built around songs of unrequited, aching longing, most famously "Constant Craving," which became lang's biggest mainstream hit, reached the top 40 on the Billboard Hot 100, and won the Grammy Award for Best Female Pop Vocal Performance. The album was, by most critical accounts, a substantial artistic departure from anything lang had released previously, trading the campy country theatricality of her earlier work for a more restrained, emotionally direct chamber-pop sensibility built around lang's own increasingly confident songwriting alongside longtime collaborator Ben Mink. The album's themes of yearning and heartbreak took on a particular resonance in retrospect once lang came out publicly the same year the album was released, listeners and critics alike recognizing, after the fact, the specific emotional register of songs written by an artist working through exactly the kind of longing the album's lyrics circled without ever naming directly.

Ingenue's commercial success gave lang a level of mainstream visibility and critical credibility that made her subsequent public coming out considerably more consequential than it would have been earlier in her career, arriving as it did at the height of her commercial relevance rather than as a footnote to a fading career, a sequencing that mattered enormously in how the announcement was received and how much attention it commanded. Had lang come out earlier, before *Ingenue* established her as a genuine mainstream commercial force, the disclosure might well have been treated by the wider entertainment press as a minor item concerning a niche alternative country performer rather than the significant cultural event it became, timed as it was to coincide with the single most commercially successful period of her career to that point.

A CAREER BUILT ON REFUSING TO CHOOSE

What distinguishes lang's career, beyond the specific historical significance of her coming out, is a consistent, deliberate refusal to stay inside any single genre category for long, a pattern that has occasionally frustrated record labels seeking a consistent commercial identity but that has produced one of the more genuinely varied and critically respected discographies of any performer of her generation, spanning country, orchestral pop, jazz-inflected standards, and roots collaborations across a body of work that resists the kind of easy single-genre summary most performers of comparable fame settle into by mid-career. Following *Ingenue*'s success, lang moved into torch song standards with 1997's *Drag*, a Grammy-winning collection built around songs referencing smoking, released in the same period she was becoming an increasingly visible advocate for animal rights and a vegetarian lifestyle. She later recorded a full album of Leonard Cohen covers, *Hymns of the 49th Parallel*, in 2004, paying tribute to a fellow Canadian songwriter whose influence on her own sensibility she has repeatedly acknowledged, and returned periodically throughout later projects to the country instincts of her earliest *Reclines*-era work, most notably with the 2011 supergroup collaboration *Sing It Loud*, formed with fellow country and Americana artists to explicitly revisit the traditional country sound she had largely set aside since her 1980s beginnings.

Her 2010 performance of Cohen's "Hallelujah" at the opening ceremony of the Vancouver Winter Olympics, delivered to a global television audience of well over a billion viewers, stands among the most watched single vocal performances in modern history and demonstrated, on the largest conceivable stage, the same combination of technical vocal command and genuine emotional transparency that had defined her work since *Ingenue*, performed without any of the visual theatricality of her early *Reclines*-era country persona, just a voice and an audience of the entire world.

BEYOND THE MUSIC

Lang's public life beyond her recording career has been marked by consistent, sustained activism, particularly around LGBTQ rights and animal welfare,

causes she has supported publicly and financially across three decades without the periodic retreat from activism some contemporaries adopted once initial visibility around their coming out faded from headlines. Her 1990 involvement in a PETA advertising campaign opposing the meat industry, released not long after Shadowland connected her more deeply to her home province's traditional cattle ranching economy, generated significant backlash in parts of rural Alberta, including reported boycotts of her music in her home province and public condemnation from local ranching organizations who felt the campaign, appearing under the slogan "Meat Stinks," directly attacked the livelihood of the community that had raised her. It was, notably, a controversy that placed lang, still years before her public coming out, in the position of weathering significant public criticism in her own community over a stance she refused to walk back despite the commercial cost, establishing a pattern of principled public commitment that would recur throughout the rest of her career whenever her personal convictions collided with commercial or regional expectations.

Lang was inducted into the Canadian Music Hall of Fame in 2013 and has received numerous other honors across her home country and internationally, including the Governor General's Performing Arts Award and, in 2018, appointment to the Order of Canada, recognition that has, over time, largely superseded the earlier tensions with the Nashville country establishment and the backlash from parts of rural Alberta that had greeted her most visible activist stances decades earlier. The same province that had once boycotted her recordings over the PETA campaign has, in the intervening decades, come to embrace her as a genuine source of national pride, a reversal that mirrors, on a regional scale, the broader cultural shift that has repositioned lang from a controversial, risk-taking outsider into one of Canada's most honored living musical figures. She remains, into the present day, an active recording and performing artist, continuing a career built consistently, from its earliest Reclines days through Ingenue and beyond, around the specific, stubborn insistence that a performer's artistic range and personal truth need not be narrowed to fit whatever single category the music industry finds easiest to market at any given moment.

What k.d. lang's career ultimately demonstrates, across four decades and multiple genre reinventions,

is that the commercial risk so many advisors and executives warned artists of her generation about, the risk of coming out publicly at the height of mainstream success, did not have to be the career-ending event the conventional industry wisdom of the early 1990s predicted. Ingenue's success, the Vanity Fair cover's cultural impact, and the sustained, decades-long career that followed all argue, cumulatively, for a different lesson entirely: that an artist's full, undisguised self, offered without apology, could be not merely survivable but genuinely, lastingly compelling to an audience finally being given the chance to hear it. Lang herself has described the decision to come out publicly not as an act of particular bravery but as simply the only version of a career she found sustainable, a framing that, whatever its modesty, understates the genuine uncertainty facing any performer choosing that path in 1992, before the substantial body of evidence her own subsequent career would go on to provide. Younger artists who have come out publicly in the decades since, across country, pop, and every other genre, have repeatedly cited lang's example, alongside the small handful of contemporaries who took similar risks in the same period, as evidence that a full and public accounting of who they were did not require abandoning the career they had already built, a debt of influence that extends well beyond record sales or chart positions into the simple, continuing fact of her visible, undiminished presence in popular music across more than three decades since that Advocate interview first ran.

JUSTIN FASHANU

The First, and For Too Long, the Only

In October 1990, Justin Fashanu became the first professional footballer in England, and the first anywhere in the world at a comparable level of the sport, to publicly come out as gay while still an active player, granting an interview to *The Sun* that ran under the headline "£1m Football Star: I AM GAY." He was, at the time, one of the more talented and well compensated players of his generation, a striker who had become, in 1981, the first Black footballer in Britain to command a transfer fee of one million pounds, a milestone that had made him a genuine national sporting figure and a source of considerable pride within Britain's Black communities years before his sexuality became a matter of public discussion. What followed his disclosure was not the gradual, complicated but ultimately survivable process of integration that later athletes in other sports would eventually experience. It was eight years of near total professional and personal isolation, ending in his death by suicide in 1998, a tragedy that stood, for more than two decades afterward, as English football's only real case study in what happened to a player who told the truth about himself inside a sport that had made unmistakably clear it did not want to hear it, a warning other players absorbed, whether consciously or not, for a full generation afterward.

A RECORD-SETTING START

Justin Fashanu was born in London in 1961 to a Nigerian father and an English mother, and was raised, alongside his younger brother John, who would himself become a well known professional footballer, in foster care and later a children's home in Norfolk following their parents' separation, an upbringing marked by considerable early instability that both brothers later discussed in interviews as having shaped their competitive drive and their complicated relationship to family and belonging throughout their subsequent careers, a shared foundation that made the eventual public rupture between them, once Justin's sexuality became a matter of national tabloid coverage, feel to those who knew them both as a particularly painful betrayal of whatever bond that shared early hardship had once forged. Both brothers developed into notable athletic talents, and Justin's

rise through the English lower and top divisions in the late 1970s and early 1980s marked him as one of the most exciting young strikers in the country, a reputation built on genuine speed, aerial ability, and finishing instinct that scouts across the top division had been tracking since his teenage years at Norwich, known for a combination of physical power and technical skill highlighted by a spectacular 1980 goal for Norwich City against Liverpool, a swerving, first-time volley from the edge of the penalty area that was later voted BBC Match of the Day's Goal of the Season, a strike still replayed decades later as one of the most memorable goals in English top-flight history and one that remains, to this day, a fixture of highlight reels celebrating the sport's greatest individual moments.

That performance and the broader promise of his early career led to his 1981 transfer to Nottingham Forest under legendary manager Brian Clough for a fee of one million pounds, making the twenty year old Fashanu the first Black player in Britain to command that price and positioning him, on paper, for a career at the very top of English football alongside a manager who had already built two European Cup winning sides at the club. The Forest years did not go as either player or manager had hoped. Clough's relationship with Fashanu deteriorated badly, marked by public friction that Fashanu and others later connected directly to rumors already circulating about his sexuality, rumors Clough addressed with a level of open hostility, including reportedly berating Fashanu directly and publicly over his private life and the company he kept away from the club, that made clear, well before Fashanu's eventual public disclosure, exactly how a significant portion of the football establishment would respond if those rumors were ever confirmed.

A CAREER SCATTERED ACROSS THE MAP

Fashanu's career after Nottingham Forest never recovered the trajectory his early Norwich City form had suggested. He moved through a long sequence of clubs across England and, eventually, the United States, Canada, and other countries, spending time at clubs including Southampton, Notts County, Brighton and Hove Albion, and West Ham United among numerous others across a well traveled but increasingly unsettled career pattern that reflected

both ordinary footballing considerations and, by Fashanu's own later account and that of numerous biographers and journalists who have examined his career since, the practical difficulty of sustaining a stable position within any single club environment once persistent rumors about his sexuality followed him from team to team. He continued to demonstrate flashes of the talent that had made him a record transfer as a young player, but the sustained top-level career many had projected for him in 1981 never materialized, a gap between early promise and ultimate career outcome that his own 1990 interview addressed directly, connecting the difficulty he had faced maintaining stable footing at leading clubs to the broader hostility he anticipated, correctly, that an openly gay footballer would face.

THE DISCLOSURE, AND WHAT IT COST

Fashanu's October 1990 interview with *The Sun*, for which he was reportedly paid a substantial sum, a detail that complicated the reception of the disclosure among some in the football and gay communities who viewed a tabloid payment as sitting uneasily alongside the courage of the announcement itself, made him the first prominent professional footballer anywhere to come out publicly while still playing. The reaction from within English football was almost uniformly hostile. His brother John Fashanu, by then also a prominent professional player at Wimbledon, publicly disowned him in the press, telling reporters he did not want to be associated with his brother and reportedly offering him money to deny the story, a rupture between the two brothers that remained largely unhealed for the rest of Justin's life and that added a layer of personal, familial rejection to the professional isolation Justin was already experiencing from clubs, teammates, and the wider football press. Managers, teammates, and football authorities offered little public support, and Fashanu found himself increasingly unable to secure the kind of stable club position that had defined even his difficult post-Forest career, a marginalization he attributed directly to homophobia within the sport's institutional culture, an assessment that the near total absence of any other openly gay professional footballer for the following two and a half decades did little to contradict.

Fashanu continued playing and coaching in various capacities through the 1990s, including spells in the United States with several regional and lower-division

clubs, but the career never regained anything resembling the trajectory his early promise had suggested, and by his final years he was working in relatively marginal coaching and playing roles far removed from the top-flight prominence his 1980 Norwich City goal had once promised, a professional decline that ran in near-exact parallel to the years following his public disclosure, a correlation Fashanu himself, in interviews given during this period, never hesitated to draw a direct line between.

A DEATH THAT BECAME A WARNING

In 1998, while working as a coach for a professional club in Maryland, Fashanu became the subject of a police investigation following an allegation of sexual assault made by a seventeen year old. Fashanu maintained his innocence and fled back to England rather than face the charges, a decision he explained in his final note as arising from a belief, shaped by everything the sport and the press had already put him through over the preceding eight years since his 1990 disclosure, that he could not expect a fair hearing once his sexuality became part of the public discussion of the case. On May 2, 1998, he was found dead in a garage in Shoreditch, London, having died by suicide, leaving behind a note that denied the allegation and expressed a belief that he could not receive a fair trial given his sexuality and the specific climate surrounding the case. He was thirty-seven years old. A subsequent investigation in Maryland, conducted after his death, found significant grounds to doubt the allegation, though the question was never resolved through the trial Fashanu did not live to face, leaving his death permanently entangled with an accusation that was never tested in court and that his note specifically and directly disputed.

For more than two decades following his death, Fashanu remained the only prominent openly gay professional footballer in the sport's modern history to have played at the top level of English or comparable international football, a genuinely startling statistic given the sheer number of professional footballers active across the world's most popular sport during that period, involving thousands of contracted players across dozens of national leagues over more than twenty years, and a statistic that football historians, journalists, and LGBTQ advocacy organizations within the sport have repeatedly cited as damning evidence of exactly how thoroughly Fashanu's specific

experience, hostility, isolation, and an early death, functioned as an unmistakable warning to any other player who might have considered following the same path. Organizations including Stonewall and various football-specific LGBTQ advocacy groups have pointed directly to Fashanu's case, and the specific chilling effect it appeared to produce across the sport for a full generation of players, as central evidence in their ongoing arguments for structural reform within professional football's institutional culture around sexuality and inclusion.

A SLOW RECKONING

English football's relationship to Fashanu's legacy has shifted gradually and incompletely in the years since his death. He was posthumously inducted into the National Football Museum's Hall of Fame in 2020, and the Premier League and various clubs have, at points, publicly acknowledged the specific failure of the football establishment to support him during his lifetime, including tributes and commemorations tied to the league's broader anti-discrimination initiatives in subsequent decades, a form of institutional reckoning that arrived decades too late to change anything about the isolation he actually experienced while alive. His brother John Fashanu has spoken in later interviews with evident regret about the public rejection he delivered in 1990, describing it as one of the great regrets of his own life and acknowledging that the pressures of the football culture both brothers were operating within at the time shaped a response he came to view very differently with the benefit of decades of hindsight, an admission that, whatever its sincerity, cannot undo the specific wound it opened at the time it mattered most.

It was not until 2022 that another top-flight professional footballer in England, Jake Daniels, came out publicly while still an active player, more than three decades after Fashanu's own disclosure, a gap that stands as its own quiet, damning commentary on exactly how long Fashanu's isolation and death functioned as the sport's only available reference point for what happened to a player who told the truth. Daniels himself has spoken publicly about the weight of Fashanu's story in his own decision-making process, describing an awareness of exactly what had happened to the man who came before him and a determination that his own disclosure, made in a considerably changed but still far from fully

welcoming football culture, would not end the same way. Justin Fashanu's goal against Liverpool is still shown, still celebrated, still called one of the finest ever scored in English football. What happened to the man who scored it, once he told the sport who he actually was, remained, for far too long, the part of the story football preferred not to show at all.



JAMES BALDWIN

The Fire He Would Not Put Out

James Baldwin left the United States for Paris in 1948, twenty-four years old, with almost no money and, by his own later account, a genuine fear that if he stayed in America any longer he would either die or kill someone. He was Black in a country that had made that fact a life sentence of a particular kind, and he was gay in a country and a Black church culture that had made that fact something closer to unspeakable, and he had concluded, correctly as it turned out, that he could not survive both truths at once inside the country of his birth, at least not without the particular distance and anonymity that only a foreign city could offer a young writer still finding his voice. The immediate trigger for the departure, by Baldwin's own account, was the suicide of a close friend, an event that crystallized for him just how narrow and dangerous the path forward in New York had become for a young Black gay writer trying to build a literary career while barely surviving financially. He would spend most of the rest of his life abroad, largely in France and later Turkey, and he would spend nearly all of that life writing directly and unflinchingly about the country he had left, becoming, from a self-imposed distance, one of the most essential American writers of the twentieth century on the exact subjects, race and sexuality, that America least wanted examined.

A HARLEM CHILDHOOD

Baldwin was born in Harlem in 1924, the eldest of what would eventually be nine children, raised largely by his stepfather, David Baldwin, a Pentecostal preacher whose harshness and religious severity shaped Baldwin's early life profoundly and whose relationship with his stepson remained, by Baldwin's own repeated account, one of the central unresolved wounds of his childhood. Baldwin's biological father remained unknown to him throughout his life, a fact he addressed only obliquely across his work, and the family lived through the deep poverty of Depression-era Harlem, an environment Baldwin later described in unsparing detail across his essays, not as a picturesque backdrop but as a genuine daily struggle for survival that shaped his understanding of American class and race as inseparable forces acting

on the same body at once. Baldwin himself became a youth preacher at Harlem's Fireside Pentecostal Assembly at age fourteen, delivering sermons with a fluency and command that later biographers and Baldwin himself traced directly to the cadence, structure, and moral urgency of his mature prose style. He left the pulpit at seventeen, a break he described as leaving the church without ever fully leaving what the church had given him: a voice built for testimony, for bearing witness, for saying difficult things to a congregation that needed to hear them whether it wanted to or not.

He attended DeWitt Clinton High School in the Bronx, a school with a notably strong literary tradition for its era, where he edited the school literary magazine, *The Magpie*, alongside classmates who would themselves go on to notable careers, and worked a series of manual labor jobs after graduation while beginning to publish essays and reviews in small magazines, building, slowly and against considerable financial precarity, the foundation of a writing career before the move to Paris gave him the distance and the desperation in equal measure to finish his first novel.

GO TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN, AND THE WORK THAT FOLLOWED

Go Tell It on the Mountain, published in 1953, drew directly on Baldwin's Harlem childhood and his stepfather's ministry, a semi-autobiographical novel that established him immediately as a major literary voice and that remains, seven decades later, a foundational text of twentieth century American fiction, praised in particular for its structural ambition, moving between a single day's church service and the accumulated family history of three generations that brought the characters to that pulpit. It was followed in 1956 by *Giovanni's Room*, a novel that took the far greater professional risk of centering an explicitly gay relationship between two white men in Paris, a subject matter so far outside what American publishing was prepared to support in the mid-1950s that Baldwin's own editor at Knopf reportedly urged him to burn the manuscript rather than publish it and damage the literary reputation *Go Tell It on the Mountain* had just built. Baldwin published it anyway, with a different publisher, and the novel has since become one of the most significant works of gay literature in the American canon, notable not only for its subject

matter but for the specific refusal, unusual for its era, to resolve its central relationship through tragedy imposed from outside as punishment for the characters' sexuality, even as the novel's own ending carries its own considerable sorrow.

Baldwin's nonfiction proved, if anything, even more consequential than his fiction. *Notes of a Native Son* (1955) and *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961) established him as one of the essential essayists of the century, collections built from magazine pieces that combined rigorous social and political analysis with a personal, confessional register almost entirely absent from serious American political writing at the time, a combination that would go on to influence essayists for generations afterward. *The Fire Next Time*, published in 1963, became a genuine cultural event, a slim book combining a letter to his teenage nephew with an extended meditation on race, religion, and the specific, urgent danger facing America if it continued to refuse an honest reckoning with its racial history. The book sold in numbers almost unheard of for a work of serious nonfiction, put Baldwin on the cover of *Time* magazine, and positioned him, whether he sought the role or not, as one of the central intellectual voices of the civil rights movement at its height, a position that brought with it surveillance from the FBI, which maintained a file on Baldwin running to well over a thousand pages, tracking his movements, associations, and public statements across decades on the theory that his writing itself constituted a form of political threat.

A DIFFICULT PLACE WITHIN THE MOVEMENT

Baldwin's relationship to the civil rights movement's mainstream leadership was genuine but never entirely comfortable, and the discomfort ran in both directions. He was close to figures including Martin Luther King and worked alongside major civil rights organizations, and he participated in a well documented 1963 meeting with Attorney General Robert Kennedy alongside other prominent Black cultural figures including the actor Lena Horne and the psychologist Kenneth Clark, a meeting that grew tense and ultimately unproductive as Baldwin and others pressed Kennedy on the federal government's inadequate commitment to civil rights enforcement, with Kennedy reportedly leaving the meeting frustrated and unconvinced, a rare public instance of

Baldwin's rhetorical persuasion failing to move its intended audience in the room, whatever effect the meeting eventually had on wider federal policy. But Baldwin's open homosexuality made him, at points, a liability in the eyes of some movement leaders operating in a period when respectability politics and the fear of providing ammunition to segregationist opponents led some organizations to keep openly gay figures, including Baldwin and Bayard Rustin, at a careful institutional distance from the movement's most visible public roles, even as both men's intellectual and organizational contributions to the movement were substantial and, in Rustin's case, foundational to the March on Washington itself.

Baldwin never stopped writing about this tension, in his fiction and in interviews across decades, describing with characteristic precision the specific loneliness of being asked to set aside part of himself in service of a cause that was, at its core, about the right to be seen and treated as a full human being. He refused the request more often than he complied with it, a refusal that cost him certain forms of institutional embrace within the movement even as it made his writing on both race and sexuality more honest, more difficult, and ultimately more enduring than work by contemporaries who made the opposite choice.

THE FINAL DECADES

Baldwin continued publishing major fiction and nonfiction through the 1960s, 1970s, and into the 1980s, including *Another Country* (1962), a novel that pushed even further into explicit territory around race, bisexuality, and sexual relationships across racial and gender lines than *Giovanni's Room* had, testing the patience of even some sympathetic critics and cementing Baldwin's reputation as a writer entirely unwilling to soften his subject matter for the comfort of any audience, Black or white, straight or gay. *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974), a novel later adapted into an acclaimed 2018 film by director Barry Jenkins, returned to a more conventionally structured narrative while retaining Baldwin's characteristic moral clarity, telling the story of a young Black couple in Harlem confronting a wrongful criminal accusation with a directness that anticipated, by decades, the contemporary conversation around mass incarceration and the criminal justice system's treatment of Black defendants. His later work, including *The Devil Finds Work* (1976), a book length essay on race and

American cinema, and *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* (1985), an extended examination of the Atlanta child murders, showed a writer whose intellectual range only continued to expand across a career that never settled into repetition or comfortable formula.

He spent his final years largely in Saint-Paul-de-Vence in the south of France, in a rambling farmhouse that became a gathering place for a wide circle of writers, artists, and friends, including Nina Simone, Miles Davis, and Josephine Baker among others who visited over the years, and continued writing and teaching, including a period as a visiting scholar at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, until his death from stomach cancer in 1987. He was sixty-three years old. Maya Angelou delivered his eulogy, and Toni Morrison wrote a widely circulated tribute in the *New York Times* describing the specific, irreplaceable quality of mind the country had lost, a loss she framed not simply in literary terms but as the disappearance of a particular kind of moral witness the nation had rarely produced before him and has struggled to fully replace since.

WHAT HE LEFT

Baldwin's reputation has undergone a significant revival in the decades since his death, driven in large part by a generation of readers, scholars, and filmmakers who returned to his work and found it addressing contemporary American crises around race and policing with a precision that made his decades-old essays read, disturbingly, as though they had been written the previous week. The 2016 documentary *I Am Not Your Negro*, built around an unfinished Baldwin manuscript and directed by Raoul Peck, introduced his work to an entirely new audience and confirmed, for many who encountered him for the first time through the film, that the specific clarity and moral seriousness of his voice had lost none of its force. Passages from his 1965 televised debate with the conservative commentator William F. Buckley Jr. at Cambridge University, in which Baldwin argued the American dream had been built at the direct expense of Black Americans, have circulated widely online in the years since, introducing his rhetorical precision and command to audiences who had never read a single page of his published work.

What Baldwin insisted on, across four decades and every genre he worked in, was the refusal to separate

the truths he was living from the truths he was writing. He would not write about race without acknowledging what his sexuality had taught him about exclusion, and he would not write about love and desire without acknowledging what his race had taught him about a country that withheld full humanity from him on two separate grounds simultaneously. That refusal to compartmentalize, to give his readers and his movement the comfortable, simplified version of himself that would have made him easier to embrace fully by either cause, is precisely what makes his work as urgent and as uncomfortable to read today as it was when he first insisted, from a self-imposed exile three thousand miles from Harlem, on telling America exactly what it did not want to hear about itself.

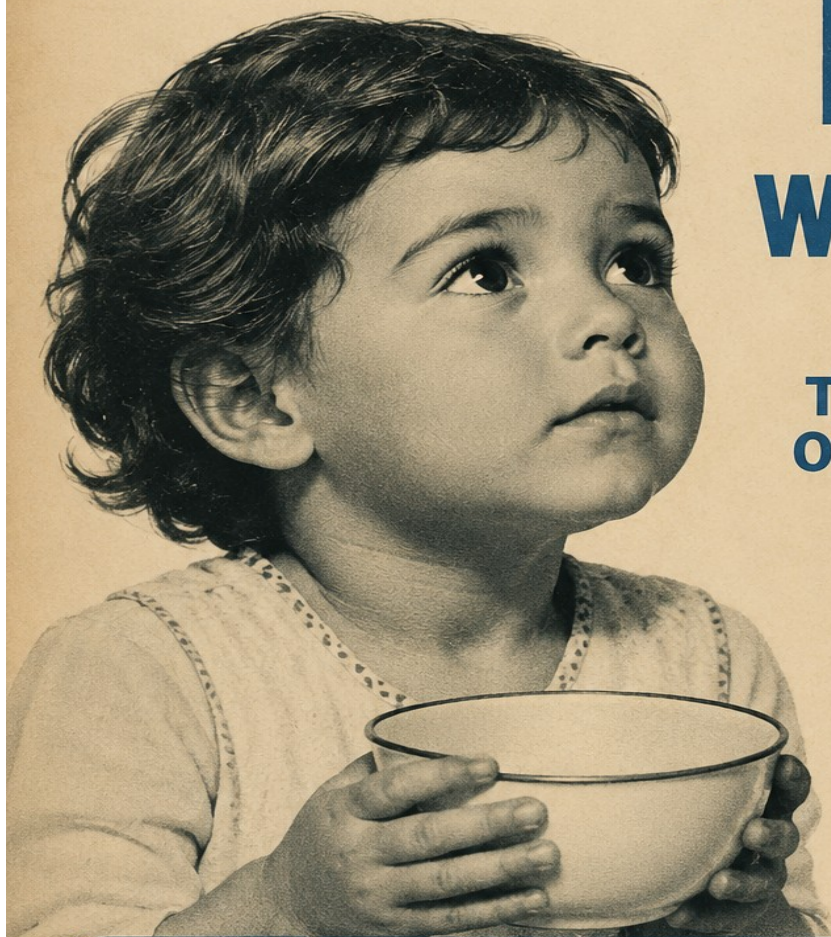


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★ SKY WATCH ★

SEPTEMBER 26, 2026

✂ HARVEST/CORN MOON ✂



The Harvest Moon shines bright near the autumnal equinox, a time of balance and abundance.

MOON PHASES

-  **New Moon**
September 11, 2026
2:05 P.M. EDT
-  **First Quarter**
September 18, 2026
9:32 P.M. EDT
-  **Full Moon**
Harvest/Corn Moon
September 26, 2026
5:09 A.M. EDT
-  **Last Quarter**
October 3, 2026
7:15 A.M. EDT
-  **New Moon**
October 10, 2026
10:55 P.M. EDT



SUN INFORMATION

Sunrise (Sept. 26) 7:06 A.M. EDT
Sunset (Sept. 26) 7:08 P.M. EDT
Day Length 12h 02m
(Shorter by 2h 55m since June Solstice)



★ **ASTRONOMY HIGHLIGHT** ★

September 22, 2026, marks the Autumnal Equinox at 2:19 P.M. EDT. Day and night are nearly equal all over the Earth. The Harvest Moon that follows is a welcome light as days grow shorter.

LOOKING UP

- ✦ Jupiter shines in the eastern sky after sunset.
- ✦ Saturn is visible in the southeast as evening deepens.
- ✦ The Pleiades Star Cluster glitters high in the autumn sky.



★ “Keep your eyes on the skies and your feet on the ground.” – Farmers’ Almanac ★



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★ SKY WATCH ★

OCTOBER 25, 2026

✂ HUNTER MOON ✂



The Hunter Moon rises as the leaves fall and the days grow short.

MOON PHASES

-  **New Moon**
October 13, 2026
11:12 A.M. EDT
-  **First Quarter**
October 20, 2026
3:57 P.M. EDT
-  **Full Moon (Hunter Moon)**
October 25, 2026
6:49 P.M. EDT
-  **Last Quarter**
November 2, 2026
9:20 P.M. EDT
-  **New Moon**
November 11, 2026
5:47 P.M. EDT



SUN INFORMATION

Sunrise (Oct. 25) 7:54 A.M. EDT
Sunset (Oct. 25) 6:29 P.M. EDT
Day Length 10h 35m
(Shorter by 1h 27m since Sept. 25)



★ **ASTRONOMY HIGHLIGHT** ★

On October 25, 2026, the Sun enters Scorpio at 6:53 P.M. EDT, marking the heart of autumn in the Northern Hemisphere. Orion is high in the south after dark—look for the bright stars Betelgeuse and Rigel.

LOOKING UP

- ✦ Jupiter shines bright in the eastern sky at dusk.
- ✦ Saturn is visible in the southeast as night deepens.
- ✦ The Orionid meteor shower peaks the night of October 21–22.



★ “Keep your eyes on the skies and your feet on the ground.” – Farmers’ Almanac ★

4300 Years of US Stories of Human Sexuality, Part I

1. Someone Offered. Someone Paid.

Long before anyone minted a coin, there was desire. Long before contracts, banks, stock markets, or subscription platforms, there was beauty, youth, and somebody willing to exchange resources for access to them. Human beings later wrapped that exchange in temple incense, court etiquette, municipal licenses, moral condemnation, and digital interfaces. The wrapping changed. The uncomfortable transaction underneath proved remarkably durable.

The oldest surviving records do not give us a complete beginning. They give us the beginning that scribes chose to preserve. Around the age of Sargon of Akkad, Mesopotamian temples were not simply places where people prayed. They were economic institutions. They stored grain, managed property, employed workers, distributed rations, and kept accounts. In the temples of Inanna, later called Ishtar, sexuality also belonged to the sacred world.

Women described as holy or set apart lived within temple systems and performed ritual functions. Later law codes protected the property and inheritance rights of consecrated women. Temple archives recorded rations, duties, and payments. The surviving evidence is fragmentary, but it shows something important: sexuality, religion, and economics could occupy the same institutional space without the sharp boundaries later societies would draw between them.

The Epic of Gilgamesh preserves that older imagination in the figure of Shamhat. Enkidu begins outside civilization, living among animals. Shamhat meets him through sexuality, and afterward he can no longer return to the old life. He enters human society. In that story, sex is not the fall from civilization. It is one of the things that brings civilization into being.

There is also silence. Mesopotamian records do not clearly document male prostitution. Gender-crossing performers and priests appear, but the surviving evidence does not allow us to turn them confidently into sex workers. That distinction matters. So does the

fact that the tablets were written overwhelmingly by men working inside male-controlled institutions. History preserves what somebody thought worth putting on clay.

That leaves us with the first lesson of this journey. The archive is not humanity. It is humanity after somebody selected what deserved to survive. Desire happened in streets, taverns, houses, barracks, palaces, and bedrooms that left no tablet behind. Four thousand years later, we are still trying to reconstruct the people who lived between the lines.

2. Athens: What Mattered Was Your Place

Athens did not invent prostitution, but it organized it with a confidence that feels startlingly modern. By the fifth century BCE, sex work was legal, taxed, and divided by status. At the upper end stood the hetairai, women valued not merely for beauty but for education, wit, music, conversation, and access to elite society. Below them were entertainers who might also provide sexual services. At the bottom were the pornai, many of them enslaved, working in brothels where the city itself could collect revenue.

The same city also gives us some of the clearest evidence for male sex workers in the ancient world. The pornoi served primarily male customers. Their existence was not hidden, but it carried consequences. An Athenian man who had sold sexual access to himself could lose the right to address the Assembly. The scandal was not simply that two males had sex. Athens cared intensely about status: citizen or slave, active or passive, buyer or bought.

That difference is difficult for modern readers because we instinctively reach for identities: gay, straight, bisexual. The Greeks did not organize the question that way. Same-sex desire could coexist with marriage, citizenship, military service, philosophy, and public life. Myth itself supplied divine examples. Zeus desired Ganymede. Apollo loved Hyacinthus. The gods were not especially interested in twentieth-century categories.

Then there is Phaedo of Elis. His later name belongs to philosophy, but his road there ran through enslavement and a brothel. The essay's surviving account describes him as captured, sold, and eventually freed after his intellectual ability was recognized by Plato's circle. Whatever later philosophy made of him, the human fact is more arresting: a person whom society had reduced to a commodity became a thinker whose name endured for more than two millennia.

Athens also understood the cruel arithmetic of beauty. A successful courtesan could earn money, property, and influence, but youth was a wasting asset. A

woman who failed to save while patrons still competed for her could slide downward through the tiers as she aged. The modern language of a career window would have made perfect sense in the Piraeus.

The Greeks therefore leave us something more complicated than a story of ancient tolerance. They accepted behaviors later societies criminalized, while maintaining hierarchies that could be vicious. They remind us that a culture can be permissive about sex and still ruthless about power.

3. Rome Scales Everything

and legal framework that Europe would inherit for centuries.

Rome had a gift for scale. Roads, armies, aqueducts, taxes, slavery, administration: if an earlier civilization had developed a system, Rome could usually make it imperial. Sexual commerce was no exception.

The Roman vocabulary itself tells the story. There were terms for young male sexual partners, older male prostitutes, and refined youths kept for pleasure. Pompeii preserved names scratched into walls, including male workers praised for their beauty. Those bits of graffiti matter because they collapse the distance between us and the ancient world. An empire becomes, for a moment, a wall on which somebody advertised or remembered a beautiful man.

The military carried the economy of conquest with it. Captives became slaves, and some young men entered sexual service just as others entered mines, farms, households, or workshops. Roman sexual freedom was inseparable from Roman domination. The person with money, citizenship, rank, or ownership possessed choices that the enslaved person did not.

Then the religious world changed. By the late fourth century, Christian emperors were remaking Roman law and public morality. The essay marks this period as a decisive turn in the treatment of male prostitution and same-sex commerce. What had been regulated, mocked, exploited, or socially ranked could now become a matter of capital punishment and public violence.

The asymmetry is revealing. Female prostitution continued under regulation while male same-sex commerce drew a new kind of theological condemnation. A society that had once asked who was citizen and who was slave increasingly asked what God permitted. The behavior did not disappear. The vocabulary around it changed, and with vocabulary came law.

Rome therefore gives us a second transformation. Mesopotamia could place sexuality inside sacred economy. Greece could organize it around status. Rome first absorbed those older arrangements and then, as its religion changed, helped create the moral

4. The Women Married to Gods

In South Asia, another temple world developed on its own terms. Girls dedicated to deities became known as devadasis, servants of God. They were trained in dance, music, ritual, poetry, and the demanding arts required to perform before temples and patrons. In some periods they held prestige. In others they were trapped inside systems that offered little meaningful choice.

The ceremony could begin in childhood. A girl was symbolically married to a deity and could not marry a mortal man. Her training might make her an accomplished artist, but the institution could also turn her sexuality into an economic resource for temple, patron, or family. The same structure could produce cultural authority for one woman and exploitation for another.

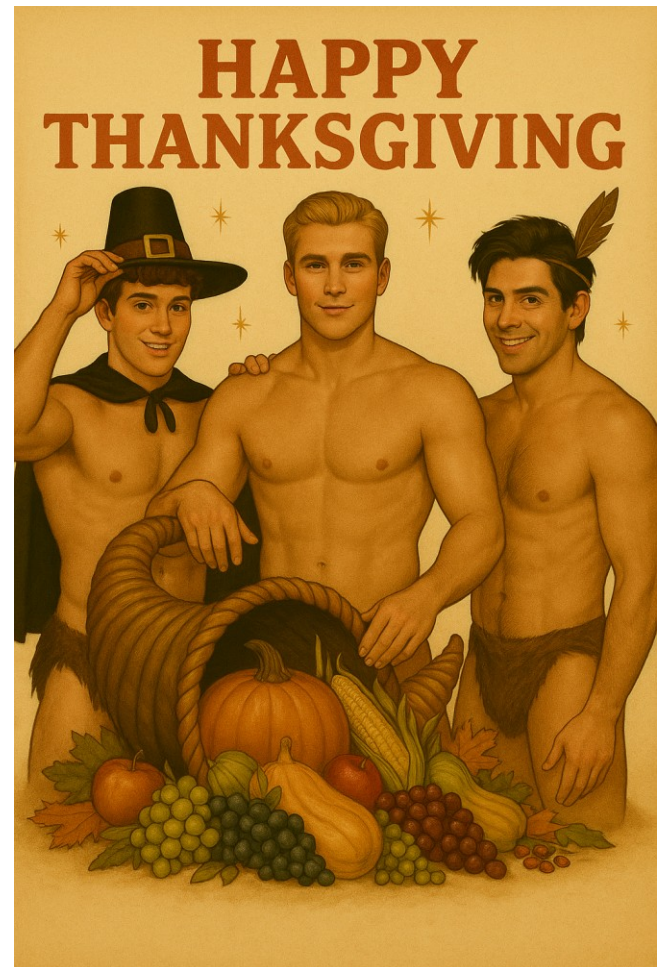
Alongside the temple tradition stood celebrated courtesans such as Amrapali, the famed bride of the city associated with Vaishali in the age of the Buddha. Centuries later, Mughal India developed the tawaif culture of Lucknow, Delhi, and Hyderabad. A tawaif's house could resemble a salon more than a brothel. Poetry, music, politics, conversation, gifts, rivalry, and courtship might occupy months before sex entered the relationship at all.

That distinction matters. Across this history, beauty is rarely sold alone. People also sell performance, attention, prestige, fantasy, access, conversation, and the feeling of being recognized by someone desirable. The digital age did not invent the parasocial relationship. It gave it Wi-Fi.

Colonial rule disrupted these worlds. Victorian authorities brought new systems of surveillance, medical inspection, and moral classification. The devadasi system was eventually prohibited, but legal abolition did not automatically give families education, employment, or a new social network. An institution could disappear on paper while the poverty and stigma that sustained exploitation remained.

India's hijra communities add another thread. For centuries, hijras held recognized ritual and social roles, including blessings at weddings and births. Modern legal recognition of a third gender restored a

measure of personhood, but discrimination in schools, families, employment, and policing has continued to push some toward sex work. A society may recognize an identity ceremonially and still deny the person a livelihood.





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★ SKY WATCH ★

NOVEMBER 24, 2026

BEAVER MOON

MOON PHASES

-  **New Moon**
November 10, 2026
12:57 A.M. EST
-  **First Quarter**
November 17, 2026
10:45 P.M. EST
-  **Full Moon**
("Beaver Moon")
November 24, 2026
3:44 P.M. EST
-  **Last Quarter**
December 2, 2026
1:24 P.M. EST
-  **New Moon**
December 9, 2026
7:53 P.M. EST

The full Moon that rises in November is called the Beaver Moon. Native American tribes set their beaver traps before the swamps and rivers freeze, a sign of preparation for the long winter ahead.

FOLKLORE & TRADITION

- Beavers are nature's builders and planners.
- This Moon reminds us to prepare our homes and families for winter.
- A time for hard work today for a cozy tomorrow.



The Beaver Moon shines bright as winter approaches and nature prepares for the cold months ahead.

SUN INFORMATION

-  Sunrise (Nov. 24) 7:13 A.M. EST
- Sunset (Nov. 24) 4:55 P.M. EST
- Day Length 9h 42m
- (Shorter by 1h 42m since Oct. 24)

★ ASTRONOMY HIGHLIGHT ★

-  On November 22, 2026, the Sun enters Sagittarius at 8:35 P.M. EST. The night sky features brilliant Jupiter in the east after sunset and the Pleiades Star Cluster high in the evening sky. Orion rises later, a sure sign that winter is near.

LOOKING UP

- Jupiter shines brightly in the eastern sky after dusk.
- Saturn is visible in the south as evening deepens.
- The Leonid meteor shower peaks around November 17–18.



★ "Keep your eyes on the skies and your feet on the ground." – Farmers' Almanac ★



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★ SKY WATCH ★

DECEMBER 23, 2026

THE COLD MOON

MOON PHASES

-  **New Moon**
December 8, 2026
4:39 A.M. EST
-  **First Quarter**
December 15, 2026
10:48 A.M. EST
-  **Full Moon**
("The Cold Moon")
December 23, 2026
12:19 P.M. EST
-  **Last Quarter**
December 30, 2026
6:28 P.M. EST
-  **New Moon**
January 6, 2027
11:56 P.M. EST

The full Moon in December is called The Cold Moon. This Moon rises long and bright on frosty nights, when the cold of winter settles in and nights are at their longest.

FOLKLORE & TRADITION

- This Moon got its name from the long winter nights and biting cold.
- It reminds us to slow down, conserve, and cherish the warmth of home and hearth.
- A time to plan ahead and care for friends, family, and neighbors.



The Cold Moon shines long and bright on the longest nights of the year, a gentle light in the deep of winter.

SUN INFORMATION

-  Sunrise (Dec. 23) 7:52 A.M. EST
- Sunset (Dec. 23) 4:49 P.M. EST
- Day Length 8h 57m
- (Shortest by 4m since Nov. 30)

★ ASTRONOMY HIGHLIGHT ★

-  On December 21, 2026, the Sun enters Capricorn at 10:02 P.M. EST — marking the Winter Solstice in the Northern Hemisphere and the shortest day of the year. After this, days slowly begin to grow longer again.

LOOKING UP

- Jupiter shines in the southeast after sunset.
- Saturn is visible in the south as night deepens.
- The Orion Nebula glows in Orion.
- Look for bright Sirius rising in the southeast.



★ "Keep your eyes on the skies and your feet on the ground." – Farmers' Almanac ★

A MEMORIAL

December 1, World AIDS Day

Every December 1 since 1988, the world has set aside a single day to remember something American public life spent much of the 1980s trying hard not to look at directly. World AIDS Day exists because the epidemic itself very nearly did not get a day, a name, or an honest accounting while it was actually killing people, and this issue closes on it deliberately, not as a footnote but as the thing the whole season has been building toward. The harvest gets brought in. The wood gets stacked. The table gets set for Thanksgiving. And then, before the year turns all the way over into winter, there is a day set aside to remember the people this country lost to a disease it was, for the better part of a decade, more comfortable ignoring than treating.

THE SCALE OF IT

By the time effective combination antiretroviral therapy became available in the mid-1990s, HIV and AIDS had killed several hundred thousand Americans, a number so large it resists the kind of comprehension a single figure is supposed to provide. It is worth saying plainly what made the American epidemic specifically, additionally cruel: it arrived in a country whose federal government, for years, treated it as someone else's problem, a disease of gay men and drug users that mainstream America could regard from a safe, moralizing distance. The Reagan administration did not publicly address the epidemic by name for years after the first cases were reported, years during which the death toll climbed from dozens to thousands, and public health funding lagged badly behind the actual scale of the emergency. Hospitals in some cities refused to treat AIDS patients. Funeral homes in some cities refused to handle their bodies. Families in some cases refused to claim them at all, leaving friends, lovers, and the communities that had formed around gay bars, bathhouses, and neighborhood associations to do the work of grieving and burying that blood relatives had abandoned.

The toll was not confined to the large coastal cities most commonly associated with the epidemic in popular memory. Rural America and the industrial Midwest lost people too, quietly, in towns where a

man who died of AIDS was as likely to be buried under a euphemism, cancer, pneumonia, an unspecified long illness, as he was to be buried with the truth attached to his name. That particular silence, common in small towns and close-knit communities across the country including places not unlike the ones this magazine calls home, is part of why the naming the quilt insisted on mattered as much as it did. A panel could say, in fabric and thread, what an obituary in a small-town paper had often been too frightened or too constrained to say in print.

This is not ancient history. It is well within living memory for a great many Americans still alive today, and it is well within the specific memory of this magazine's own project, which has spent three prior issues insisting that the twentieth century's gay history deserves the same careful, honest documentation as any other American history. AIDS is the chapter that history most wanted to file away quickly, and this magazine does not intend to let it be filed away.

A QUILT, BECAUSE THERE WAS NOWHERE ELSE TO PUT THE GRIEF

The AIDS Memorial Quilt began, as so much of the epidemic's real response did, not with any government agency but with the people actually living through the loss. In November 1985, a gay rights activist named Cleve Jones organized the annual candlelight march in San Francisco honoring Harvey Milk and George Moscone, and asked marchers to carry placards bearing the names of friends who had died of AIDS. At the end of the march, Jones and other volunteers taped those placards to the wall of the San Francisco Federal Building. Standing back and looking at the wall of names, Jones later said it reminded him of a patchwork quilt, and the image stayed with him.

Two years later, in June 1987, Jones and a small group of volunteers founded the NAMES Project Foundation in a storefront on Market Street, and began making panels in earnest, each one three feet by six feet, roughly the size of a single grave, sewn or painted or collaged by the friends, lovers, parents, and children of someone who had died, a way of grieving for people the country at large had made it difficult to grieve for openly. Some panels were plain and simple, a name and two dates. Others carried photographs, concert tickets, wedding rings, baby shoes, favorite song lyrics, entire biographies compressed into forty-

eight square feet of fabric, each one an argument, made without words, that this particular person had existed, had been loved, and deserved to be remembered by name rather than folded into an anonymous statistic.

The quilt's first public display came in October 1987, on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., during the National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights. It covered a space larger than a football field and included 1,920 panels, each one representing a single life, laid out in a grid on the ground between the Capitol and the Washington Monument while half a million visitors walked its length reading names, many for the first time seeing the epidemic rendered not as a statistic on a news broadcast but as a specific, enormous, irrefutable field of individual human losses. Volunteers read the names aloud over a public address system for the length of the display, a practice that has continued at nearly every major showing of the quilt since, an oral recitation running alongside the visual one, because a name spoken out loud does something a name sewn into fabric cannot quite do alone.

The quilt returned to Washington multiple times over the following decade as it grew, and by 1996, its last full display on the National Mall, it had grown to more than forty thousand panels covering the entire Mall from the Capitol to the Washington Monument, so large that visitors could no longer walk its full length in a single day. It has continued growing since, panels added by families and friends and former partners as new losses occurred and as older losses were finally, sometimes decades later, given the memorial they had not received at the time of death. The quilt today contains more than fifty thousand panels and remains, by weight and by scale, the largest piece of community folk art in the world, a distinction that undersells what it actually is, which is closer to the largest single act of collective grief this country has ever produced, sewn by hand, one panel and one name at a time, because no institution was going to do the remembering for them.

WHAT THE QUILT REFUSED TO DO

It is worth being specific about what made the quilt's approach radical at the time, and what still makes it worth understanding now. It refused anonymity. It refused the clinical, distancing language of case

counts and statistics that had characterized so much of the official response to the epidemic. It refused to let the dead be reduced to the categories, gay men, drug users, the categories a frightened and often hostile public had used to keep the epidemic at a comfortable moral distance. Each panel insisted on a name, a set of dates, and whatever fragment of a specific human life the people who made it chose to include, a deliberate, handmade rebuttal to years of a government and a press that had often treated these deaths as somehow less than fully human losses.

The quilt also did something practical that mattered enormously at the time: it made the epidemic visible to people who had the power to do something about it and had, until they saw it, managed not to look. Members of Congress who had voted against AIDS funding walked the quilt's length in 1987 and found panels for people some of them recognized, colleagues, staffers, family friends. The visual, physical scale of the thing did work that testimony and statistics alone had not managed to do, translating an abstraction into forty acres of specific, undeniable grief.

A CHILD'S NAME AMONG THE OTHERS

Some of the names sewn into the quilt belonged to people whose stories became, in their own time, part of the broader public reckoning with the epidemic. Ryan White, an Indiana teenager infected through a blood treatment for hemophilia, was barred from his middle school by parents and administrators terrified of a disease they did not understand, and became, before his death in 1990 at age eighteen, one of the epidemic's most visible faces specifically because his story forced a country that wanted to see AIDS as someone else's moral failing to reckon with a child who had done nothing to deserve either the disease or the treatment he received from his own community. His panel on the quilt, and the federal Ryan White CARE Act passed in his name later in 1990, remain two different, equally necessary responses to the same refusal: the panel insisting on remembrance, the legislation insisting on care for the living, both born out of a country's belated recognition of what its silence and its fear had already cost.

THE QUILT TODAY

The NAMES Project Foundation continues to maintain and grow the quilt from its current home in Atlanta, and individual sections travel for display at schools, churches, and public events throughout the year, though the quilt has grown too large for any single showing to display it in its entirety the way the 1987 and 1996 displays once did. A digital archive now allows anyone to search the quilt by name, browsing high-resolution images of individual panels from anywhere in the world, a project that extends the quilt's original purpose, insisting on names, into a format that does not require standing on the National Mall to access it. New panels continue to be submitted every year, some for people who died decades ago and are only now being memorialized by family members finally ready, or finally able, to do the work of naming them publicly.

DECEMBER FIRST, AND WHAT THIS ISSUE ASKS

World AIDS Day was established in 1988 by the World Health Organization, the first global health day of its kind, and has been observed every December 1 since, a day set aside specifically for remembrance, for continued advocacy, and for the plain, necessary work of making sure a still-ongoing epidemic does not slide back into the comfortable public silence that characterized its first several years. HIV has not been eradicated. It remains a serious and, in parts of the world and in specific communities within the United States, a growing public health concern, even as the disease has been transformed by medical advancement from a near-certain death sentence into a manageable chronic condition for those with access to proper treatment, an access that remains unevenly distributed along the same lines of race, geography, and poverty that shaped the epidemic's worst years.

This magazine has, across three prior issues, made a practice of insisting on names, on specificity, on the refusal to let mid-century and late-century gay history dissolve into vague generality. The AIDS Memorial Quilt did exactly that work, decades before this magazine existed, sewn by hand by people with considerably less institutional support and considerably more at stake than an editorial project like this one will ever have. We offer this piece, timed to sit beside the first of December the way it ought to,

in the same spirit the quilt itself was made: as a refusal to let the dead be filed away as statistics, and as a plain acknowledgment that the work of remembering them, honestly and by name, is not finished, and was never going to be finished quickly, and remains worth doing regardless.

THE FIRST SNOW

It comes at night, the way it always has,
while the porch light burns on nothing much at all,
and no one sees the moment it began,
only the hush that settles after it.

You wake to a world that has changed its mind
about the color of everything it owns.
The driveway gone. The mailbox wearing white.
The dog at the door, uncertain, testing air.

There is a quiet the summer never learned,
a quiet the autumn only gestured toward
in falling leaves and geese against gray sky.
This is the quiet that means the year is done

asking. It has decided. Here is winter,
early or late, it does not ask permission,
it simply arrives the way most true things arrive,
without an announcement, and changes what you see

out every window in the house at once.
The children will be first to call it good.
The rest of us stand a moment at the glass
remembering other years it did the same,

other porches, other dogs, other hands
that used to make the coffee before we did,
and for one white morning, before the plows,
before the salt trucks and the shovels start,

the whole street holds its breath together, still,
covered equally, the same soft weight
on every roof regardless of what waited
underneath it yesterday, uncovered, bare.

ZIPPO

VOLT '57

ECONOMY SEDAN

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ZIPPO VOLT

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dear Editors,

I have been a subscriber since Issue One and I must say, a magazine that puts Tyrone Power's beefcake history next to a serious essay on tribal court jurisdiction is either the bravest thing in publishing or the most confused. Which is it?

A Longtime Reader, Marquette

Both, obviously. We contain multitudes. So does the Upper Peninsula. If you wanted a magazine that only did one thing well, we hear Field and Stream is still accepting subscriptions.

Dear Editors,

Your Summer issue spent four pages on Tyrone Power's abs and exactly zero pages explaining how to properly split a cord of firewood. I had to figure that out myself and I nearly lost a thumb.

Concerned in Ishpeming

We have addressed this. See "Stacking the Wood," this issue. Your thumb's timing was, frankly, editorially inconvenient, but we appreciate the motivation.

Dear Editors,

The cover price says one dollar. I am fairly certain a magazine of this quality, with this much research, costs you considerably more than one dollar to produce. Are you laundering money. Is this a front.

Suspicious in Sault Ste. Marie

It is not a front. It is a labor of love, several extremely patient printers, and a founder who has strong opinions about accessibility. If we were laundering money we would like to think we would have chosen a more profitable vice than mid-century jurisdictional history.

Dear Editors,

I noticed a small error in your Spring issue. You listed Tab Hunter's film debut one year off from the commonly cited date. I have attached three sources.

A Careful Reader, Munising

We received your letter, your three sources, and the four follow-up postcards. We have corrected the internal record. We have also begun sleeping with one eye open.

Dear Editors,

Why does a magazine about mid-century gay history also run a deer hunting piece. Explain yourselves.

Puzzled, Downstate

Because the same November that puts a rifle in a Yooper's hands also puts a family around a table giving thanks, and because gay men have been hunting deer, stacking wood, and enduring Upper Peninsula winters for exactly as long as everyone else has, whether the history books mentioned them or not. We contain multitudes. We already said that. Pay attention.

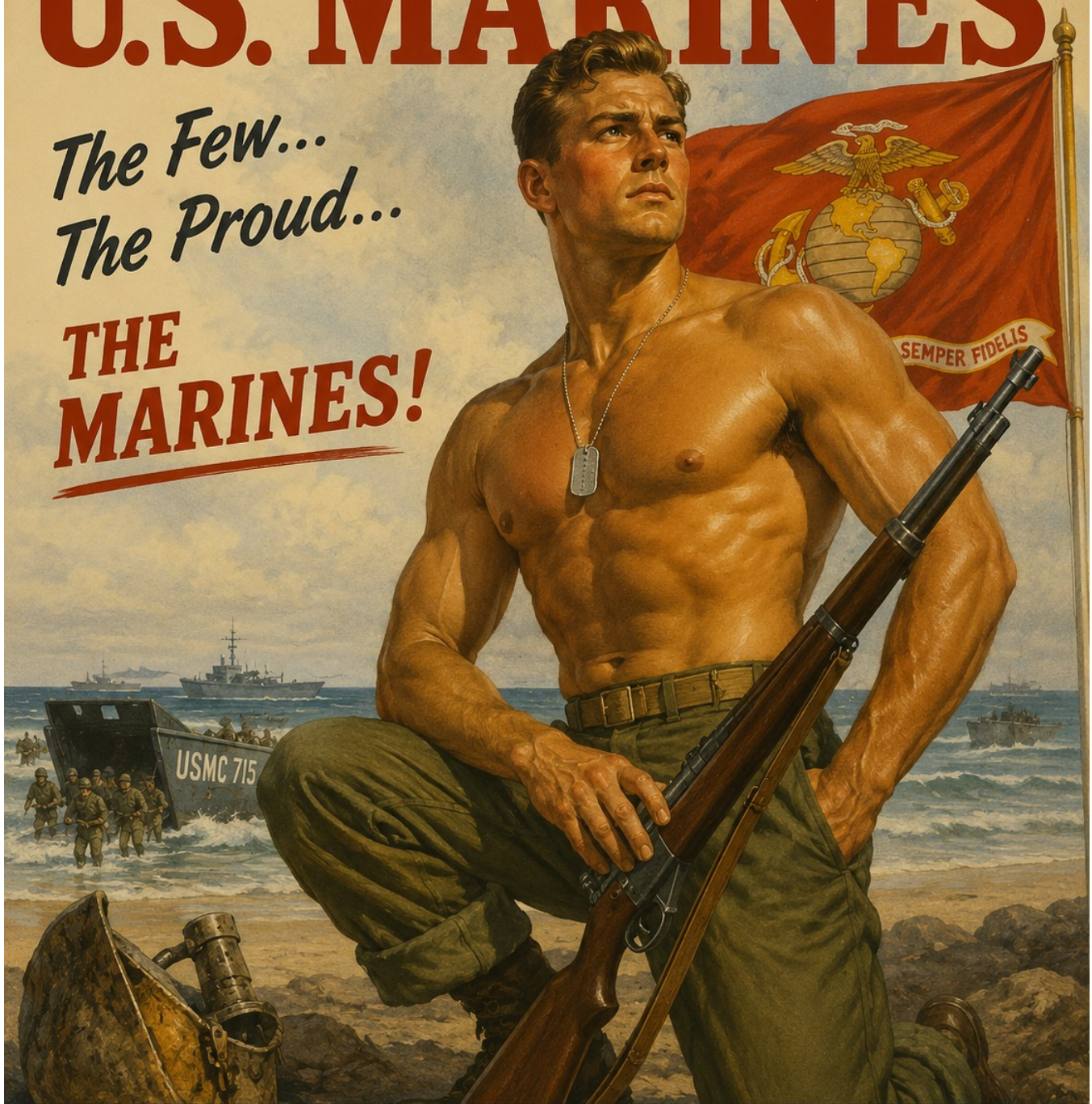
The Editors



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