

TorontoLife

RAUCOUS
PARTIES

STRIPPERS
ON THE DECK

FLAGRANT
TRESPASSING

JAM-PACKED
COTTAGES

LATE-NIGHT
FIREWORKS

REVENGE OF THE COTTAGERS

Short-term renters have taken over cottage country
with their parties, noise and boorish behaviour.

THE LOCALS ARE FIGHTING BACK

By Caitlin Walsh Miller

FIRE-CODE
VIOLATIONS

ENDLESS
NOISE

VOMIT-SOAKED
LAWNS

OVERFLOWING
SEPTICS

BACKYARD
BOUNCY
CASTLES

PLUS

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DRUG LORD:
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STORY**

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**I GAVE UP A
SIX-FIGURE
JOB TO MOVE
BACK IN WITH
MY PARENTS**

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Photograph by Liam Mogan

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74 At 21, I dropped out of university to play video games professionally. The money was great. The stress was not *By Juan Guibert*

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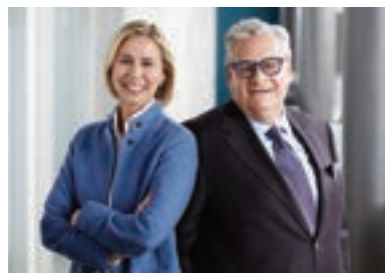


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Everyone's a Critic

Our annual roundup of the city's best new restaurants always gets chins wagging, particularly with regard to the top ranked spot.

"I've enjoyed many of Jen Agg's establishments over the years, but your number one ranking of General Public is a bit of premature enthusiasm. I visited the week your ranking came out, busy Saturday night, only bar seats available. No worries—we've always enjoyed that real estate at her restaurants. But we had a very disappointing food experience: black cod, heritage chicken, potato roulade all came out cool or cold. The couple beside us sent their tongue and tail pie back twice. The manager kept apologizing, and they comped our dessert, but the experience was far below expectations. I guess even number ones can have an off night."

—J. Hartman, *Toronto*

"Great list! Also General Public is great, but I'm not sure many people (particularly Jen Agg, from what I know of her) would want to be tagged as leading a neighbourhood gentrification charge."

—toradiano5, *Reddit*

"To be perfectly honest, 2024 was not a great year for Toronto

restaurant openings. This list is very underwhelming."

—Kogre_55, *Reddit*



Power of Attorneys

Readers were unequivocal in their response to our profile of criminal lawyer Megan Savard: they thought her choice of clients and her courtroom tactics were indefensible.

"Megan Savard is a prime example of being oblivious to the idea that perpetrators of crimes should face the consequences of their misdeeds. All our lawyers seem to be for the defence right now. People steal millions and get house arrest for two months. The Supreme Court is insisting criminals have more rights than victims. Bail has become a get-out-of-jail card for murderers, pedophiles and other scumbags. The police aren't getting support from the judicial system

"It is thinking like this that will result in the average citizen taking the law into their own hands. What do they teach at law school?

It certainly doesn't seem to be the difference between right and wrong."

—Janet McIntosh

"Your recent article describes lawyer Megan Savard's aggressive defence tactics in glowing terms. But it fails to acknowledge the other side to the story: the lasting harm those very tactics cause to survivors like me.

"Ms. Savard defended Jacob Hoggard, the man convicted of sexually assaulting me. She did not simply 'do her job.' She tried to dismantle my character, my credibility and my humanity on the stand. It was just as traumatizing as the assault itself. By presenting only Ms. Savard's narrative, your article helps her reframe those tactics as prison abolitionist work. But real abolition means harm reduction and collective care for everyone—not just the wealthy, powerful men she chooses to defend.

"Your piece reinforces a legal culture that celebrates aggressive tactics while ignoring the serious harm they cause. I hope you'll consider the real-world impact of this framing. Survivors deserve better than this."

—J. B.

"Judging from my chair while reading various accounts, it seems

Savard's clients could be found not guilty, but no lawyer can make them innocent."

—@RebelRabbit, X



Raised on Robbery

Readers found the story of Jeffery Shuman, the so-called Vaultier Bandit, and his jet-setting, bank-robbing escapades irresistible.

"A confidently told caper of a globe-trotting bank robber's rise and fall, with just the right number of allusions to *Heat* peppered in? Click."

—The Sunday Long Read



Naked Truth

Andrea Werhun's memoir about her journey from sex work to the silver screen elicited near unanimous applause.

"What an interesting dichotomy you gave us with an article about a sex worker preceded by a profile of Megan Savard. One is honest about taking money in exchange for sex while the other takes money—significantly more money!—to defend men accused of heinous sexual assaults. Ask yourself: Which one would you rather be around for more than five

minutes before you felt disgusted by what they do for a living? My pick is not the one cozying up to human rubbish like Peter Nygård and those other shining examples of men abusing power and wealth."

—Alex Blake, Toronto

"I've always loved stories that speak of a life in a matter-of-fact manner. We all tend to add a theme song to our dramatic moments as we recount our history (mine is Hoobastank's 'The Reason'). But, in reality, so many of our turning points take place with ourselves as the only witness. Those moments are usually uncinematic. Andrea Werhun's writing wonderfully puts us in the moment with her as she experienced it all."

—bana_narama57, Instagram

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From Runway to Community



Imagine 370 acres of mostly vacant land evolving into seven vibrant neighbourhoods—where homes, shops, schools, parks, and work are all within reach.

This is YZD: the call sign of the former Downsview Airport, now a growing cultural district and future home to thousands.

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Party Next Door

Tiny Township is aptly named. At just 335 square kilometres, it comprises a small collection of homes and cottages on the southeastern edge of Georgian Bay. The first time I came upon it, Covid lockdowns were turning Torontonians squirrely. I opened my laptop and reflexively typed “cottage for sale.” I wasn’t exactly in the market, but the search itself felt therapeutic. Up came a bungalow with golden sands and azure waters, the picture of tranquility, an escape from urban drama. If only.

At the time, cottage country was experiencing an unprecedented surge in popularity, fuelled by cabin-feverish city dwellers willing to pay anything for some wide open space.

Tiny, given its natural beauty and proximity to Toronto, was especially popular. One beachfront property, which had sold in 2002 for \$160,000, went for \$1.85 million to a medical professional from Toronto in 2021.

Many of these new buyers needed rental income to help cover their mortgages, and Tiny, at the time, had no rules against short-term rentals. With demand so high, buyers saw a viable financial path and signed on the dotted line.

Before long, the tranquil vibe of Tiny had changed. Revved-up weekend warriors lugging cases of beer and Red Bull and complicated speaker systems showed up in droves, ready to blow off steam.

To many locals, it was as if King West had shifted north for the summer. The backlash started, as it does, online. The area Facebook page registered complaints about loud music, raucous behaviour, flagrant trespassing and overflowing septic systems. United by collective outrage, the locals decided they weren’t going to take it any more.

A Toronto real estate broker became the test case. His family had never owned a cottage, and he viewed it as the final boss of the Canadian dream. In September of 2021, he purchased a two-storey home on a quiet cul-de-sac a short walk from Tiny’s picturesque Bluewater Beach. The monthly mortgage payment was

\$6,000, so he put it on Airbnb and began renting it out.

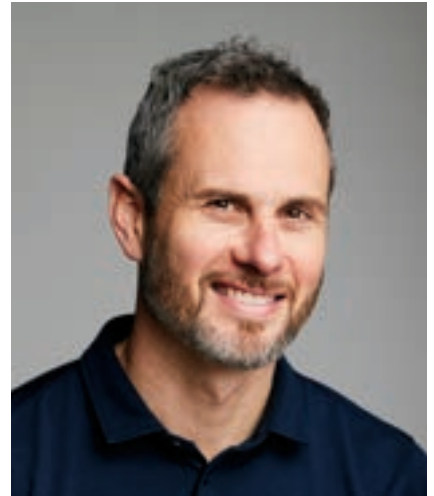
It took little time for the complaints to roll in. First a handful, then 20, then more than 100. He got nasty looks from neighbours and noticed a conspicuous quantity of dog poop on his property.

At the strident urging of locals, the township enacted a licensing program and introduced rules to limit the number of bookings in a calendar year, neither of which he obeyed. One day, he received a message from a man who wanted to book a single night to celebrate his wedding anniversary with his wife. The cottage owner allowed it—only to learn later that the renter was in fact a private investigator hired by the township to collect evidence—and he’s now facing several bylaw charges and potential fines.

He and others like him are hurt at the treatment they’ve received. They argue that they bring economic activity and jobs to the area, and they think the township’s crackdown was overkill that inordinately punishes new owners, who themselves are taxpayers. Besides, a little noise is hardly a sin.

Who’s right? In her terrific piece, “Big Trouble in Cottage Country” (page 24), Caitlin Walsh Miller poses some tricky questions: Who is cottage country for? What kinds of behaviour should be tolerated? And are short-term rentals an economic boon or a plague that needs to be eradicated?

—Malcolm Johnston
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COMING UP

A special issue celebrating 50 years of TIFF, a deep dive into the battle over Norman Jewison’s estate, a roundtable with the new faces of Canadian filmmaking and a profile of quadruple threat Matt Johnson.

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THIS CITY

“I was such a nerd. I learned guitar just so I wouldn’t get beat up”

—EVAN SOLOMON, P. 20



THE BIG PICTURE

Bot Summer

Self-driving delivery robots are hitting our streets. They’re adorable, scary and here to stay

PERHAPS YOU’VE SEEN THEM: two new self-driving delivery bots from Magna International are rolling around the city’s west end as part of a pilot program. They’re not the first to brave Toronto streets. Geoffrey, the tiny pink courier, tried as much in 2021—until the city banned him from sidewalks. And Markham has been host to four cooler-size food delivery bots since May. But Magna’s automata are of a higher, faster, bulkier order. They’ll be tailed by human chaperones armed with kill switches for the trial run, but if all goes well, they’ll be on their own—and the goal is mass market proliferation. Can these robot drivers, however cute, navigate the city’s insane traffic without incident? We wish them godspeed.

Q&A

Tech Support

Newly minted Minister of AI Evan Solomon has accepted a precarious portfolio: promoting the power of AI without letting it annihilate us all

BY COURTNEY SHEA

ChatGPT tells me your new role as the minister of artificial intelligence and digital innovation is focused on government digitization and encouraging the private sector to adopt AI. Can I get a fact check? That's partly right. Prime Minister Carney decided to create the Ministry of AI based on the idea that this tech is as transformative as the printing press. Having a dedicated ministry means we can support the tech's growth. My job is to develop a sovereign AI strategy while asking, "How can we make sure it causes more good than harm?"

Has this sovereign policy been in the works for a while?

For too long, Canada has been a farm team for the US: our best minds can't get funding, so they leave. Our new strategy will foster more homegrown research. It will also invest in high-potential companies. Ottawa has invested \$2 billion into building domestic data centres, which are essentially digital storage facilities. Today, most centres—and the data they store—are owned by American giants like Meta. We want to ensure that Canadian data benefits Canadians.

Prime Minister Carney has said that AI will build the economy of the future. Are we talking science fiction here? The internet brought about

"For too long, Canada has been like the tech farm team for the US"



the democratization of information. Now AI is democratizing intelligence: making the ability to analyze data, automate tasks and improve decision-making more accessible. It turns all of this information into the predictive models that make inventions like ChatGPT possible. So many things that used to take tons of time now happen in seconds.

Do you consider AI a threat?

AI raises important concerns relating to privacy, safety and job loss. But there's also a huge number of new jobs that have already been born from this revolution—in 2023, the AI workforce grew by 30 per cent, and today roughly 150,000 people across the country work in the field.

Which emerging AI companies are you most jazzed about?

The Toronto-based firm Ada provides personable AI customer support agents to slash wait times. There's also GlükKind, from Vancouver, which is developing a self-driving baby carriage.

Self-driving baby carriages evoke the kind of dystopian imagery that makes people not like AI.

That's fair. But AI can also invent medicines in months as opposed to years. It can build homes faster and greener. It can track the prevalence of pollution better than any human. Its potential is enormous.

Carney has been the subject of deepfakes. Have you?

That's a personal question.

I wasn't talking about porn. Neither was I.

But now that we are, how will you protect Canadians from this kind of exploitation? Google just announced

a plan to watermark images for authenticity, which seems promising. But you're always going to have people finding ways around laws. If you live in an apartment building, for instance, and someone gets beat up in a stairwell, do you then close all the stairwells? Hard cases make bad laws.

Meaning you plan to enact looser regulation? Meaning maybe the former government was too focused on drafting the perfect regulatory structure when such a structure doesn't exist. But we're still coming up with regulation. There's just no life jacket yet.

Were you always a techie?

Yes. My science teacher at Crescent School, Jim Wright, taught an incredible course called Men, Science and Technology—I realize that title is problematic—and I was obsessed. Then, early in my career, I was a co-founder of *Shift* magazine, chronicling the rise of the internet.

You're a rookie MP. Why join politics now? I've always

loved politics. I actually took a girl on a date to a political convention when I was 15. I was such a nerd. I learned guitar just so I wouldn't get beat up. As for the new job, I was living and working in New York for *GZero*, a publication on global affairs, when the prime minister called. Nothing was guaranteed, but being in the US under Trump, watching him bully Canada—that was hard to witness. I remember my wife saying something like, "We are the right people to join this fight." We just couldn't stand on the sidelines.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

COST OF LIVING

Making Moves

How a bureaucrat turned barista spends her money

BY AMANDA WHALEN

Teagan Cutajar is a 27-year-old barista, makeup artist, content creator and dog walker. After moving to Toronto from Australia in January of 2024, she worked as a disability case manager, making roughly **\$74,000** a year. But she hated the job and would finish work on Friday dreading having to go back on Monday morning. She decided that becoming a barista with various side hustles would be better for her mental health. Now, she makes roughly **\$60,000** a year and lives in a one-bedroom apartment in West Queen West, which she rents for \$2,200 a month.



“My new landlord offered a month of free rent, and that sold it for me”



REGULAR EXPENSES

Rent: \$2,200 a month.

“I’m living on my own for the first time in my life. This new place offered a month of free rent, and that sold it for me.”

Internet: \$62 a month with EBox. “It was the cheapest service I could find.”

Hydro: \$80 a month.

Phone: \$38 a month with Freedom Mobile.

Groceries: \$300 a month.

“I shop at FreshCo and Metro for bulkier items. For fruits and veggies, I go to smaller greengrocers.”

Transit: \$70 a month. “My coffee shop is only a 15-minute walk from my apartment, but I sometimes Uber home if it’s late at night.”

Clothing: \$90 a month. “I try to thrift a lot of my clothes. I like Common Sort, and if I’m in the mood to rummage, I’ll go to the Salvation Army.”

Beauty: \$55 a month. “I have a waxing membership at Foxy Box Wax Bar on Queen.”

Takeout: \$0 a month.

“I’d rather save my money for meals with friends.”

Dining out: \$400 a month.

“I’ve tried Oretta, and I like going to Pizzeria Badiali with friends and then taking the pie to Bellwoods to eat.”

Gym: \$145 a month. “Right now, I have ClassPass, an app for booking appointments. But I’m thinking of swapping to a cheaper package because my new building has a gym.”

Subscriptions: \$9 a month.

“I pay for Google Photos to store my memories.”

RECENT SPLURGES

Mother’s Day: \$80. “My mom is back home in Australia, and I sent her flowers.”

Toronto Waterfront Marathon entry fee: \$210. “It’s in October. I’m excited.”

Bulk meat order: \$270. “I just ordered a bunch of meat, including Australian beef, from Woodward Meats. This will last me about seven months.”

THE CHASE

Launch Pad

This bachelor wanted to be free from roommates. He found his new place just down the street

BY ALEXANDRA WHYTE



The Buyer: Akshay Kapoor, 29, a data scientist at a financial company. **The Story:** In May of 2023, Akshay was living in a three-bedroom Corktown townhouse with two roommates. Hoping for a place to call his own, he started looking for a one-bedroom, one-bathroom condo, but prices were too high. A year later, the market had cooled, and Akshay resumed his search, now also hoping for a balcony, a big kitchen for cooking Indian food, and a proper bedroom with full-length walls and a door. He set a budget of \$530,000 and hit the listings.



① **Front Street East**
near Jarvis

Listed at \$499,900
Sold for \$505,000

IN MAY OF 2024, Akshay saw this home across from the St. Lawrence Market. It was a one-bedroom-plus-den with a decent-size kitchen. But it had drab wall-to-wall carpeting, plus it faced an interior courtyard, which meant no view and little natural light. The complex was older—built around the year 2000—and Akshay figured his unit would require updating in the near future. He was also concerned that its value would depreciate over the long term. He decided not to put in an offer and moved on.



② **Ordinance Street**
near Wellington and Strachan

Listed at \$544,000
Sold for \$530,000

AKSHAY THEN checked out this larger, glass-tower complex in Liberty Village. It had a balcony and a view, but the kitchen had a tiny sink and very little counter space. “Indian cooking takes up a lot of space,” he says. “This kitchen wasn’t made for people who cook often. The sink wouldn’t fit more than four dishes.” The neighbourhood was also loud—construction, bars, house parties—and all of it made Akshay anxious about committing, especially given his desire for peace and quiet. He didn’t make an offer.



③ **Trolley Crescent**
near King and River

Listed at \$520,000
Sold for \$506,000

TURNING HIS attention back to Corktown, Akshay found this condo. The downsides: it had no balcony, and the bedroom was separated from the living space by a sliding door. But the place had loads of natural light, a huge kitchen and a great southwest view. And despite amenities like a pool and a sauna, maintenance fees were only \$400 per month. Akshay offered \$500,300, the seller countered with \$515,000 and they settled at \$506,000. He’s been cooking ever since. “I was lucky to stay in the neighbourhood,” he says. “The people here are so nice.”

The Buy



Dear Urban Diplomat,
 I'm a server at a buzzy downtown restaurant, and it feels like diners are ruder than ever. Last week, a customer—an influencer type—brought out a huge ring light to take videos for social media. I told her she was disturbing other patrons and asked her to put it away. She said, and I quote, "I'm working, just like you are," before grudgingly wrapping up. Entitled, right? If it happens again (and I know it will), am I correct to shut it down?

—SHOOT ME NOW, *Greenwood-Coxwell*

UD: As long as that light ended up back in her bag, it sounds like you handled it well. Her reply, while ridiculous, can't be the worst you've heard in your line of work. Forgetting this incident is the best way to safeguard your sanity. And the next time someone brings out professional videography equipment, appeal to your status as the guardian of ambiance. Tell them that they're killing the very vibe they're trying to capture.

Dear Urban Diplomat,

My sister moved to Hamilton, and she's constantly crowing about how great it is. Quality of life, prices, traffic—it's all just so much better than Toronto. But, when we recently went to Europe together, she introduced herself as a proud Torontonian to everyone she met. I confronted her, and she brushed me

off. She said that no one in Europe has heard of Hamilton (true) and that no one cares (but I do). Then we went to Edmonton, and she boasted about being a Hamiltonian again. I want to tell her to stop fine-tuning her city affiliation to maximize her cred. Any advice?

—HAMMER DOWN, *Markland Wood*

UD: While your sister's flip-flopping loyalties may be annoying, they're not egregious enough for confrontation, especially since it seems like she claimed to be Torontonian for expediency's sake. Consider that she may be so vocal in her Hamilton-boosting because she's compensating for everything she's missing now that she's left Hogtown. While Hamilton is fast becoming a very livable city, it'll never offer everything Toronto does—and she knows it.

Dear Urban Diplomat,

I'm a family lawyer, and one of my clients has an AI agent—a virtual helper to complete rote tasks. I find it outrageous that this guy is too much of a big shot to discuss his own divorce in person, and it's degrading to give vital legal advice to an unfeeling robot, especially one this incompetent. The thing is supposed to summarize meetings for him, but I can tell from his email responses that it's giving him wrong information. Any advice for how to navigate the situation without coming across as a curmudgeonly Luddite?

—TECH-NO, *Rosedale-Moore Park*

UD: You could try an argument about the perils of entrusting life decisions to novel tech, but it sounds like he's too far gone. Instead, focus on every single mistake this automaton makes. You just want your client to have good data. Eventually, he'll realize that troubleshooting a janky piece of software takes more effort than showing up.

Dear Urban Diplomat,

I suspect my friends are using me for my handyman skills. They've been inviting me up to their cottages this summer. I love the lake, but lately, these trips have all followed a familiar pattern: we unpack the cars, put away the food, and right when we're cracking our first beer, they mention a leaky sink or a dead light switch or a loose deck tie. These repairs often eat up the whole weekend, with multiple trips to the hardware store. How can I keep the cottage invites rolling without having to spend my weekends on the job?

—FIX-IT FELIX, *Downsview*

UD: A lot of work goes into hosting a cottage weekend. Some guests help out with groceries, cooking and cleaning, while others let chores happen while soaking up the sun in their own bubbles of oblivion. I'm trying to be tactful here: Are you in the latter or the former group? If it's the latter, your hosts are probably trying to wring some contribution out of your attendance, and you should oblige them. If it's the former, then they're taking advantage, and you're well within your rights to tell them you're off the clock.

Send your questions to the Urban Diplomat at urbandi diplomat@torontolife.com

A scenic view of a lake at sunset. In the foreground, a wooden dock with metal railings extends into the water. The water is calm, reflecting the golden light of the setting sun. In the background, a dense forest of tall evergreen trees stands against a clear sky. The overall mood is peaceful and serene.

BIG TROUBLE IN COTTAGE COUNTRY

BY CAITLIN WALSH MILLER

**SHORT-TERM RENTERS HAVE TAKEN
OVER, LOCALS ARE MAD AS HELL
AND TOWN COUNCILS FROM MUSKOKA
TO TINY TOWNSHIP ARE MAKING
EVERYTHING WORSE**



THE HOUSE IS A STUDY IN GREIGE, FROM ITS UNFUSSY CONCRETE PATIO STONES AND FAUX-RUSTIC LEDGESTONE VENEER TO THE PRACTICAL SLOPE OF ITS ASPHALT-SHINGLED ROOF.

Big and blocky, it's sandwiched between similarly oversized homes on a sparsely landscaped cul-de-sac, like a Monopoly property strategically plonked down to maximize ROI. The cut-and-paste interior is engineered for maximum rentability: the carefully staged comforters, accent throw pillows and framed word art all look like they were snapped up during a single lap through HomeSense. One aggressively cheerful print insists, "YOU CAN NEVER HAVE TOO MUCH HAPPY."

But the real selling point of the five-bedroom, three-bathroom property is its proximity to the beach. It abuts a sand dune in a quiet corner of Tiny, Ontario, just a three-minute walk from Bluewater Beach on the southeastern edge of Georgian Bay. The township—a low-rise stretch of cottages and year-round residences—is home to roughly 13,000 full-timers and, thanks to a quirk of geology that scientists don't fully understand, what may be the purest water on earth. It was dubbed Tiny in 1822, after a Cavalier King Charles spaniel that belonged to the wife of the lieutenant-governor of Upper Canada.

A Toronto-area real estate broker named Calvin, who asked that we not publish his last name for fear of reprisal from locals, bought the property in September of 2021 for \$1.1 million. He wanted to spend time there with his family, but it also came with a \$6,000 monthly mortgage, so he listed the home on Airbnb. In the summer months, he charged \$1,500 a night; during the off-season it was roughly half that price. The sprawling rental, advertised for up to 16 guests and outfitted with a hot tub, a sauna, a trampoline and a volleyball court, drew a mix of renters: golfers, families, weekenders from the city. Almost immediately, neighbours began to complain about the noise, the garbage, the constant turnover. In the fall of 2021, 30 guests attended a wedding on the site, flouting Covid restrictions. On two separate occasions, guests apparently tried to ignite a propane grill using charcoal, sending flames shooting into the air. The neighbours made no effort to hide their scorn, filing well over 100 complaints with the township since Calvin bought. Signs declaring "homes not hotels" were posted on the periphery of the property. According to Airbnb reviews, some locals even recorded renters while they were using the hot tub.

Calvin says he hopes to pass the place down to his kids someday, and that may well be his endgame. But he also runs a side business mentoring fledgling investors, and a big part of his advice involves short-term rentals—which he pitches as high-yield assets that deliver guaranteed returns of at least 30 per

cent. Calvin isn't the only Torontonian to have spotted opportunities in the region. During the pandemic, investors from the city descended on Tiny, hoping to turn beach access into a revenue stream. Entire strips of the town were taken over by what residents described as "ghost hotels," empty cottages run by absentee landlords, rented out every weekend to a new batch of strangers.

Locals pushed for action, and in August of 2022, the town council introduced a by-law governing short-term rentals. It required that all rentals be licensed and follow a strict set of rules, including occupancy caps and limits on how often and how long homes could be rented. When Calvin submitted an application for a licence, he mistakenly filed it under his own name, not the corporation he'd transferred the property to. This clerical error voided his application, but the township refused to refund him the \$1,500 application fee. He never reapplied.

By the fall of 2023, the town council had accused Calvin of at least 15 by-law violations, including operating without a licence, advertising without a licence, and breaching occupancy and minimum-stay rules. But licensing by-laws aren't silver bullets. Proving a violation can be difficult—by the time enforcement officers investigate, guests are often gone, and inspectors don't have access to information about how often a property is rented or to how many people.

That October, a prospective renter reached out to Calvin through Airbnb, saying he wanted to book the house for a single night to celebrate his anniversary with his wife. It was an odd request: the place was way too big for a couple, and the property typically had a two-night booking minimum. Still, Calvin accepted the booking and didn't give it much more thought. Two months later, he received an email from the township with a photo attached—a picture of an unmounted smoke alarm, taken inside his property. The anniversary guest, it turned out, was a private investigator, hired by the township to gather evidence against Calvin.

The sting was, according to the town council, a necessary tactic. At a meeting in early 2024, Tiny's chief municipal law enforcement officer, Steve Harvey, justified the approach by pointing to the volume of alleged violations at Calvin's property and the insidious spread of short-term rentals across the township. A private investigator, Harvey explained, offered certain advantages: they could book a stay, obtain receipts and snap photos, and because the hire was made through the town's lawyer, details would be protected by client confidentiality (from nosy journalists, presumably). Town officials said they use private investigators only in "extreme cases" but refused to elaborate on what constitutes "extreme." They also wouldn't disclose what the investigator found or how much the operation cost. When I tried to obtain documents related to the investigation through freedom of information requests, the township said they were in the custody of its law firm and not subject to disclosure. According to court records, Calvin now faces a total of 25 municipal by-law charges. The case is ongoing, with a pre-trial appearance scheduled for late August.

Calvin, who is Chinese Canadian, didn't grow up cottaging. When he bought the waterfront property, he felt like he was fulfilling a fantasy that has traditionally been out of reach for

many immigrant families. Now, he's Tiny's public enemy number one. He's emotionally and mentally exhausted—and so are his neighbours. In a way, so is all of cottage country. In Simcoe County, Muskoka, Kawartha Lakes and beyond, town councils, residents and hosts are clashing over how to regulate short-term rentals and how to enforce the rules. What's driving the drama? That depends who you ask. It's NIMBYism. It's classism. It's good old-fashioned racism. It's entitled property owners, entitled out-of-towners, entitled small-town politicians. It's tourism. It's capitalism. It's also the creeping panic of watching a familiar place fill up with unfamiliar people. But, any way you look at it, it's a vortex of frustrations that threatens that most Canadian of summertime pursuits: spending time by the lake.

TODAY, COTTAGE COUNTRY is a splashy summer playground for the financially buoyant, but there was a brief window when it was much more readily within the grasp of the middle class. Thanks to post-war economic growth, a Crown land fire sale, widespread car ownership and a burst of provincial infrastructure that included massive highway expansion, more people could access Ontario's 250,000 lakes. By 1960, the province had around 100,000 cottages—roughly one for every 61 residents. Then, in 1970, Ontario rolled out a new property assessment system, and many cottage owners saw their property taxes

ONE COTTAGE OWNER ACCEPTED A BOOKING FROM A MAN WHO TURNED OUT TO BE A PRIVATE INVESTIGATOR HIRED TO GATHER EVIDENCE AGAINST HIM

double and even triple. Cottage ownership was suddenly unattainable for many would-be buyers, and even those who had inherited family properties found themselves struggling to keep them. Over time, a new two-tiered pattern emerged: to help cover costs, owners started renting out their places a few weeks each year to people who wanted to participate in the tradition of cottaging but had been priced out. As renting became more common, it also became more formalized. What had once been a neighbour's cousin's referral evolved into a sub-economy of management companies and searchable listings. Then came Airbnb. While the booking platform didn't invent cottage rentals, you can bet it scaled them, branded them and made them impossible to ignore. Suddenly, anyone could book a weekend on your lake, no family friend required.

After the pandemic hit and remote work became the norm, cooped-up Torontonians fled the city for lower-density pastures. Some 64,000 residents decamped for other parts of the province, many heading north. As of 2021, two of Canada's fastest-growing communities—Collingwood and Wasaga Beach—were in cottage country; Wasaga alone saw its population jump by more than

12 per cent between 2019 and 2022. And the price of real estate followed the same trajectory. Between 2020 and 2021, recreational property values in Ontario's most popular summer spots soared, with average prices rising 35 per cent—the biggest increase in the country. Prices in Tiny rose 44 per cent, with the cost of a typical single-family home climbing from \$633,000 to \$911,000.

In 2021, rare was the day when Dan O'Rourke didn't find at least one letter in his mailbox from someone wanting to buy his house in the town's Lafontaine Beach area. Overwhelmingly, they were from people who had no intention of moving to Tiny full time. "Every house that sold in my area was turned into a short-term rental," says O'Rourke. There were seven on his street alone. From scrolling through Airbnb and Vrbo, O'Rourke estimated that there were 64 in his neighbourhood and more than 500 in the township. The Federation of Tiny Township Shoreline Associations, a volunteer-run advocacy and watchdog group, had been registering concern for years. In 2019, it surveyed full-time and seasonal residents about short-term rentals. The respondents lodged a litany of complaints, including loud music, large groups, late-night parties, overflowing garbages, overcrowded beaches, overloaded septic systems, firecrackers, broken glass, cigarette butts, guns, ignorance of boating etiquette, a rental with porta-potties instead of a bathroom, unattended fires, damaged property, verbal assaults, ineffectual by-law enforcement, hooligans and "strangers."

A year and a half later, the township finally drafted short-term rental regulations and assembled a task force to address residents' concerns. It didn't go swimmingly. One frustrated town councillor resigned in September of 2021, stating in an open letter that "council and some senior staff have sidestepped the issue for so long that it may be unfixable." Six months later, the task force collapsed after one member threatened legal action against another. The residents of Tiny were more divided than ever. O'Rourke, a member of the disbanded task force, says he was spat on in a grocery store by a short-term rental owner. Calvin claims that someone deliberately placed dog feces in front of his guests' vehicles. The town's chief administrative officer urged people on both sides of the issue to "stop sabre-rattling."

Glen Sloutsky and his wife bought their home in Tiny in February of 2020, just weeks before Ontario declared a state of emergency in response to Covid. They spent much of the early pandemic in

During the pandemic, the Township of Tiny attracted space-starved city dwellers looking for a good investment



Tiny but kept an apartment in the city. The couple wanted to continue splitting their time between both places but knew they couldn't afford to without renting their home in Tiny. Sloutsky had researched which Ontario municipalities allowed short-term rentals before their purchase, and Tiny's website, he says, explicitly stated that cottage and home rentals were permitted under the zoning by-law. That summer, they listed the property.

Their experience with unfettered renting was short-lived. In mid-2022, Tiny became one of the first cottage communities in Ontario to require that short-term rentals be licensed. The by-law capped the number of licensed properties at 300 and limited rentals to 92 days annually, with a minimum six-night stay from April to October. Occupancy was set at a maximum of two guests per bedroom, up to 10 total. Owners had to pass fire and electrical inspections, submit floor plans, and designate a "responsible person" to respond to complaints within an hour. The annual fee was set at \$1,500—it has since climbed to \$1,750—and penalties included fines and a demerit point system that could lead to licence suspension or revocation. A related zoning by-law set out, among other things, parking rules and required that short-term rentals be a secondary use, not the property's primary function.

Around the time the by-laws passed, Sloutsky and a few other short-term rental owners founded the Responsible Hosts of Tiny to coordinate opposition, raise legal funds and rally owners caught off guard by the new regulations. On the other side, a residents' association called Good Neighbours Tiny formed to promote "the restoration and preservation of family-oriented, child-safe neighbourhoods." Both groups appealed the new zoning by-law to the Ontario Land Tribunal. Responsible

In early 2023, Sloutsky asked council to pause by-law enforcement so the township and residents could have another shot at finding a mutually agreeable solution. The council voted down the motion. Soon afterward, Responsible Hosts filed a legal challenge with the Ontario Superior Court, arguing that the town was trying to regulate short-term rentals out of existence by imposing onerous and expensive requirements that made it hard for owners to break even. The rules were strict, but whether they constituted a functional ban was debatable. Mayor Dave Evans dismissed the group's efforts and called those who wanted to repeal the by-law "delusional."

The ins and outs of the short-term rental regulations may at times be difficult for the township's residents to parse, but the reason for the by-law itself seems crystal clear to Calvin. "They say they're trying to maintain the fabric of the community," he says. "They have a specific idea of who belongs here." In Tiny, the binoculars were out—not for spotting wildlife but for tracking city folk who were turning the community into something locals didn't recognize.

NINETY MINUTES NORTH of Toronto, the township of Oro-Medonte has rolling hills, canopied forests and a 40-kilometre stretch of Lake Simcoe's northwestern shoreline that draws outdoorsy visitors year-round. According to a compendium of complaints compiled by a local anti-short-term-rental group, weekend warriors turn it into a lakeside bacchanal: busloads of partiers dropped off for all-night ragers, entire hockey teams howling into the early hours, dirt bikes tearing through residential streets, boats weaving dangerously close to docks, a property rented to 10 groups in a single month. One stag party featured strippers on the back deck; another drew more than a dozen cars and trucks to the property and lasted three days, leaving behind the stink of sewage, likely the result of an overtaxed septic system. In nearby townships, guests' reported bad behaviour included funnelling beer, urinating and vomiting on the lawn, doing drugs off the hoods of cars, and shooting fireworks at one another.

Oro-Medonte has been trying to do away with short-term rentals for the better part of a decade. In 2018, as a stopgap, council passed an interim control by-law: no new rentals while the township studied the issue, but existing ones could keep operating. When that by-law expired in 2020, rather than introducing a licensing system, as other municipalities were doing, Oro-Medonte tried claiming that short-term rentals were already prohibited—everywhere except the condos and townhouses in Horseshoe Valley Resort and its next-door neighbours, Carriage Hills and Carriage Ridge—under a zoning by-law provision made five years earlier.

That didn't make sense to some local cottage owners, who got together to form the Oro-Medonte Association for Responsible Short-Term Rentals. The group went to the Ontario Land Tribunal, which found in their favour, ruling in 2022 that the township's zoning approach was overly broad and legally unsound and that it unfairly penalized "benign, non-contentious" cottage owners who occasionally rented out their properties.

In response, the township appealed the decision to the Ontario Superior Court, joined by the Oro-Medonte Good Neighbours Alliance, a special interest group that took a hard line against short-term rentals. That fall's municipal election ushered in a first-time mayor, Randy Greenlaw—who ran in part on an anti-short-term-rental platform—and councillor Peter Lavoie,

ONE STAG PARTY IN ORO-MEDONTE FEATURED STRIPPERS ON THE BACK DECK; ANOTHER LASTED THREE DAYS, LEAVING BEHIND THE STINK OF SEWAGE

Hosts argued that the rules unnecessarily punished conscientious owners and effectively banned a long-standing, low-impact rental tradition. Good Neighbours, meanwhile, claimed that short-term rentals should never have been allowed in residential zones to begin with.

The problem with one-size-fits-all by-laws like Tiny's is that they don't distinguish between owners who rent to friends and family a few times a year, those who welcome vetted vacationers through third-party platforms, responsibly run full-time commercial operations, and absentee landlords with little regard for who rents their property or why. Because most municipal zoning by-laws in Ontario were written decades ago, they rarely account for short-term rentals directly. As townships revise their rules, they're grappling with the fact that these kinds of rentals blur the line between residential and commercial uses—they're used like homes but behave like businesses. Case law is still evolving, leading to a patchwork of precedent. Some towns, like the Blue Mountains, have successfully banned short-term rentals from residential zones. Others, like Puslinch, south of Guelph, have bounced between bans and court challenges, showing just how messy zoning can get.

then president of Good Neighbours. The new council tried to double down on enforcement despite the unsteady legal footing. Signs reading, “No one wants to live near a disruptive short-term rental,” provided by Good Neighbours, popped up on lawns. In 2023, two owners were charged with operating illegal short-term rentals only for the charges to be dropped on the advice of the township’s legal counsel. Several local hosts say they received threatening letters from the township and their renters were harassed by by-law officers sent door to door. The township claimed that, pending its appeal, it was simply enforcing the 2018 stopgap by-law. Except, as the Responsible Short-Term Rentals group pointed out, the by-law didn’t ban short-term rentals; it only froze the creation of new ones.

In March of 2024, Ontario’s Superior Court upheld the land tribunal’s decision, striking down Oro-Medonte’s zoning by-law amendment seemingly once and for all. And yet, on its website, the township continued to insist that short-term rentals were allowed only in the units at Horseshoe Valley, Carriage Hills and Carriage Ridge. “It’s nonsense, and it’s a lie,” says Tammy DeSousa, a former town councillor who served from 2019 to 2022. DeSousa doesn’t own a short-term rental. “I’ve got no skin in the game,” she says. “But I believe people should have the right to rent out their properties. We’re in a tourist town with a beautiful lake—why shouldn’t it be shared?”

Oro-Medonte is now drafting a licensing by-law, but it would apply only to those three resort developments. When I got in touch with the township, officials declined to comment on its proposed short-term rental by-laws, the reasoning behind its approach—which seems to defy multiple legal decisions—or why it’s drafting rules that apply only to a few buildings in which no problems have ever been reported. Officials would say only that they hope to have the new rules in place sometime this summer, a timeline that seemed wildly ambitious.

The township has already spent more than \$1 million pursuing the issue, and DeSousa believes the draft by-law, if passed as is, will only invite another legal challenge and more costs for all residents. “Stop throwing our taxpayer dollars out the window with failed attempts to beat a dead horse,” she wrote in an email to the town council in April. What she’d like to see instead is a township-wide licensing regime—something fair, enforceable and focused on managing actual problems, not on banning all rentals outside a very limited zone.

Meanwhile, some owners, including those offering the kind of “benign, non-contentious” rental the land tribunal’s original 2022 decision sought to protect, are left in the lurch. One of them, a local teacher, began renting out her five-bedroom ski chalet—her primary residence—on Airbnb in 2017, after a divorce. “I needed money,” she says. She rents it out a few weeks per year, books only guests with five-star ratings and has a hard six-person cap. Last year, she made roughly \$5,000. Her side hustle puts her on the wrong side of the proposed by-law, so she keeps it quiet, telling only friends and neighbours. “It’s like a dirty little secret,” she tells me—not so much embarrassed as tired of pretending the uproar makes sense. To her, the debate over short-term rentals is about privilege. She says there’s a sense of entitlement among



Homeowner Glen Sloutsky has been pushing back against Tiny’s short-term rental regulations since 2022

the rich, white, over-55 crowd in Oro-Medonte, the people who don’t worry about how they’re going to pay for life’s extras. The teacher, on the other hand, is now part of a blended family of seven that includes three kids in competitive sports. “We both work full time in education, and our expenses are high,” she says. “I’m just hoping I don’t get caught.”

WHILE TOWNSHIPS were cracking down on short-term rentals, the market was doing some correcting of its own. After ballooning in 2022, the pandemic bubble started to deflate. Rising interest rates and return-to-the-office mandates led cottage country transplants to sell. Between 2022 and 2023, cottage prices across Ontario’s vacation belt plummeted as much as 60 per cent. And while data from Royal LePage shows that markets across Canada are stabilizing—four per cent year-over-year growth compared with an unsustainable 27 per cent in 2021—Ontario’s recovery is the slowest in the country. Even Muskoka, the crown jewel of Ontario cottage country, has been affected: average prices there are down 6.5 per cent compared with last year.

Most of the buyers that Maryrose Coleman, a Muskoka real estate agent with Sotheby’s, worked with during the pandemic were searching for properties they could enjoy with their families. But, as Covid dragged on, some looked at the skyrocketing demand for rental cottages, saw dollar signs and made impulse purchases thinking their rental income would cover costs. “They saw a cottage renting for \$25,000 per week on Lake Muskoka and thought it was going to be like that all year,” says Coleman. “But it’s a hyper-seasonal market—maybe six to eight weeks. No one rents in Muskoka in the winter at that price.” One buyer she knows believed they’d be booked from Easter through to the end of summer. Instead, they found themselves spending almost \$9,000 a month to carry the property.

It’s only getting harder to make a business of cottages. Since 2022, all six of the municipalities in Muskoka have implemented their own licensing regimes. The one in Muskoka Lakes comes into full effect next year, with new rules that limit waterfront properties to one rental group per six-night stretch between Victoria Day and Labour Day. It will also force owners to block out one full week in each of June, July and August when the home cannot be rented at all. Coleman estimates that 20 per cent

of last year's cottage country sales were by owners who decided to cash out rather than abide by the new restrictions or deal with the consequences of non-compliance. She stresses that not all hosts are wealthy investors—many rely on short-term rentals to make ends meet. One couple she's worked with spent the past decade living in a trailer over the summer months so they could use the income made renting out their lakefront home to fund their retirement. But, as the regulations came in and the demand softened, they had to sell.

Then there are those who can ostensibly afford to opt out of renting and are weighing the pros and cons of staying in the game. Jayne McCaw manages a rental portfolio of more than 250 high-end properties, most of them in Muskoka, through her company Jayne's Luxury Rentals. She also offers a concierge service that includes private chefs, personalized boat tours and curated Muskoka adventures. Her main client base is families who use their cottages for half the summer and then rent them out the rest of the time. Weekly rates start around \$8,000 and climb to 10 times that, with a handful of properties renting for more than \$16,000 a night in peak season. McCaw and some of her clients are irritated by the rigidity of the licensing framework and the associated costs. Licensing fees in Ontario can range from \$750 to \$3,000 a year, with the average landing somewhere around \$1,250—a big jump from those in British Columbia, which top out at \$650, and Quebec, where the maximum is \$153. "It's a cash grab," says McCaw.

One of the owners she works with in Huntsville spent the entire summer of 2024 at his \$30,000-per-week rental. As a result, he didn't apply for a short-term rental licence—but because the listing stayed up on McCaw's site, he was fined \$684 for advertising without a licence. Despite explanations and protestations from both McCaw and the owner, the township refused to waive the fine. So the owner took his cottage off McCaw's site, telling her he was no longer going to contribute to local tourism. By vexing owners who rent out their cottages and the people they seek to attract, municipalities may be the ones to suffer most in the long run. A 2020 report found

that Muskoka's pre-pandemic seasonal waterfront cottage industry generated about \$925 million in economic activity annually—including \$80 million in spending from renters.

IN MARCH, an Ontario Superior Court judge sided with the Township of Tiny and dismissed the challenge brought by its Responsible Hosts. But declaring the by-law legal hasn't boosted its popularity. Glen Sloutsky and his group have filed an appeal, arguing that the judge got key facts and legal points wrong. Dan O'Rourke, once the loudest voice in opposition to short-term rentals, is urging council to ease some restrictions. The pandemic-era surge in rentals, he says, has passed, taking with it many of the problems the by-law was meant to fix.

Try telling that to Jacqueline, a Tiny resident who asked that we use only her first name. In 2022, the four-bedroom house next to hers at the northeastern point of the township sold to an out-of-town investor who lives two hours away. Almost immediately, renters began arriving by the carload. Her once-quiet stretch of waterfront became a locus for 20-person parties midweek, backyard bouncy castles, stolen firewood and people wandering onto her dock—or into her home. One time, when her teenage daughter was in the house alone, guests walked in unannounced, mistaking it for their rental. "We're terrified every time it's a long weekend," says Jacqueline.

The by-law has helped only marginally. The 10-person guest cap curbed the largest gatherings, but the owner continues to flout the minimum-stay requirement. In June, one rental group had a raucous two-night stay, and another arrived almost immediately after the first party cleared out. Water safety, one of Jacqueline's biggest concerns, falls outside the scope of the by-law. In the past, renters have used the host's boat without a licence, tried to swim to a nearby island and drifted out on floaties into an active boat channel. She's had to call the OPP marine unit on multiple occasions. When problems arise, Jacqueline reports them, in accordance with Tiny's recommended protocol. During that rowdy weekend in June, she first tried calling the property's

designated "responsible person"—who's supposed to be reachable within 30 minutes and on-site within an hour—but got no answer. She then submitted complaints through the township's online form and by phone, reaching a 24-hour hotline that's meant to relay concerns to the township and the owner. No one followed up.

Selling is an option. One of Jacqueline's friends moved after finding herself flanked by rentals, but Jacqueline isn't ready to leave just yet. To prepare for the onslaught this summer, she set out new No Trespassing signs, planted cedars for added privacy, and hooked up a camera trained on her backyard and dock. "If it was like this before we moved here," she says, "we never would have bought." Her neighbour doesn't seem thrilled either: he's listed the property at least four times and hasn't managed to sell.

All this stress tied to short-term rentals has a price—and not just for residents and hosts. The programs created to enforce the regulations are meant to be self-funding, with licensing fees and fines expected to

Wainfleet residents Joanne and Scott Wilson owe more than \$200,000 in short-term rental fines, interest and penalties



offset the costs of the staff and resources required to run them. That hasn't exactly panned out. In 2024, Tiny budgeted nearly \$500,000 for short-term rental licensing and enforcement—to cover everything from salaries and legal fees to software and vehicles—and projected \$525,000 in revenue from licensing fees. But, with only 177 applications received at \$1,750 each, the township was more than \$200,000 short. Even after factoring in \$12,000 in fines, well below the projected \$20,000, the program was deep in the red. This year, Tiny has scaled back its operation, planning to reap \$350,000 from 200 licence applications and projecting expenses that are \$70,000 lower than last year, mostly due to staffing cuts. But, despite fewer resources and a fall-off in infractions—12 in the first quarter of 2025, down from 27 the year before—the township is somehow projecting \$80,000 in court-collected fines, an equation that just doesn't square.

Over the past two decades, many municipalities have adopted a faster and cheaper alternative to by-law fines, which are processed through the legal system and clog up dockets. Administrative monetary penalties, on the other hand, can be

NEEDING A BREAK, ONE COUPLE IN ORO-MEDONTE LEFT ON A SHORT VACATION AND RENTED THEIR HOME OUT ON AIRBNB. NEIGHBOURS WENT BALLISTIC

issued and collected directly by municipalities, bypassing the courts altogether. Any unpaid amounts are transferred to the property owner's tax roll and collected as municipal taxes. In 2023, the town of Wainfleet, in the Niagara region, proposed a short-term rental by-law with administrative monetary penalties that started at \$1,500 for a first offence. But, during the subsequent discussion, the town's councillors kept pushing to increase the fines—despite the fact that, according to Ontario's Municipal Act, these penalties aren't meant to be punitive. By the time Wainfleet's licensing by-law came into effect that July, the township had landed on a range of fines so astronomical that enforcement seemed unimaginable: \$5,000 to \$20,000, per owner, per dwelling, per day.

When Scott and Joanne Wilson bought a lakefront property in Wainfleet in 2021, they knew they would have to occasionally rent it out to offset steep property taxes and their million-dollar mortgage. When Wainfleet's licensing by-law came into effect, Scott says, owners weren't given enough notice to complete the permit process in the allotted time. Since he and his family had sold their home in Burlington and planned to live in Wainfleet full time, Scott opted to wind down the rental business. As a gesture of good faith, he emailed the township about his intention to honour some existing bookings. The township took his email as proof of a violation, and over the next five months, the couple was fined more than \$90,000 for operating without a licence.

As the Wilsons attempted to untangle how they'd landed in this mess, things got even worse. Earlier this year, one of their listings was inadvertently reactivated on a rental site, and despite the fact that the property couldn't actually be booked via the platform, the couple was fined another \$50,000. When Scott wanted to challenge the fines in court, the township told him he couldn't appear in court himself. The appeal process for

administrative monetary penalties is internal—first through a town staffer, then a paralegal. In June, Wilson was scheduled for a call with a screening officer to contest part of the most recent fines—\$30,000—but he was unable to reach them due to spotty lakeside cell service. Less than an hour later, he received an email stating that, due to his failure to attend, the fines were upheld and no further review was possible. The Wilsons now owe, with interest and penalties, more than \$200,000. A chunk of that sum has already been added to their property taxes. They asked Wainfleet to separate their fines from their base tax amount, but the township ignored the request. The couple fears that any payment they make will go toward the fines first and will be taken as an admission of guilt. Meanwhile, their outstanding tax bill has rendered them ineligible to renew or renegotiate their mortgage, putting their ownership at risk.

Letters sent by the Township of Wainfleet to the Wilsons state that unpaid fines may be collected “in the same manner as property taxes,” meaning their home could eventually be treated as tax-delinquent, opening the door to late fees, interest and even a tax sale. The township did not respond to multiple interview requests, but in a statement released in October of last year, it denied pursuing the seizure or sale of any properties related to short-term rentals. In that same statement, the town also said it doesn't apply fines on a per-day basis, but its correspondence with the Wilsons warns of “daily penalties for up to 12 months.” Scott is now suing, alongside 11 other property owners, to overturn the by-law. He's optimistic that the court will quash the fines and is hopeful that the township will be forced to cover legal fees

and damages. But he also knows that the expense of a protracted legal fight will ultimately be shouldered by Wainfleet's taxpayers. “Even if we win, we'll end up getting punished,” he says.

MONSTER FINES and other outsized tactics employed by these municipalities paint a picture of a crisis that is spiralling out of control, but the reality is usually much more subdued. Late last year, Peter Lavoie of Oro-Medonte's Good Neighbours group conceded that there were just a handful of truly disruptive properties in the area. In Tiny, six addresses—three licensed, three unlicensed—accounted for a third of all complaints in 2024, and 87 per cent of licensed rentals had no complaints at all. What, then, is being regulated so aggressively? In housing-strapped cities, these rules are often about preserving long-term housing. In cottage country, they tend to target noise and crowding. But the townships pushing them also seem concerned that, with this new influx of urban buyers into small-town markets, something more intangible is under threat: a long-standing notion of who belongs in the community and who doesn't.

One Toronto couple I spoke to moved to Oro-Medonte in 2021 and applied to the township to convert their basement into an apartment, first as a rental but eventually as a suite for their parents or children. Their proposal aligned with the province's housing goals and the township's official plan, plus similar applications had been approved without question. But this one, from a family of colour, sparked a fierce backlash. According to one of the applicants and a town councillor who served at the time, a representative from the Horseshoe Valley Property Owners Association urged locals to object. More than two dozen residents submitted complaints. Some raised fears about density and noise. Others were more explicit, warning that renters wouldn't respect

the area's tranquility, that the change would "set a precedent" and that "newcomers"—often a euphemism for immigrants—would cram "8, 10, 12 residents" into a single-family home. "We're going to have a character change in that community," said Ian Veitch, a councillor and former vice-president of the Property Owners Association, who predicted rentals could "mushroom" and "turn into something which may not be wholesome" for the township's "natural rural paradise." (Veitch did not respond to requests for comment.) The couple's application was ultimately denied, but a similar one was approved at the following meeting.

When the couple appealed the decision to the Ontario Land Tribunal, the township bowed out, saying it wouldn't fight them, but the Property Owners Association refused to back down and hired a lawyer. Though the couple eventually won a scaled-back approval, just as they prepared to move forward, the township brought up a square-footage restriction that hadn't previously been applied. Fed up, the couple decided not to build and began to wonder if they would ever feel comfortable in the neighbourhood. In 2022, needing a break, they left on a short vacation and rented their home out on Airbnb. Neighbours went ballistic. They posted photos of the couple's home, address included, on Facebook, accusing guests of partying. Some crept into the yard to photograph licence plates; others tried to get the listing taken off Airbnb. On the couple's return, one neighbour was caught peeping into their car, leading to an altercation that almost got physical. The police were called, and neighbours falsely accused the applicant of beating his wife. The hostility, the applicant claims, wasn't about parking or square footage or zoning. "We believe we were stereotyped because of our race," he says.

Much of the debate around short-term rentals hinges on the perceived difference between traditional renters—families who return summer after summer, often renting from the same owner—and this new generation that books via platforms, with no ties to the community. By-laws in Muskoka Lakes, Georgian Bay, Northern Bruce Peninsula and Oro-Medonte all cite a need to protect the "character" of the community. The 2019 survey conducted in Tiny flagged concerns about renters taking over a beach. One Oro-Medonte resident complained about individuals with "limited language skills." In Gravenhurst, an official infographic listing the top short-term-rental concerns includes a black silhouette simply labelled "unknown people."

"Renting your property here, and this is probably controversial, it's a privilege," Muskoka Lakes Mayor Peter Kelley told the CBC last year. But protecting that privilege too aggressively can cross into bigotry. Jayne McCaw, the owner of Jayne's Luxury Rentals, has heard from property owners who get complaints only when their guests aren't white as well as non-white renters who say they're treated with suspicion. Officially, cottage country's short-term-rental rules focus on managing behaviours through guest caps, minimum stays and noise restrictions. But the way these regulations are enforced often targets unfamiliar faces and people who look like they don't quite fit. The profile of the typical renter is shifting, and townships need to get over it. McCaw, for example, estimates that about a quarter of her booking inquiries are from non-white guests. And as Ontarians of all kinds seek out the aspirational Canadian experience of going to the cottage, that number is only going to grow. 77



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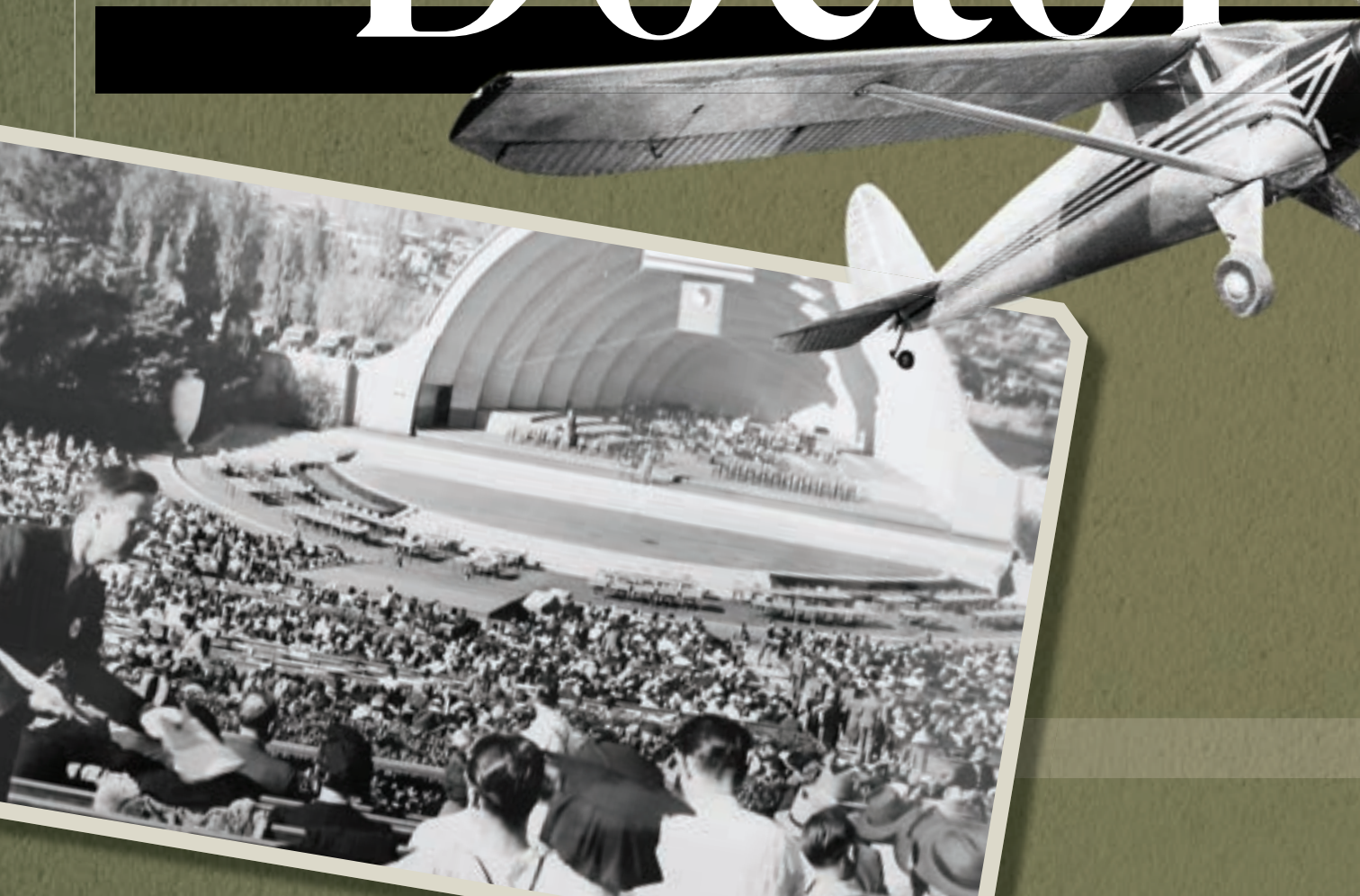
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Elon Musk's grandfather was many things: prairie farmer, chiropractor, conspiracy theorist, thrill-seeking aviator. His wackiest vocation? Leader of the Canadian technocracy movement



Doctor





Strange

BY JOHN LORINC

THE CANADIAN origin story of Elon Musk begins in 1907, three generations before his birth, in the tiny, whistle-stop settlement of Herbert, Saskatchewan. Even now, Herbert consists mostly of a grain elevator, a level crossing and a tight cross-hatch of streets just north of the Trans-Canada Highway, its 700-odd residents surrounded by wheat fields that extend endlessly out toward the horizon. But, at the time, John Elon Haldeman; his wife, Almeda; and their five-year-old son, Joshua (Elon's grandfather), were at the vanguard of a massive migration. More than 320,000 Americans were heading north to the Prairies, lured by offers of land from the Canadian government. They

all shared a dream of settling and cultivating the vast swath of terrain that had been tended for millennia by the Plains Cree.

Despite the government's promises of prosperity, money was tight for the Haldemans. Almeda set up a little diner behind a lumberyard on Herbert's main drag to help bolster the family's finances. Then, when Joshua was just seven, his father died from complications related to diabetes, and Almeda signed on to teach at the town's new school for extra cash. In 1915, she married a British-born man named Heseltine Wilson, who owned a large farm and was active in municipal politics. Joshua grew up on his stepfather's property, becoming an athletic kid who boxed, wrestled and took part in bronco-riding competitions. Life in rural

Saskatchewan wasn't for the faint of heart, but the unforgiving prairie steppes provided the perfect outlet for Joshua's physical prowess and competitive spirit.

He struggled in more rigid environments. After high school, he attended nine colleges and universities in Western Canada without graduating from any of them. Eventually, he completed chiropractic college, at that time a fringe discipline, in Iowa. In 1926, he moved back to Herbert to establish a practice and manage the homestead. Within a few years, drought turned the once-fertile prairie lands into a dust bowl. Haldeman, by then a robust 24-year-old with high cheekbones and an intense gaze, leveraged every skill he had, breaking in horses and trading chiropractic treatments for food and lodging, but he couldn't stop the banks from foreclosing on his family's farm. For a time, he abandoned Herbert altogether. In a biography of Elon Musk, journalist Walter Isaacson describes Joshua Haldeman's peripatetic life: "[He] worked as a cowboy, a rodeo performer, and a construction hand. His one constant was a love for adventure. He married and divorced, travelled as a hobo on freight trains and was a stowaway on an ocean-going ship."

Haldeman eventually returned to Western Canada, where the Great Depression was in full force. Bankrupt and dispossessed farmers were directing their ire at the indifferent capitalist system, which no longer seemed to value what they produced. Haldeman got caught up in the populist fervour that blew in like a prairie storm. It was those headwinds that would spur him to become a leader in a radical US-based movement called Technocracy Inc. Its hundreds of thousands of followers would advocate for the abolition of democracy, the creation of a single state that would consume every country from Greenland to the Caribbean, and the right to put all political, economic and social decision-making into the hands of a few all-powerful technocrats.

THE ROOTS OF HALDEMAN'S INTEREST in fringe politics were most likely related to his occupation. In the early 20th century, chiropractic medicine operated firmly outside the bounds of accepted health care. The profession's founder, a Port Perry man named D. D. Palmer, was a healer who proselytized about the rejuvenating power of magnets. One day, so the story goes, Palmer was joking with a hearing-impaired custodian and casually slapped him on the back with a book. The man's hearing suddenly improved. Palmer continued treating him by pressing on a protrusion in his spine, eventually thwacking it hard enough to dislodge the bump. After that, the custodian's hearing recovered fully.

Palmer began administering spinal adjustments to his patients. He and his son, B.J., went on to found the Iowa-based college of chiropractic medicine that Haldeman would later attend. The Palmers cultivated a profession that, at the time, was defiant in its resistance to biomedical science and steeped in the huckster culture of midwestern preachers. The malady they sought to cure was genuine—they were hardly the first to observe that distinctly miserable condition known as chronic back pain. Many doctors had tried to diagnose it, attributing it to bad posture, excessive masturbation ("self-abuse," per one medical journal of the time), poor diet, improper hygiene, and too much drinking and smoking. Palmer and his disciples recognized that back pain is both fed by and feeds into psychological conditions such as unrelieved stress or depression. Their treatments involved the usual—massage, vertebrae popping, neck adjustments—combined with efforts to get to the bottom

of their patients' psychic distress and attempts to transfer their own physical strength to the ailing through the power of touch.

The early chiropractors were mavericks, suspicious of conventional health care with its painful surgical procedures and dubious pharmaceuticals. They spread the gospel of chiropractic medicine as a panacea. Some practitioners claimed that athletes were dying prematurely due to stresses on their spinal columns, others that chiropractic adjustment could completely cure 70 per cent of childhood polio cases.

Haldeman treated the men and women toiling in the fields of Saskatchewan, doing the thankless, back-breaking work of keeping the rest of the nation fed. Like them, chiropractors felt snubbed by the mainstream, a sentiment that was the focus of a conference Haldeman would attend in Toronto in 1938. Over three hot days in late July, some 1,200 chiropractors from across North America converged on the Royal York Hotel for the annual confab of the National Chiropractic Association. It included a pilgrimage to Port Perry to see D. D. Palmer's birthplace. In the evening, after a dinner in the Royal York's banquet hall, a Toronto practitioner reminded attendees of chiropractic's persistent outlaw status. It was banned in Ontario and subject to criminal prosecution in New York state. "Today we cannot visit even the smallest and meanest of the hospitals [in Ontario] to carry on our work," he lamented. "Our fellow practitioners are brow-beaten and humiliated wherever they go."

Haldeman made it his personal mission to fight the exclusion of chiropractors from the medical community. He joined various professional committees and pushed for laws to protect chiropractors, osteopaths and naturopaths from prosecution. He started his own radio show out of Regina to promote his "drugless" profession and helped launch a Canadian council of chiropractors. Haldeman's relentless drive to gain legitimacy for his brand of health care was likely what brought him into the political arena.



Haldeman (far right) was a leader of Technocracy Inc., an organization that advocated for the complete dismantling of democracy in North America

THE GREAT DEPRESSION fuelled Western Canada's feelings of alienation from the federal government and gave rise to new political movements. Populism offered the promise of healing to a ravaged region. The charismatic figures who rose to the surface of this quintessentially grassroots movement proposed various solutions to the West's economic collapse. Some started farm co-ops or advocated for socialized health care; others suggested societies built around something other than money. One of the most alluring was the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation—the CCF—led by Tommy Douglas, a preacher who would go on to champion medicare and found the NDP. For a while, Haldeman joined their ranks. In 1934, he served as the chairman of the Assiniboia constituency association for the party's federal wing. But his involvement in Canada's nascent progressive politics didn't last long. Within two years, he left the party to join Technocracy Inc., a loose-knit group whose agenda went far beyond what the CCF was offering.

Technocracy Inc. was the brainchild of Howard Scott, a Virginia-born man who had moved to Greenwich Village in 1918. Scott described himself as an engineer, although he had no actual training beyond a few years spent working for chemical companies in Alabama. In New York in the 1920s, he fell in with a circle of intellectuals that included Thorstein Veblen, the economist who coined the concept of conspicuous consumption. It was there that Scott developed what he deemed the ultimate solution to America's problems: handing power over to technocrats and engineers.

Scott established Technocracy Inc. as a "research" group in 1933 and set out its tenets in a series of manifestos. He argued that science and technology were already changing life in North America and that only engineers and other technological experts could lead the masses into a new age. Scott proposed a society without capitalism, where production was instead organized

according to scientific techniques. The logistics were wobbly, but Technocracy Inc. planned to calculate the amount of energy required to produce all the goods and services on the continent. They would then convert that energy value into currency, in the form of what they called energy certificates, and divide it equally among all citizens over the age of 25. Scott claimed that this system would give rise to dramatically shorter workweeks, longer vacations and widespread early retirement.

The ultimate goal was to create a massive new techno-utopia called Technate, erasing all national borders and democratic systems in North America and the Caribbean. In place of democracy, which Scott believed put too many incompetent people in

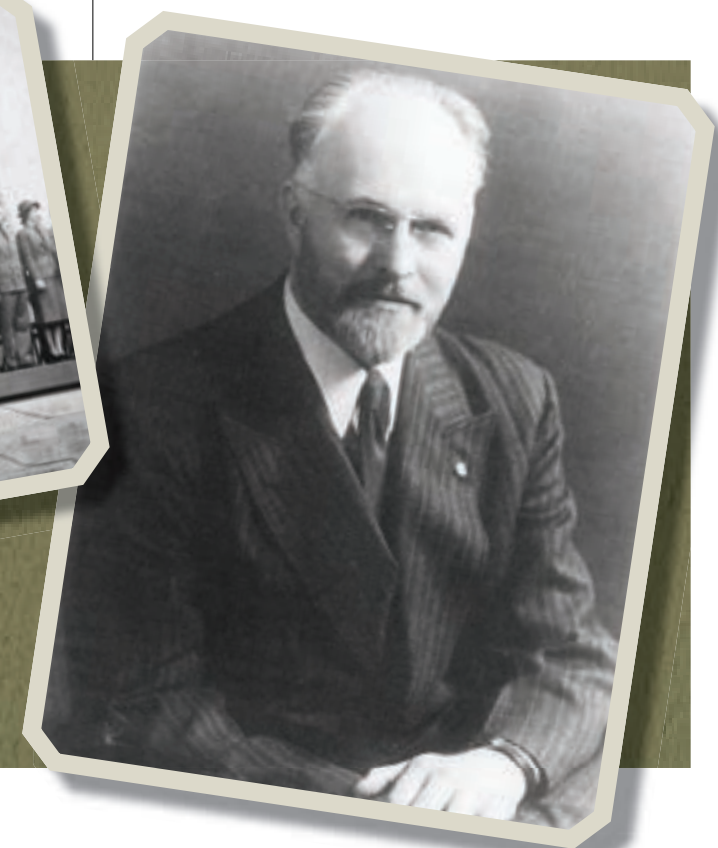
The ultimate goal was to create a techno-utopia called Technate, erasing all national borders and democratic systems in North America

positions of power, a committee of "experts"—largely engineers and technocrats along with some leaders in fields like medicine and education—would make up a cabinet, with a single "continental director" overseeing them. Scott claimed that, in Technate, everyone would be housed, fed and cared for. "Under the Technate, we will be responsible for the health and well-being of every human being," he said. "That is more than any political government ever did."

Despite the many logistical holes in his vision, Scott was a persuasive evangelist. A tall figure often dressed in tailored grey suits, leather overcoats and wide-brimmed fedoras, he was a gifted orator whose infectious non-conformity attracted growing audiences, first in Greenwich Village's coffee houses and then farther afield. "Whatever may be one's beliefs about the soundness of the concrete proposals which have been advanced by Howard Scott," one pundit wrote in a 1933 essay in a journal called *The World Tomorrow*, "one can only warmly welcome the extraordinary interest which they have aroused." It was, in the writer's view, a sign that most people had "seen through the essential vacuity of the stuffed shirts of the bull market era and are in a mood to consider basic proposals for the reconstruction of society."

As Technocracy spread, it formalized its operations. Adherents set up local chapters across the US, and members started wearing grey military-style suits and driving cars painted to match. Scott took on the mantle of "Chief Engineer," and his followers saluted him whenever he entered the room. In an effort to expand Technocracy's membership westward, into cities like Chicago, Los Angeles and eventually Vancouver, Scott held large rallies that he called "symbolizations." Technocracy officials took over large venues like the Hollywood Bowl or the Vancouver Forum, once arriving in a motorcade with hundreds of cars. Then Scott would take the stage, flanked by his uniformed lieutenants, and address crowds of up to 5,000 people.

Technocracy gained a following in Canada partly because mass unemployment made its vision especially appealing. A cover story in *The Technocrats Magazine* posed the following



question: “Thirty million out of work in 1933 or \$20,000 a year income for every family. Which?” In 1936, Haldeman became one of Scott’s disciples. He may have found out about Technocracy Inc. from Robert Cromie, the publisher of the *Vancouver Sun* and one of Scott’s most zealous Canadian followers. Haldeman then formally signed on as Technocracy Inc.’s Saskatchewan research director and an “authorized instructor.” His mandate: establish a foothold for the movement among the province’s farmers.

HALDEMAN THREW HIMSELF into building up Technocracy’s presence in Saskatchewan, but the political landscape was quickly shifting. In Europe, Adolf Hitler’s Nazi party was on the rise, and suddenly Technocracy’s visible similarities—the tailored uniforms, the salutes, the rallies—became a liability. In early September of 1939, shortly after the Second World War began, Technocracy tried to proactively address questions about its members’ loyalties. Canadian Technocrats wrote to prime minister Mackenzie King declaring their willingness to defend the country against “alien attack.” But, on June 20, 1940, the federal government banned the group using the new wartime Defence of Canada Regulations. “The Minister of Justice reports that there is an organization known as Technocracy Inc.,” the government wrote in a press release, “which is considered to be of a subversive character and which should be declared an illegal organization.” The RCMP’s commissioner at the time likened Technocracy to “a poison toadstool that sprang up overnight to destroy our social structure.”

Despite the government prohibition, Haldeman didn’t relent. Instead, he took out an ad for Technocracy Inc. in Regina’s *Leader-Post*. He wrote that Ottawa’s ban was a “tactical political blunder” and that “Technocracy Inc. from its inception has been unequivocally opposed to Nazism, Fascism, and Communism.” Authorities promptly arrested Haldeman on charges of sedition and membership in an illegal organization. He was convicted in a Regina courthouse, though there’s no indication that he served prison time. But Haldeman didn’t jump ship—yet. Following Hitler’s invasion of the Soviet Union, Technocracy’s American leadership abruptly ditched its opposition to communism and declared its support for Soviet Russia. Haldeman quit over the new allegiance, and soon he was actively distancing himself by accusing the group of “conspiring against the British Empire” and “the sovereignty of Canada.”

Next, he threw his boundless political energy to the far right. Haldeman joined Social Credit, the deeply conservative and conspiracy-minded populist party founded in Alberta by “Bible Bill” Aberhart and led by Ernest Manning, who would later become premier of the province. For the next several years, Haldeman tried to build up Social Credit’s presence in Saskatchewan. He ran as a candidate in the 1945 federal election, but by then Saskatchewan’s voters were mostly in Tommy Douglas’s progressive camp. Haldeman lost decisively and instead became the chair of Social Credit’s national arm.

It was in this role that he came under fire for Social Credit’s antisemitic views. The party’s leaders trafficked in resentment, blaming an international cabal of Jewish financiers for wielding control over Western Canada. Haldeman tried to refute these accusations. “Social Credit is absolutely opposed to antisemitism,” he wrote in the *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix* in early

Haldeman’s wife, Winnifred, and their four children (Lynne, Scott, Kaye and Maye) were frequent fliers on his plane



1947. “The great mass of the Jewish people in Germany suffered greatly and our full sympathy goes out to them.” He received a scathing letter to the editor in reply. “I am sure Doctor Haldeman is aware of the anti-Semitic character of the *Canadian Social Crediter*, the party newspaper,” wrote a local rabbi, who also claimed that Social Credit’s rhetoric followed “the Hitler line.” He went on to say that Haldeman “must have a short memory as well, if he does not remember his own speeches shot through with anti-Semitic talk.” Perhaps stung by such accusations—or dejected by two more unsuccessful election campaigns, in 1946 and 1949—Haldeman quit Social Credit and withdrew from politics.

WITHOUT A POLITICAL PROJECT, Haldeman took up a midlife hobby: he bought, on a whim, a small plane. In Walter Isaacson’s book, he writes that Haldeman was on a trip when he spied a farmer selling a single-engine Luscombe airplane in his field. Haldeman, who had never flown a plane before, was intrigued. He wasn’t carrying any cash, but he persuaded the farmer to take his car in exchange. Haldeman took lessons and began flying around Saskatchewan. His passengers included his second wife, Winnifred Fletcher, and later his four children, including twins Kaye and Maye (Elon’s mother).

In 1950, Haldeman packed up the whole clan and moved to South Africa in search of adventure and a milder climate. They settled on a farm near Pretoria, where Haldeman opened a chiropractic practice. From there, he flew his plane around the country—he’d disassembled it for the move, then put it back together upon arrival. In a dispatch he sent to the *Regina Leader-Post* a year after his move, titled “A New Life for Haldeman,” he extolled South Africa’s diverse geography and the beauty of Pretoria. He also described the country’s apartheid system. “The present government of South Africa knows how



Maye Haldeman went on to have three children: Elon, Kimbal and Tosca

to handle the native question," he wrote. "They are endeavouring to make the natives as independent and self-supporting as possible." Haldeman disparaged the Black population as lazy and overpaid. "It is impossible to make a native work hard," he lamented.

Haldeman's chiropractic practice, though, had a large contingent of Black patients. He described his patronizing interactions with them: "At first I would ask the patient what was wrong. He would answer, 'I am sick.' Then I would ask him, 'Where does it hurt?' He would answer 'All over' and look at me as if I were asking a lot of silly questions. With them, I can immediately start looking for and removing any nerve interferences without any unnecessary [trouble]. The results have been very good. One of the more intelligent natives said, 'You best doctor in Pretoria. Natives no understand. You give no medicine, natives come to doctor sick, get well.' Then he laughed and laughed."

Haldeman's overconfidence finally came back to bite him.
In 1974, at age 72,
he was killed in a plane crash while attempting an emergency landing

Haldeman soon found a new outlet for his restlessness in one of the most enduring and enigmatic legends about South Africa: the tale of a "lost city" in the northernmost reaches of the Kalahari Desert. It had been discovered, as legend had it, by the Great Farini, a Canadian fabulist and acrobat who'd famously walked a tightrope over Niagara Falls. In 1885, Farini

travelled to South Africa and embarked on an expedition across the arid Kalahari (now mainly in Botswana) in search of diamonds, big game and the kind of adventure story that would titillate his Victorian audiences. Toward the end of the journey, he and another member of his crew claimed they'd found the ruins of a long-lost city deep in the wilderness, possibly the burial ground of some great civilization. But, until the day he died, Farini refused to reveal its exact location.

Haldeman became obsessed. In 1953, just three years after emigrating, he decided to find Farini's ruins. He went on a dozen searches, risking his life with his treacherous tactics. On one expedition, a 13,500-kilometre aerial journey, he flew his little plane scarcely 60 metres off the ground in order to thoroughly scan the terrain for clues. The fact that he never found any evidence of the ruins didn't dissuade him from his quixotic belief that the lost city existed, somewhere—nor did it assuage his desire to find it despite the risks.

Not only was Haldeman willing to fly great distances over empty and often inhospitable swaths of sub-Saharan Africa, but he happily subjected others to these trips. Once, he packed up his wife and their children and set out on a 1,300-kilometre flight from Pretoria to Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). "[We] got lost for three hours over the wilds of Africa and just managed to get into Salisbury with the gas tanks showing nearly empty after five hours," Haldeman wrote. "Winnifred had quite a nervous reaction after that. She had been focusing on those gas gauges too much." Eventually—perhaps inevitably—Haldeman's boundless confidence came back to bite him. In 1974, at age 72, he was killed in a plane crash while attempting an emergency landing.

AFTER HIS DEATH, Haldeman became something of a family legend. His daughter Maye, a striking model with a vivacious smile, married a South African man named Errol Musk. When their first son was born, in 1971, they named him Elon, after Haldeman's father. In 1989, Elon moved back to Canada with his mother and two siblings, where they lived in a rent-controlled apartment in Toronto while he finished high school. He would go on to attend Queen's University before founding SpaceX, becoming the CEO of Tesla, buying Twitter and helming, for a frenzied and polarizing stretch, the US Department of Government Efficiency under Donald Trump.

Musk was too young to have known his grandfather well; he was just three when Haldeman died in that plane crash. But Haldeman's life story loomed large, and his appetite for risk-taking endured. The family's motto was "Live dangerously—carefully." When Elon discusses his grandfather, it's clear that Haldeman's penchant for adventure, his willingness to launch himself full-tilt toward his various compulsions, is what left the most enduring impression. "He knew that real adventures involve risk," Musk told Isaacson. "Risk energized him."

Haldeman and Musk share much in common: the conspicuously short attention span, the anti-establishment world view, the attraction to radical ideas. Haldeman wanted to find a lost civilization in an African desert. Musk seeks to create a new civilization on Mars. Both were initially attracted to, and then ultimately repelled by, the Klieg lights of populism. They believed that technology was the answer to the problems of their time—and they were drawn to ambitious ideas, however flawed and untenable, of how to fix a society, fast.



BECOMING



From the moment he was born, Ryan Wedding was the family darling. He belonged to a sporty, tightly knit clan with a shared love of the outdoors. In the 1960s, his grandparents, Laurence and Marlyn Spiess, had purchased the Mount Baldy Ski Area, a ski club near Thunder Bay. Their ambitions were modest. Marlyn sat behind the ticketing desk, and Laurence, who carried a key ring befitting a prison warden, did triple duty as manager, landscaper and handyman. Mount Baldy wasn't a ritzy destination resort but a scrappy hub for local families. It had an old rope lift, a T-bar pulley, and a chalet that sold hot dogs and Molson Canadian. Skiing was the family religion. The

Spiess's son, Craig, coached the women's national alpine ski team in the early '90s; their daughter, Karen, married an engineer named Rene Wedding who'd skied competitively in university. Ryan Wedding was born on September 14, 1981, the first son of the third generation. Laurence had him on skis almost as soon as he could walk.

As a child, Ryan was daring and adventurous, with a capacity for intense focus. He'd sit behind his father's drafting table for hours, drawing perfectly scaled buildings, then go out on his bike, alone, to explore the logging trails that wended through the surrounding boreal forest. When Ryan was still young, his grandfather put him behind the wheel of the family car

EL JEFFE

Before Ryan Wedding landed on the FBI's Most Wanted list as a high-level associate of El Chapo, he was a bright-eyed kid from Thunder Bay. The inside story of how an Olympic snowboarding prodigy became one of the world's most dangerous and powerful drug lords

BY SIMON LEWSEN

and showed him how to work the transmission. He learned how to use the pedals before his feet could even reach them. But his appetite for risk went beyond family-sanctioned activities. Occasionally, he'd disappear, and his parents would find that he'd snuck into a neighbour's garage to rummage through their tools.

Wedding started snowboarding at age 12, shortly after he moved with his parents and two younger sisters to Coquitlam, BC, for his dad's work. He won the first race he entered and caught the attention of Bob Allison, a former professional skier, windsurfer and rock climber, who was building a team of elite snowboarders to represent Canada. Wedding was the baby of

Allison's team, the cherubic blue-eyed kid. At national competitions, he'd head to bed early with his teddy bear while his teammates, a band of roofers and roughnecks, hit the bars and tried to get laid. Come morning, though, Wedding was as bold as any of them. He was fearless on the slopes, barrelling headlong down steep mountain faces over icy terrain and carving perilously close to the snow. At home with his dad, he occupied himself with mini experiments, testing out boots and bindings to see which would enable him to glide just a bit faster.

At 15 years old, Wedding made the Canadian national team. Soon, he was competing internationally in the Alps and the Andes. Success fed his rapidly growing ego—he became obsessed

with winning. He took home bronze at the junior world championships in 1999 and silver at the same competition two years later. People started mentioning him as a potential challenger to Ross Rebagliati, who'd won gold at Nagano in 1998. And then Wedding was chosen to represent Canada at the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City.

For a 20-year-old athlete who wanted to become a household name, Salt Lake City could have been a dream come true. But, for Wedding, it was the end of a dream. At the giant slalom event on Valentine's Day, he came out of the gate aggressively, carving deep into the slope. It was a poor choice for the conditions of the day: the sun had melted the snow from powder into slush, which makes carving risky. Wedding managed to stay upright, but the initial jolt threw him off his rhythm. He placed 24th, his time a second too long to qualify for the next round. That day, Wedding learned a crushing lesson: you can be extraordinarily, even freakishly talented—you can dedicate your life to a single pursuit, pushing your body far beyond what most people consider possible—and, statistically speaking, your efforts probably won't be enough. Not everyone gets to win.

Snowboarding was never a reliable route to fame anyway. Even the most successful athletes can chase adrenaline for only a handful of seasons before their bodies give out. Of the first-generation Olympic boarders who represented Canada at Nagano, Salt Lake City, Turin and Vancouver, only Rebagliati transcended his sport, partly because of his athleticism and partly because of the controversy after he tested positive for cannabis. The overwhelming majority of Olympic athletes live and die in obscurity. Wedding gave up on the Olympics, but he didn't give up on his ambitions. Instead, he learned something that eludes many of his athlete peers: if adventure, glory and status are your goals, there are other ways to get them.

After Salt Lake City, Wedding moved to Vancouver to study at Simon Fraser University, but instead of applying his competitive streak to academics, he hit the weight room. According to a profile in *Rolling Stone*, he transformed his body from the lithe, athletic build of an alpine racer to the muscular, thickset physique of an action-movie star. He told a friend that he resented the men at the gym who were bigger than he was, and he set out to surpass them. For work, he picked up shifts as a bouncer at Vancouver-area clubs, many frequented by gang members in designer streetwear and Swiss watches. Soon, Wedding was dressing like them.

After two years, he dropped out of school. With a \$250,000 loan from his father, he bought and quickly flipped a house in Maple Ridge, an affluent garden suburb of Vancouver. He then set himself up in a condo with 30-foot ceilings in Vancouver's ritzy Westwood Plateau neighbourhood, outfitting the space with a pinball machine and a video game station with race car seating. In his building's garage, he stored snowmobiles, a Ducati and a BMW M5.

If his lifestyle seemed too lavish for a bouncer with a bit of real estate cash, that's because it was. To finance the designer clothes and luxury vehicles, Wedding started a business on a rural property in Maple Ridge. It was owned by a friend of his

who called it Eighteen Carrot Farms, but the real crop was cannabis—and Wedding was mass-producing it in a warehouse on-site. Twice a month, he drove out to the property to harvest some of its 6,800 plants and deliver his yields to a supplier.

In the summer of 2006, the authorities received a tip about Wedding's operation. When the RCMP searched their database, they learned that Wedding had been named in a 2004 investigation into marijuana grow-ops. Eighteen Carrot Farms was consuming 2,000 kilowatt hours of electricity per month, far beyond the average for a warehouse of that size. In a non-residential building, there are only a few practical uses for such an enormous amount of energy. Powering grow lamps is one of them.

On September 22, 2006, the RCMP raided the property and discovered a mix of dried cannabis and live plants worth an

BY THE TIME WEDDING'S GROW-OP WAS BUSTED, HE HAD SINISTER PEOPLE IN HIS ORBIT

estimated \$10 million, plus a shotgun and numerous rounds of ammunition. But they didn't find Wedding at the site, and they were unable to make a strong enough case against him to justify pressing charges.

Looked at one way, Wedding's early forays into criminality were unremarkable. BC was the epicentre of the North American cannabis industry, which had grown precipitously over the late 1990s and early aughts, aided by the proliferation of organized crime syndicates. Between 1997 and 2003, law enforcement investigated 25,000 grow-ops in the province, likely a tiny proportion of the overall number. Police couldn't keep up, so they focused their limited resources on shutting down facilities rather than prosecuting suspects. Out of every 100 people charged with growing cannabis in BC, maybe eight or nine would see prison time.

Arguably, Wedding wasn't doing anything outlandish: he was just getting in on the local industry, and he happened to be good at it. But the scale of his operation set him apart. To turn a grow-op the size of Eighteen Carrot Farms into a profitable business, one would need to rub shoulders with experienced criminals. All that product had to go somewhere, after all, and in the early 2000s, much of it was going to points south. The work of moving plants in bulk across international borders was done almost entirely by criminal organizations: the Hells Angels, the largest biker gang in the world; the United Nations, whose members practise Thai kickboxing and swear fealty to an ancient samurai honour code; the Independent Soldiers, who, in 2003, got into a deadly shootout with the Hells Angels on the dance floor of a Gastown nightclub; and the Red Scorpions, who massacred six people in a

Surrey apartment complex in 2007, leaving them face down in a pool of blood. By the time Wedding's grow-op was busted, he had sinister people in his orbit.

One of Wedding's new associates was Hassan Shirani, a Persian Canadian who had been implicated in a police investigation into a Vancouver-area murder, though he wasn't ultimately charged with the crime. Shirani was useful to Wedding because of his connections to a niche corner of the underground economy: a money-transfer system known as hawala that dates back to eighth-century India and still has networks around the world.

Hawala runs on trust. If you live in Toronto and are seeking to send, say, \$10,000 to your brother in Tehran, you might give the cash to a hawala broker (or hawaladar) operating out of a dry-cleaner's or car dealership or convenience store. The broker will put the money in his safe. For a fee, he'll instruct a fellow hawaladar in Tehran to make the same amount available to the intended recipient, who will identify himself by an agreed-upon code word. Hawaladars keep track of inflows and outflows, and every once in a while they coordinate with colleagues to settle up outstanding balances, perhaps through cash transfers, exchanges of goods or professional favours. Because the network is informal, it's ideal for law-abiding Canadians who distrust the banking systems in their countries of origin. Because it leaves no digital record, it's ideal, too, for criminals looking to discreetly move money across international borders.

In 2008, Wedding turned to Shirani to help him in a new venture, one with the potential to be much more lucrative than cultivating cannabis. Together, the duo hatched a plan to smuggle 24 kilograms of cocaine into Canada via San Diego. That spring, Shirani met with a hawaladar in Vancouver and deposited \$300,000 that he would then be able to draw on in California. Wedding and Shirani flew to Los Angeles on June 10. At LAX, they met up with a Russian Canadian named Michael Krapchan, whom Shirani had hired to set up the purchase. Krapchan had also brought along the seller, a menacing-looking heavysset ex-KGB agent named Yuri.

The situation was tense. Yuri was under the impression that the four men would drive directly from the airport to San Diego to do the deal, and he became agitated when Shirani and Wedding explained that they needed a few days to retrieve the funds. Shirani and

Wedding were mystified: did Yuri really think they'd flown in from Canada with hundreds of thousands of dollars in their suitcases? Yuri asked, angrily, why he'd even been brought to the meeting.

Everyone was suspicious of everyone else. Nevertheless, they agreed to move forward. Over the next 72 hours in LA, Shirani and Wedding visited malls, restaurants and hookah bars, and they stopped by a Persian rug store that was also a hawala brokerage. There, they retrieved a portion of their cash: \$120,000 in American bills, bundled up in newspapers. They hid the package in a drawer below the TV in their hotel room.

On June 12, Shirani and Wedding met with Krapchan in Anaheim and gave him \$17,000 (US), enough to procure the first kilo of cocaine. The next day, to inspect the sample, they drove to a San Diego hotel room that Krapchan had rented. Krapchan headed off in a rental car to buy the drugs from Yuri while Shirani and Wedding holed up in the room—they believed, erroneously, that if the cops showed up at the buy and they weren't present, they couldn't be prosecuted. As lunchtime drew near, the guys grew hungry and impatient. After an hour and a half, they ventured out to get food—only to be quickly apprehended by the FBI, which had arrest warrants for both of them.

The whole thing had been a set-up. Yuri, the ex-KGB agent, was really a confidential police informant who'd been wearing a wire at the LAX meeting. The cocaine he'd sold Krapchan in San Diego had been given to him by the feds. As soon as Krapchan had completed the deal, agents arrested him, then headed to the hotel to round up Shirani and Wedding.

Both Krapchan and Shirani pleaded guilty for participating in the plot. Wedding pleaded not guilty and stood trial in San

When he was 20, Wedding competed in the Salt Lake City Winter Olympics, but he didn't make it past the first round



Diego in November of 2009. His mother and two younger sisters attended the trial, dismayed but supportive, firm in their conviction that Wedding was, at worst, a bit player in the scheme.

In the courtroom, Wedding's lawyer made this exact argument, claiming that Shirani had brought Wedding along as a fall guy. To create the impression that Wedding was bankrolling the entire operation, the lawyer said, Shirani had told

During the 17 months Wedding spent awaiting trial, he was held at the Metropolitan Correctional Center in San Diego, where the FBI monitored his calls. These phone conversations revealed that Wedding was a callous and calculating operator. He had as many as five girlfriends back in BC, all of whom believed themselves to be dating him exclusively. At Wedding's behest, they would wash his cars, clean his condo, or pick up money from his associates and use it to pay off creditors. Wedding spoke to male colleagues on the phone too, bragging about the "good connections" he was making in prison.

This was likely true. Because of its proximity to Tijuana, southern California is one of the hottest spots in the US-Mexican drug trade. For anyone looking to meet well-connected drug traffickers, there may be no better place on earth than a San Diego jail. And Wedding was exactly the kind of person Mexican cartels are known to seek out: a white Canadian with an English name, someone who doesn't fit the stereotype of a cartel associate and can therefore do business abroad without arousing suspicion. "We knew we were giving Wedding all the contacts he needed to return to a life of crime," Kalina says ruefully, "but there was nothing we could do about it."

On November 30, the jury found Wedding guilty of conspiracy to distribute cocaine. At his sentencing hearing on May 6, 2010, Wedding finally struck a note of contrition. "What I did

was completely out of character for me, and it is a personal mission of mine to rebuild my reputation," he said. "As an athlete, I was always taught that there are no second chances, and, well, I'm here asking for exactly that." The judge imposed a lower sentence than he'd initially intended. At the time, 80 to 100 months was standard for such crimes. Wedding got 48 months, minus time served.

He was sent to the Reeves County Detention Complex in Texas, a private prison populated mainly by migrants awaiting deportation. On Valentine's Day in 2011, exactly nine years after he'd competed at Salt Lake City, Wedding, then 29 years old, got married in prison to a Persian Canadian entrepreneur and caterer from BC. Later that year, his new wife would become a person of interest in a police investigation into a Vancouver-area kidnapping, in which a man was held captive for 20 hours, at times with a gun to his head. In 2020, her name would come up again in relation to a police raid on a grow-op in Abbotsford, BC, during which the cops seized two and a half tons of cannabis. The woman was never charged in connection with either crime. When contacted by phone, she said, "These cases have nothing to do with me." When asked about her marriage to Wedding, she added, "It was a long time ago. I live a normal life. I have kids, and I'm remarried."

Was the union a love match? Maybe, but it's more likely that it was a strategic business move. A source close to the San Diego investigation pointed out that, if you're married and imprisoned, you can sometimes get permission to talk to your spouse on the phone without anyone listening in. One thing is certain: despite what Wedding told the judge at his sentencing hearing, he had no intention of going clean.

Wedding said almost nothing to Kalina during his arrest. He was eerily silent—until the strip search at the detention facility, during which he saw Kalina watching him and called him a "faggot." The slur was shocking because it was so unusual. "Typically, when people are arrested, they try to make nice," says Kalina. "They're vulnerable. They know who has power at the moment and who doesn't." Kalina remembers Wedding as the most hostile suspect he's ever arrested.



Through Operation Giant Slalom, the FBI laid charges against men they believe were involved in Wedding's drug trafficking ring

W

edding was released from prison and deported to Canada in December of 2011. If he'd left the country a few years earlier as a mid-level drug smuggler, ambitious but green, he was now returning a new man—well connected and

hardened by prison. He settled in a luxury condo in downtown Montreal, despite having no legal source of income, and soon established himself as a drug kingpin. Drawing on his newfound understanding of drug-trade logistics, he organized far more sophisticated schemes than the ones he'd tried on the West Coast. One of his associates was Philipos Kollaros, who had once been arrested in Toronto with millions of dollars' worth of cocaine. With Wedding's help, Kollaros made a plan to bring hundreds of kilos of cocaine into the country by sea, from Saint Kitts to Newfoundland.

Kollaros knew of a man who purportedly owned a sailboat brokerage and ran a side hustle bringing cocaine from the Caribbean to Atlantic Canada. His name was Joe, and he was exceptionally well connected. Over the previous year, he'd peddled his shipping services to drug smugglers across the country. With an Ottawa restaurateur, Joe had hatched a plan to bring in 3,000 kilograms of cocaine from a pickup point off the coast of Antigua. With a 60-year-old career criminal from Montreal, he'd plotted to move 500 kilos of coke along the same route. And with a pair of Nova Scotia brothers connected to the coast guard, he'd created a lookout system to ensure that his boats could evade law enforcement.

Kollaros was in contact with Joe about the possible Saint Kitts shipment, and he introduced Joe to "the man in charge": Wedding, who lived a short walk from Kollaros's Montreal apartment. When Joe met Wedding, he knew immediately that he was dealing with a sophisticated criminal. Wedding asked Joe detailed questions about the storage capacity of his boats and helped him design a plan to transfer the contraband from a large research vessel, which would pick up the drugs in Saint Kitts, to a fleet of smaller fishing trawlers, which would bring the haul to shore, inconspicuously, in Newfoundland.

The only hitch in the plan: Joe was really an RCMP operative, referred to in court documents as "Undercover Officer Joe," who'd infiltrated Canada's extensive underground drug-trading networks as part of an initiative called Operation Harrington. The sting was designed to target the Mexico-to-Canada cocaine trade, a route that had ballooned in size and become so lucrative that it could be run, on the Latin American side, by only one person: Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán, the most powerful drug lord in the world. The semi-literate child of a farming family in the Mexican state of Sinaloa, El Chapo had become a billionaire by building up the regional Sinaloa Cartel into the biggest drug-smuggling enterprise in history.

At the time of the Harrington sting, the Sinaloa Cartel was doing business in 50 countries, and it was responsible for the majority of the narcotics that moved across the US-Mexico border. In Sinaloa, the cartel basically ran a parallel state. It owned hundreds of businesses, from water parks to daycares; it financed roads and schools; and it bought off the very officials who were supposed to bring it to justice. The cartel was also legendary for its acts of brutality—kidnappings, public decapitations, shoot-outs at funerals in which entire families were slaughtered. As head of

the cartel, El Chapo had presided over 34,000 murders, built a secret network of subterranean railroads at the US-Mexico border and been arrested several times, only to break free by, for instance, hiding in a prison laundry basket or directing associates on the outside to tunnel him out of his cell.

In the early 2010s, El Chapo was specifically targeting Canada for his exports. The domestic price of cocaine was high, and because Canada wasn't then a focal point of US drug-trafficking investigations, he considered the country a safe place for his subordinates to meet with international smugglers or with suppliers of drug precursors. To that end, he'd made inroads with Canadian contacts, people with extensive knowledge and power in the local drug trade. When El Chapo had sent high-ranking deputies to Montreal, they'd met with Kollaros—and probably also with Wedding.

But, on April 20, 2015, before any cocaine could actually enter the country aboard Joe's ships, the RCMP pounced, issuing 15 arrest warrants, including ones for Wedding and Kollaros. They were both charged with conspiracy to import and traffic cocaine, and Wedding got an additional charge for trafficking. The size of the combined conspiracies was staggering. People living in at least seven Caribbean and Latin American nations were implicated in the Harrington sting, which involved an estimated 15 tons of cocaine, worth at least \$750 million.

The Harrington defendants suffered a range of fates. Some pleaded guilty and got lesser sentences; others went to trial and wound up serving hard time. It's unclear whether Kollaros cut a plea deal with the Crown, but he ended up serving a mere day

HE LEFT CANADA A MID-LEVEL DRUG SMUGGLER AND RETURNED A WELL- CONNECTED, HARDENED CRIMINAL

in prison after getting credit for time in remand. That's not to say he got off lightly. On the evening of November 7, 2018, Kollaros was hanging out at Café Cubano, an old-school coffee shop in Montreal's Little Italy, when a man strode in and shot him. Kollaros died in hospital later that night.

The murder has not been solved, although one person—Wedding—had obvious reasons to want Kollaros dead. Kollaros knew all the details of the Saint Kitts plot and could testify against Wedding at a later date. Plus, it was Kollaros who had foolishly brought Joe, the undercover operative, into the Saint Kitts operation in the first place. If Wedding plotted the murder, though, he surely did so from afar. In April of 2015, when the RCMP showed up at his Montreal condo to arrest him, he had already left the country.

Police believe that **Wedding** fled Canada directly into the arms of the Sinaloa Cartel and went into hiding, probably in Mexico, under their protection. In exile, he was bolder than ever. According to the US Department of Justice, he built his drug smuggling enterprise into a billion-dollar organization, which now moves 60 tons of cocaine per year—worth nearly half a billion dollars—most of it through the United States and into Canada. He has collected an impressive list of aliases: RW, James Conrad King, Buddy, Giant, Public Enemy, El Toro (“The Bull”) and El Jefe (“The Boss”). And he’s become the kind of person who kills, sometimes carelessly, without compunction.

Jaspreet Kaur Sidhu, a 28-year-old Caledon woman, became one of his many victims. One night in November of 2023, she was getting ready for bed when she saw a masked man in her hallway. She had a full house: her father, Jagtar, and mother, Harbhajan, were visiting from India and staying in the rental home she shared with her brother, Gurdit, who happened to be out that evening.

Jaspreet recalls the events of that night only in fragments. She remembers hearing her mother scream. She remembers the sound of shots being fired, followed by a horrifying silence. She remembers attempting to stand up, keeling over as a bullet pierced her leg and then crawling, bloodied and semi-immobilized, across her bedroom floor to pick up the phone, prop herself up on a dresser and dial 911. A friend who lived downstairs came outside when he heard the shots and saw a gunman escape into a pickup truck. The vehicle was later found, abandoned and in flames, on a rural stretch of road 20 minutes away.

Jagtar died before the paramedics arrived at the home. Harbhajan, who’d been hit with 22 bullets, died in hospital 13 days after the attack. And Jaspreet, who was hit 13 times, remained paralyzed and unconscious for a month before awakening and slowly regaining her mobility. She and Gurdit were devastated by the attack. Who on earth would want to kill them and their kindly parents?

It wasn’t until almost a year later that the FBI and the Ontario Provincial Police would offer them an answer: they believed the killings had been ordered by Wedding. Their home was owned by a company that has been linked to illegal trucking activities. Wedding may have been trying to retaliate against the previous residents or the owners for a stolen drug shipment. The Sidhu family were the victims of mistaken identity.

In order to run his lethal operation, Wedding had amassed a vast and complex web of subordinates and collaborators. One such mid-level operator was Jonathan Acebedo-Garcia, a Colombian Canadian who grew up in Montreal, where he worked for his family’s cleaning company. In 2009, US agents searched Acebedo-Garcia’s car at the New York–Ontario border and found 23,000 hits of ecstasy laced with meth. Acebedo-Garcia pleaded guilty to conspiracy to traffic drugs and got a four-year sentence, which he partially served at Reeves County, in Texas. That’s probably where he met Wedding, who was serving time there for the San Diego operation. By 2024, according to police, Acebedo-Garcia was working directly with Wedding’s second in command, Andrew Clark, a 30-something elevator mechanic

from Toronto who’d left Canada for Mexico in 2022. Acebedo-Garcia communicated with Clark over Threema, an encrypted messaging app, to help arrange Wedding’s drug-trafficking operations from afar.

On February 20, 2024, at Wedding’s and Clark’s direction, Acebedo-Garcia visited an auto body shop in the GTA, where police say he met with Hardeep Ratte, the Brampton-based owner of a long-haul trucking company, and Ratte’s nephew, Gurpreet Singh. At the meeting, court documents allege, Ratte and Singh agreed to truck shipments of cocaine from southern California into Canada for a flat rate of \$220,000 per load. Representatives from Ratte’s trucking business would drive down to LA to meet with guys from the Wedding enterprise. Acebedo-Garcia would provide Wedding’s men with a dollar-bill serial number; the guys from the trucking company would use that number to identify themselves. Wedding’s associates would then hand over a shipment of cocaine—up to 350 kilos per run—which had been stashed in safe houses around LA. Ratte’s guys allegedly planned to smuggle the contraband into Canada via secret compartments in their trucks.

While these shipments were being arranged, Wedding and Clark were busy eliminating their enemies. Clark had been grooming a young, boyishly handsome man named Malik Cunningham to work as an assassin. He had even flown Cunningham, who’d recently been released from the Toronto South Detention Centre, to Mexico for military-style training in small arms, long guns and target shooting. Then he sent Cunningham back to Canada with a lengthy hit list.

Cunningham’s first assignment from Clark, for which he was paid \$100,000, was to drive to the Niagara home of Randy Fader, a 29-year-old American and Canadian citizen, and, as Clark put it in his instructions, “blow this guy’s top off.” On April 1 of last year, he did just that, shooting Fader execution-style in his driveway before fleeing the scene. Exactly what Fader had done is unknown, but clearly he’d made an enemy of the Wedding enterprise. That job now complete, Clark, communicating over Threema under the pseudonym Mero Wero, started preparing Cunningham for more lucrative hits: \$200,000 to murder “a realtor in Van,” more than twice that amount for “some Arabs” in Toronto and \$1 million for a person in Dubai—all of them had antagonized El Jefe in some way.

On April 14, 2024, Cunningham slipped up. He drove the same car he’d used as his getaway for the Fader murder to a GTA funeral parlour where attendees were mourning the victim of a recent homicide. York Regional Police say they spotted the fraudulent plates and, believing the car to be stolen, pulled Cunningham over and arrested him. When they searched it, they found four cellphones, multiple rounds of ammunition and \$100,000 in cash. On Cunningham’s phone, they found the Threema messages between him and Clark.

Police had a second lucky break in the Wedding case. In early 2024, they convinced Acebedo-Garcia to flip. He was the ideal informant—trusted, well connected and enmeshed in the organization. At last, they had a way in. Drawing on information from Acebedo-Garcia, the authorities commenced Operation Giant Slalom, a cross-border investigation into the Wedding criminal enterprise. Last summer, they raided LA safe houses, stopped truck drivers at the US–Canada border,

and picked up Ratte and Singh—the guys from the Brampton trucking company—at their Ontario homes. Law enforcement confiscated nearly two tons of cocaine, worth more than \$30 million. And on October 8, the Mexican navy descended on a restaurant in Guadalajara and captured Clark, who was later extradited to the United States. All told, 14 men, eight of them Canadian, were arrested. Cunningham has been charged with murder. Ratte and Singh are charged with conspiracy to export, possess and distribute controlled substances and continuing a criminal enterprise. All three are in custody but have not yet entered pleas. Clark is facing nine charges, including murder and attempted murder. He has pleaded not guilty to all counts.

The State of California scheduled a trial for May of this year, with Acebedo-Garcia as the star witness. But, on January 31, Acebedo-Garcia was having lunch at El Indio, a shopping mall in Medellín, Colombia, when a man carrying a handgun with a silencer walked up and shot him dead. Acebedo-Garcia's murder threw the case against Wedding's associates into disarray. His testimony would have been the centrepiece of the trial, the thread that sewed the various scraps of evidence into a coherent narrative. Without him, the state has to find a new strategy—or a new star witness. The trial has been postponed until February of 2026.

The FBI has successfully infiltrated Wedding's networks, rounded up some of his closest collaborators and coordinated a manhunt across multiple countries, but Wedding himself still eludes them. They believe he's somewhere in Latin America, and they've added his name to their roster of 10 Most Wanted Fugitives, a list that once included Osama bin Laden and the legendary Boston crime boss James "Whitey" Bulger. The US State Department is now offering \$10 million—the same amount it offered for El Chapo's sons—to anybody who provides information that leads to Wedding's arrest.

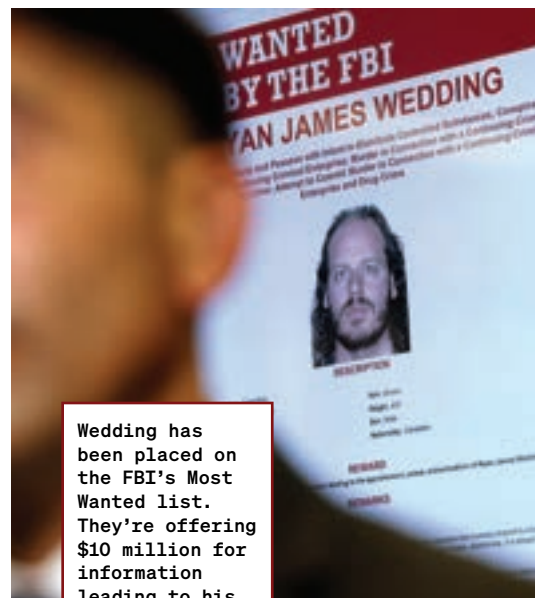
Still at large and still at work, Wedding is like a malevolent ghost: in Canada, he's absent in the flesh, but his presence is felt. His name came up again in June, in connection with Operation Pelican, a series of coordinated Peel police raids on trucks stationed in the GTA or attempting to cross the Canada-US border. The busts led to nine arrests and the seizure of 479 kilograms of cocaine.

The FBI has released two recent photographs of Wedding. The contrast between these images and the Olympic press shots from 23 years ago is jarring. Gone is the bright-eyed, baby-faced dreamer; in his place is a scowling, bulky, mustachioed man. In one shot, he's wearing a \$1,000 Louis Vuitton T-shirt and what appears to be an LA Dodgers cap—a reference, perhaps, to the city where he made his debut as an international drug smuggler and where he still runs a network of stash houses. Kalina, the man who arrested Wedding in San Diego, believes that the former Olympian is living his best life—ensconced in a mansion, wealthy beyond his wildest dreams.

But, as Wedding has become more dangerous, he's also become more endangered. Facing tariff threats from the Trump

administration, Mexico has ramped up efforts to capture cartel leaders, using special forces and the navy to avoid relying on corrupt local officials. The addition of Wedding's name to the FBI's Most Wanted list means that the US government will spend essentially whatever it takes to hunt him down. When the world's richest country decides it wants somebody that much, it usually gets them.

Wedding can't even rely on his allies to protect him. El Chapo was captured and extradited to the US in 2017.



He's locked up in a maximum-security facility in Colorado. On July 25, 2024, Ismael Zambada, a top lieutenant in the Sinaloa Cartel, was reportedly kidnapped by men working for El Chapo's son, Joaquín Guzmán López, and both have since been arrested. The rupture threw the cartel into civil war, leading to highway blockades, shoot-outs and aerial bombings. In one macabre spectacle, members of one Sinaloa faction sent a cooler decorated with wrapping paper and bows to a rival faction. In it was a severed human head. Since the infighting began, cartel leaders who once walked around openly in Sinaloa have gone into hiding or fled to other Latin American countries.

Wedding's story is surely nearing its denouement. Perhaps he'll be captured by special forces and brought to LA to stand trial, at which point his parents and sisters—who live normal lives as engineering consultants and gerontologists and health care administrators—may get to see him, likely for the first time in over a decade. At a minimum, he'll face life in prison. Or maybe he'll be murdered by rivals before law enforcement can get to him. The last act of his story will likely be sensational. Perversely, Wedding will have achieved his dream: he will have solidified his place as Canada's most famous snowboarder. 



When an A&W takeout bag appeared on my neighbour's porch in the middle of the night—followed by another, then another—I became obsessed with solving a fast food whodunit that was as baffling as it was beguiling

THE GREAT FRENCH FRY MYSTERY

BY HARLEY RUSTAD

ILLUSTRATIONS BY GRAHAM ROUMIEU

IT WAS THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT, a Wednesday in early April, when the first bag of A&W french fries was deposited on my neighbour's porch. Nobody saw who put it there, but when my neighbour opened her door to get her mail the following morning, there it was—a fast food bag crumpled up at the foot of her white wooden bench. She hadn't ordered any A&W french fries in the middle of the night, and she wasn't the one who had eaten them either.

The first bag was a mild curiosity. But the next morning my neighbour found another one on her porch, this time with a few fries still inside. She texted me and my wife in a group chat. "So some guy named Rodolphe keeps eating his A&W lunch on my porch," she typed. "Have any of you seen him?" I joked that I would put our two young kids on neighbourhood watch and sent her a video of them staring out the window, looking for someone eating french fries. "That's scary!" my much more compassionate wife

texted back. "How do you know his name?" Because, my neighbour replied, it was written in black Sharpie on both bags: Rodolphe.

Friday morning. Another mostly eaten bag of A&W french fries had appeared on her porch. The third night in a row. Rodolphe again. The following evening, in an attempt to make her space less inviting, my neighbour turned her bench around to face the house. Maybe that would be enough of a deterrent.

On Saturday morning, as I was about to take my kids to the park, I stepped outside to check the weather and glanced across the gap between our houses. My neighbour's bench was still facing the wall, but underneath it was yet another brown A&W bag. I texted her a video. "You have to be fucking kidding me," she replied. "I am going to check if it's Rodolphe." Almost immediately, she texted back a photo: "Rodolphe" scrawled in black Sharpie across the brown paper bag. The mysterious midnight french fry eater had struck again.

MY NEIGHBOUR, who recently turned 50, lives alone. By the time the fourth A&W bag materialized on her porch, she had gone from being curious about what she'd viewed as random littering to frustrated to shaken by the invasion of her privacy. She decided to leave the interloper a note: "Rodolphe: stop throwing your garbage here, thank you." She placed it at the top of the stairs leading to her front door, in clear view.

The next day: a warm Sunday. Before settling into my early morning routine of reading the news with a cup of coffee, I stepped outside. I had to check. Through the dim blue-hour light, I scanned my neighbour's porch. All clear. But then I noticed something sticking out of her metal mailbox, on the wall next to her door. I did a double take. It didn't look like mail. I scurried down our steps and up my neighbour's. There it was: another A&W bag, containing a dozen or so french fries and, this time, two packets of ketchup. This was the fifth night, the fifth bag of fries, the fifth "Rodolphe." Two was a potential coincidence, three an oddity, four a puzzle. But five? I was obsessed.

I told my neighbour that we needed to compare all the bags. "Damn," she answered. She had thrown out the first three. *Garbage day hasn't come yet*, I thought. But, before I could offer to dig through her trash, she texted, half sheepish, half proud: "I went through the garbage." I headed next door, and we laid out the bags on her kitchen island for examination. They were all small, made of the same brown paper, and adorned with the restaurant chain's logo and depictions of a happy community: one figure riding a bike, another planting a garden; there's a dog, a couple holding hands, several people in line at an A&W food truck. Inside each takeout bag was a whisper-thin pouch that had once contained a single order of fries. The tops of the outer bags had been folded down and secured with A&W-branded tape.

We spun a few theories. Perhaps this person worked nights and considered my neighbour's bench an inviting spot to sit and snack on their commute. Maybe a hungry student was returning home after cramming at the library. Later that morning, when I was at the park, my neighbour left me a voicemail. This had all started the day after she'd stuck a Chrystia Freeland sign on her front lawn, she said, the only one along our stretch of street in the leafy west end of Toronto. Was Rodolphe a political prankster? A potato-loving Tory frustrated with the polls? I suggested that someone looking to make a political statement would have taken a more direct approach than repeatedly leaving a single piece of garbage on her porch.

My neighbour, not the kind of person to float conspiracy theories or harbour irrational fears, confessed that she wasn't sleeping well. She was waking up in the night and staying up for hours, obsessing over the bags. She had started locking her doors—not just her house's front and back doors but also her bedroom door. I tried to assuage her fears: it could be rats, maybe a raccoon, but it was probably squirrels that had dug leftover bags of fries out of someone's garbage can and deposited the remains on the porch.

Squirrels, among other animals, have been known to leave things outside people's houses. It's called reciprocal altruism—a kind of evolutionary cooperation. But I knew that theory would have made more sense if these had been random pieces of garbage, not five bags of A&W french fries, five nights in a row, emblazoned with the exact same name. If it was the same squirrel accessing the same garbage night after night, why would it bring just this one piece back to the porch? I kept telling my neighbour it had to be squirrels, if only to avoid admitting it could be something else.



THERE WERE FOOTPRINTS
ON MY NEIGHBOUR'S PORCH—
HUMAN SHOES, TWO FACING
UP, TWO FACING DOWN.
THIS WAS NO SQUIRREL

ON SUNDAY AFTERNOON, seeking some form of confirmation, I rummaged through drawers in our basement until I found our old baby monitor. The camera didn't have the capability to record automatically, but when it detected movement, it sent a notification to our phones. If my wife and I were lucky and quick, we could record whatever was happening in the moment. I asked my neighbour if I could set it up on her porch. "Yes!" she answered enthusiastically. The next day, a Monday, I woke up at 5 a.m. I didn't look at my texts or my emails. The first thing I checked was the camera feed. Nothing. But, a couple of hours later, my neighbour texted: "There is another bag!" Sure enough, directly in front of her door but too low to be seen on the baby monitor's camera, there it was. The sixth bag. The sixth Rodolphe.

My neighbour and I had been canvassing our social circles for theories. One of her friends posited that someone was clumsily flirting with her, trying to ask her out on a date to A&W. Another friend took to ChatGPT, texting her the results: "The search 'Rodolphe and fries and A&W' likely refers to the fact that Rodolphe, a character on the Canadian TV show *The Beaver and the Boomerang*, is an avid fan of A&W root beer and fries. The show often features him enjoying these items, particularly the fries, as a part of his character's enjoyment of fast food and simpler pleasures." I was skeptical of this bizarre hypothesis. I decided to conduct my own online search and found no evidence that *The Beaver and the Boomerang* was ever a TV show—in Canada or elsewhere.

"My friend said I should call the cops and tell them...seems like overkill," my neighbour texted me later that morning. I agreed with her assessment. "Overkill at this point," I texted back. Instead, she called 311 and laid out the story to the city call-centre employee on the other end of the line. The woman was aghast, confused, unsettled by the mystery; she was concerned that stalking could be involved. "You should definitely call the police," she told my neighbour, then concluded on a heartening note: "Usually I get calls from neighbours complaining about each other or ratting them out for something. It's so nice to hear about neighbours helping each other out."

By this point, I was fully invested. Sure, I wanted to ease my neighbour's stress, but I also desperately wanted to solve this mystery. What was happening? Who was behind it? And above all, why? My wife, eight months pregnant, joked that I was spending more time thinking about the french fries than preparing for the birth of our third child. She wasn't entirely wrong. I needed to know for certain that it was a human depositing the A&W bags. But I wasn't willing to stay up all night watching the live camera feed, so I proposed an experiment: we could tape a piece of thread across the staircase leading onto my neighbour's porch. If it was broken by morning, we would know for sure that a human had been there.

"But what if a raccoon trips the thread?" my neighbour asked. I thought for a moment. "Do you have any flour?" I texted. "I have baking soda," she replied. At dusk, we sprinkled the soda across two of her porch steps, a dusting so light it would be impossible to see at night. If someone—or something—breached the stairs, they would leave clear prints behind.

Tuesday morning, 5 a.m. I checked the camera feed. It was on night vision mode, and I could see something on the porch. I ran outside to check our traps. The thread had been snapped, and there were prints in the soda: human shoes. Two facing up, two facing down. This was no squirrel. And there, right beside my neighbour's welcome mat, delivered at 12:33 a.m., was a small brown bag. A&W. Rodolphe. Number seven. A full week of french fries deposited in the middle of the night.

THIS HAS TO BE POLITICALLY MOTIVATED," my neighbour said when she woke up. She does a lot of environmental advocacy. She often displays protest signs on her lawn. She decidedly does not eat fast food. Was someone eating A&W on her porch and leaving the trash to make some kind of statement about her values? Maybe, I suggested, the person on her porch wasn't coming to eat a midnight snack but rather to deliver a midnight snack. It would explain why the restaurant fastened the top of the bag with branded tape—in-store and drive-through purchases aren't taped closed. It would also explain why someone's name was scrawled on the bag—to guide a courier picking up an order.

The eighth day. Just after 1 a.m. My wife, already awake from the baby kicking, received a notification on her phone that someone had been spotted on the porch cam. She opened the app. The image blinked from a porch without an A&W bag to a porch with an A&W bag leaning against our neighbour's door. Rodolphe had struck again. But whoever dropped it off was already gone. Eleven minutes later, my wife got another notification and saw a raccoon ripping open the bag. At 5:30 a.m., while we were making coffee, another notification showed a squirrel snacking on the few remaining fries.

The bags were being delivered, but we still didn't know from where or why. I needed to conduct a test. As we drank our coffee, I downloaded the A&W app and placed an order for a single bag of thick-cut fries. Including delivery fee and tip, the total came to \$10.58. I received a text that my order was being prepared and that it would arrive in 19 minutes. Nineteen minutes later, I received a notification that my order had been delivered. By the time I rushed outside, all I could see was an e-bike courier scooting away, into the dawn, heading for his next pickup.

At my feet was a small brown A&W paper bag, exactly like those left on my neighbour's porch: the same happy community, the same black Sharpie, the same A&W tape securing the top. "Now that I know someone isn't sitting on my porch in the middle of the night, I'm not scared anymore," my neighbour said later that day, grateful for my experiment. A gig worker was delivering the fries, and animals were eating them.

That night, at 11:49 p.m., the ninth bag of french fries was deposited on my neighbour's porch. Our next step was clear: head to the source. There are multiple A&W restaurants in our neighbourhood, but the text I'd received confirming my order had noted which location had prepared the fries. It was 800 metres away. My neighbour and I decided to go for a walk.

OUR CLOSEST A&W LOOKED like any of them, like all of them. Outside, an orange sign advertising: "Home of the Burger Family." Inside, faux-wood-panelled tables and booths, a mirror-clean stainless-steel counter, fridges of root beer. And crucially, like many A&Ws, it was open 24 hours. We approached the counter, and I spoke a phrase I'd hoped never to utter: "Can I speak with a manager?"

The man behind the counter was the assistant manager. I introduced us, two neighbours, and explained the mystery: the deliveries of french fries, the odd hours, the distinct tape on the bags, "Rodolphe" in Sharpie. I outlined some of our theories and the lengths we had gone to confirm or disprove them. Obliging but clearly confused, the man turned to his tablet to check if any Rodolphes had ordered french fries in the middle of the night from that location. As he scrolled back through the previous night, and the night before that, and the night before that, there they were: Rodolphes, again and again. Single orders of french fries.

These orders hadn't come through A&W's app, the assistant manager explained; they were placed through Uber Eats. After orders come in from a third-party delivery app, all the A&W store sees is what the order is for, a first name and the first letter of a last name, and eventually the time it was delivered. The restaurant doesn't record addresses, phone numbers or full names. Peering at the tablet over the man's shoulder, I spotted the first letter of Rodolphe's last name. I took note of it as well as several order numbers.

When I got home, I conducted another test: I placed an order for A&W french fries through Uber Eats. Would this one look the same as Rodolphe's? In fact, yes—the bag of fries that was left on my welcome mat half an hour later looked exactly like his. Using the baby monitor, we had uncovered the when. Via our tests, we had figured out the how. And we had solved one who: who had been eating the fries. But other questions remained. Who was ordering them? Who was Rodolphe? And why was someone repeatedly sending orders of french fries to my neighbour in the middle of the night?

A friend of mine suggested that a technological glitch was to blame and that the fries were being reordered by mistake every night. But, if some computer somewhere was malfunctioning and placing the same order again and again, why were the deliveries coming at irregular times throughout the night? It was too personal, too human. Was it a scam? I wondered if someone on the other side of the world was hacking a delivery app during their nine-to-five, our middle of the night.

A journalism contact connected me with a former senior employee of a major food delivery app, who agreed to speak to me only on the condition of anonymity. This person wondered if someone was making repeat orders of something cheap in order to game a rewards program. Or, they said, this could be scammers trying to validate or test stolen credit cards, purchasing something cheap and innocuous to avoid a card's fraud detection measures, and the address where the food was sent had been selected at random. It's a practice called "card testing" or "card cracking." According to Visa's website, it's meant to reveal "which cards have been cancelled or deactivated—and which ones are still valid. Once the cancelled or declined card numbers are weeded out, fraudsters move on to make larger purchases or resell the validated information."

An *LA Times* article from 2023 raised a similar theory after residents living in the northeast of the city repeatedly received un-ordered deliveries from McDonald's and Starbucks, often of single low-cost items: a carton of milk, an order of french fries. Follow-up articles never quite got to the bottom of things, though they posited that deliveries like this might be an experiment conducted by a psychology class—or a way for thieves to canvas a house to see if anyone is home. I didn't mention that last theory to my neighbour.

* * *

PRIOR TO THE A&W FRIES showing up, my neighbour and I would chat over tea or talk across the fence that separates our two backyards—politics and the environment, mainly. More recently, it was Trump and Carney, tariffs, nationalism, elections, the media. But, for weeks this spring, we forgot about all that. We found ourselves tied up in a riddle—at times a disconcerting one, then a funny one, but every day, with every new bag of french fries, an engrossing distraction. The 311 operator was right. This is what neighbours are for. It's a relationship that goes beyond a quiet wave and nod, a cup of sugar, an emergency. Neighbours are there when the world gets a bit weird, or scary, and we turn to those closest to us—not families a province or a country away, not friends on the other side of town, but those with whom we happen to share a wall or a fence.

On the 10th morning, after nine nights and nine bags of A&W french fries, my neighbour's porch was empty. Was it over? Had the assistant manager at our local A&W flagged Rodolphe's name in their system, cancelling future orders from him? Three more mornings went by, and nothing. Then, on the fourth morning, as I stepped outside to check the mail, I saw it. Another brown A&W bag on my neighbour's porch, with a few loose fries inside. Whoever had been sending the bags of A&W fries had taken four days off—the Easter long weekend. They were back to work on Tuesday.

That was the last bag of french fries delivered to my neighbour's door. It was around the same time that I contacted Uber looking for clarity. I gave my neighbour's address, the name Rodolphe, and the approximate dates and times of the deliveries. Two



THE EIGHTH DAY, JUST AFTER
1 A.M., MY WIFE RECEIVED
A NOTIFICATION ON HER PHONE
THAT SOMEONE—OR SOMETHING—
HAD BEEN SPOTTED
ON THE PORCH

employees at the company reached out to me within half an hour of each other. In an email, a safety communications staffer wrote that "Uber takes reports of unsolicited deliveries seriously" and that they had "identified and banned the account behind the fraudulent orders." The email also included the words "crime," "fraudsters" and "illegal activity," so I pressed for more information about the exact nature of the scam. The representative noted that often these kinds of repeat unwanted orders are conducted in order to "age an account"—to build a positive Uber rating—or "place 'good' orders before committing a larger scheme," but they declined to offer specifics about what exactly was happening. "We don't want to give others ideas," they wrote.

I can see why. Scams are everywhere. And while they often seem impersonal, behind each one is a person, a schemer lighting the match that sets off a chain reaction—in this case, through apps, credit card companies, fast food restaurants and delivery drivers, all the way to my neighbour's door. And at the end of the fuse, there are people too—most often victims, or in our case, two people fixated on the compelling task of solving a mystery. Weeks after the last bag of A&W french fries appeared on my neighbour's porch, she sent me a text: "I miss Rodolphe."

I had a first name, a last initial and a city. With that little bit of information, I conducted an internet search to see if I could find our Rodolphe. A LinkedIn page popped up, then a Facebook page: same first name, same initial I'd seen on the A&W tablet, listed as living in Toronto. I messaged him and sent emails—bizarre to receive, no doubt—describing the mystery and asking if perhaps he had lost his credit card or had an account hacked that spring. Surely he wasn't ordering french fries every night and sending them to the wrong address. Surely he was a victim who'd had his information stolen and used by a scammer eight time zones away. But Rodolphe never wrote back.

One day, while I waited in vain for a response, I casually scrolled through the photos Rodolphe had uploaded to Facebook. That's when I saw them: a selfie overlaid with the French flag, and multiple pictures of burgers and fries. 🍷



The Drake Hotel's must-try new menu

Executive chef Daniel Hyam's revamped menu brings bold flavours, contemporary spins and crave-able shareables to the Queen West hotspot

CREATED FOR **THE DRAKE**

The Drake Hotel is redefining what it means to eat, sip and share a meal in the city with a refreshed menu that celebrates snacks, bold flavours, sushi and elevated brunch—from morning to late night.

For more than 20 years, the Drake Hotel has set the standard for innovative hospitality in Toronto. It's an iconic multi-venue destination for locals and tourists alike, is consistently ranked among the top hotels in the city and is known for its inviting accommodations, buzz-worthy events, a sun-soaked rooftop patio and an eclectic array of award-winning eats. Now, with their new executive chef Daniel Hyam and his reimagined menu, it's once again raising the bar.

"I leaned into shareable plates and elevated the sushi program, making sure the daytime snacks were just as bold as the evening mains," Hyam says of the new culinary course he's charted. "Whether you're popping in for a quick bite or settling in for a full meal, the menu flows naturally from day to dusk—full of vibrant, crave-worthy fusion flavours that feel familiar yet surprising."

A native Torontonion, George Brown graduate and veteran of high-volume kitchens across North America—including a decade under chef David Lee at the highly acclaimed Nota Bene—Hyam signed on at the Drake in 2025 and set about revitalizing the already-popular menu.

"There's a real creative energy that runs through everything at the Drake, and that kind of environment is incredibly inspiring as a chef," he says. "This approach opens up new possibilities and allows us to create a menu that's diverse, exciting and full of contrasting flavours."

Much of the inspiration for the rebuilt menu comes from the city itself. "Toronto has an incredible food scene thanks to its diverse communities," says Hyam. "So many cultures come together. I wanted the food to reflect that energy and vibrancy."

Must-try items include the sticky baby back ribs, slow-cooked to tender perfection and brightened with fresh aromatics. The Umai bowl offers a balanced blend of flavours and textures featuring miso-glazed salmon. Pork and shrimp pot stickers—topped with kewpie, tonkatsu, bonito and scallion—deliver a punchy, umami-rich start to any meal. The playful Drake Dogs—garnished with queso, pickled jalapeño and smoked tomatillo relish—bring lively energy to the mix. A fresh addition, the green papaya and mango slaw with chili lime vinaigrette, mint, Thai basil, crispy noodles, cucumber and peanuts adds bright, crunchy contrast. The expanded sushi selection features delicate options like flame-seared aburi unagi dressed with red shiso and a luscious glaze. Together, these dishes reinforce the Drake's reputation as a destination for fun, unforgettable food alongside their renowned late-night DJs and a venerable cocktail program.

The Drake's weekend brunch—already a Toronto institution—has also been rebooted. With elevated comfort classics and cheeky takes on morning favourites, it remains one of the best tables in the city. "Brunch is part of the Drake's DNA," says Hyam. "We've kept the hits and added a few new reasons to keep coming back."

The Drake Hotel's new menu showcases a lineup of dynamic, shareable dishes rooted in one core philosophy: playful, well-executed food that balances bright, fresh ingredients with bold and satisfying flavours. It's the kind of menu that brings people together, where good food meets great company. Through this culinary program, the Drake continues to deliver on what it's always done best: creating fun, memorable dining experiences for locals and travelers alike.



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THE NEW
MENU OR TO
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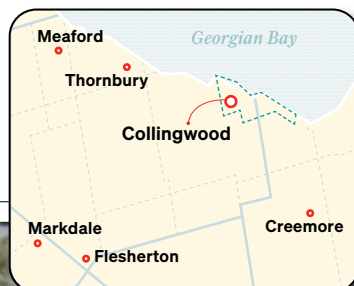
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PRIMER

County Fare

Eleven delicious reasons to take a road trip to Simcoe and Grey counties, two hot new dining destinations

BY LINDSEY KING

Craft beer and
Acadian barbecue
at Lovebird Beer x
Belle Marche





Lovebird Beer x Belle Marche

82 Sykes St. N., Meaford,
lovebird.beer

THIS PAST SPRING, Alex Chramow and Emily Fonberg packed up Lovebird Brewing, their boutique Thornbury brewery, and moved it up the road to Meaford. The new location has two things the old one didn't: a kitchen and a sit-down dining room. So they tapped chef Ryan Praskey (formerly of the Oxley and the Queen and Beaver), who now serves Acadian barbecue with East Coast kindness at Belle

Marche (named after the Cape Breton area where his grandparents live). It's a match made in Maritime heaven.

WHAT TO EAT: The "toe rags"—smoked trout croquettes with dill sauce (pictured above)—the barbecue brick chicken or the brisket platter with all the fixings.

WHAT TO DRINK: Glasses of Screech go for just \$10—and you don't even have to kiss a cod to get the deal.

OPENER AND LOVEBIRD BY JOSH AND KATIE/HOWDY PICTURES. GOOD GRIEF BY FRANCES BEATTY. CHIN CHIN BY JESSICA GRANDLEMIERE/ @LIGHTANDSHADOWPHOTO



GOOD GRIEF COFFEE ROASTERS

28 Bruce St. S.,
Thornbury, and 7535
County Rd. 9, Creemore,
goodgriefcoffee.com

LAST YEAR, Alix Haddy opened an offshoot of her Thornbury café and roastery in Creemore, complete with a large patio that's already popular with the area's cyclists. Haddy's priority was to roast and brew coffee made from sustainably sourced beans, but her house-made doughnuts have stolen the show from the humble cups of joe.

WHAT TO EAT: With rotating flavours like freeze-dried raspberry and rhubarb (a spring-time hit) or peaches and cream (hello, peak summer), there is no wrong doughnut choice.

WHAT TO DRINK: A cup of Ethiopian coffee, which has its own sweet and fruity profile of strawberry and chocolate milk.



Chin Chin

180 Mill St., Creemore, chinchinshop.ca



CREEMORE'S NEW wine bar and bottle shop is run by Toronto expats Kieran Coyne (Union, Côte de Bœuf, Heart's Tavern) and his wife, Tammy Yiu, and feels plucked from the streets of Paris. The 361-square-foot space is filled with barrel tables, though guests often spill out the doors to sip on sidewalk benches.

WHAT TO EAT: They're keeping the food menu simple—think grazing boards loaded with freshly baked baguette, olives, cheeses and charcuterie—but they also host local chefs and businesses for summertime pop-ups.

WHAT TO DRINK: Chin Chin has a list of more than 100 bottles plus a rotating roster of wines by the glass, which can be sampled in two- or five-ounce portions.

Down Home

135299 Ninth Line, Markdale,
downhomerestaurant.com



HANNAH HARRADINE and Joel Gray's Michelin-recommended restaurant was born out of their catering business, Sumac and Salt. The farm-to-table kitchen will soon be open three nights a week for 16 guests to enjoy a 10-course menu that showcases the produce from their own property alongside local, sustainably raised meat. No matter the weather, everyone takes their first bite around the outdoor kitchen's open fire, followed by a walk through the gardens before heading back inside to gather around the table. The couple also recently opened an on-site retail outpost, offering farm-fresh ingredients and Ontario-made artisanal goods to go.

WHAT TO EAT: A recent show-stopping main was fire-grilled duck breast with hakurei turnips and preserved golden plum.

WHAT TO DRINK: The all-Canadian wine pairing (at an extra cost).

BELLO PIZZA

72 First St., Collingwood,
bello-pizza.com



THIS PIZZERIA, helmed by former Soho House chefs Andrew LeBlanc and Mike Trudeau, had a short life in Bloor West Village, tucked inside a café and bottle shop. The closing of Bello's BWV location had Redditors mourning the loss of its Roman-meets-New-York-style pies. Thankfully, the Collingwood outpost retains the hits, which means the popular Spicy Goat—cold-fermented dough piled with fresh goat cheese, Calabrian chillies and hot honey—is only a two-hour drive away.

WHAT TO EAT: The Spicy Goat, obviously.

WHAT TO DRINK: The Georgian Bay Mule, a refreshing blend of vodka, ginger beer and peach.



The Gate

14 Sydenham St.,
Flesherton,
thegategreyhighlands.ca

JONATHAN GUSHUE (Fogo Island Inn, Langdon Hall) and Jennifer Belanger (One Restaurant, the Bruce Hotel) like to say their new restaurant in the quiet community of Flesherton feels like your favourite pair of blue jeans—comfortable and easy to slip into. The menu, which celebrates the bounty of Grey County's farmers and producers, is gently European inspired, with dishes meant for sharing. Gushue and Belanger also firmly believe in supporting education, so students of any age can order an app, a main, a side, a dessert and a mocktail for just \$25.

WHAT TO EAT: For lunch, charred albacore tuna salad with fennel and radish in a brown butter vinaigrette or house-made semolina pasta tossed in a pistachio pesto. For dinner, popcorn bread with a side of pork butter and rosemary honey, followed by poached scallops with mayo, cucumber and toasted hazelnuts.

WHAT TO DRINK: Here's to You Mr. Robinson, a riff on a manhattan made with maple syrup from a local sap tapper.



Après Snack Bar at Penny's Motel

141 King St. E., Thornbury,
pennysmotel.ca

ROADSIDE MOTELS aren't exactly synonymous with freshly shucked oysters and glasses of chablis—but Penny's is no ordinary motor inn. It's co-owned by John Belknap of John and Sons Oyster House, so it's no surprise that the menu at the motel's lobby bar is laser-focused on seafood—including a garlic-roasted shrimp cocktail and a bright and spicy scallop-shrimp ceviche. There's also a wide range of elevated snacky staples, including brisket sliders, oven-baked nachos and "share-cuterie" boards. You don't need to be a guest of the motel to grab a bite at the bar or enjoy a drink on the covered patio, but anyone staying the night can end their day with fireside s'mores and a schvitz in the courtyard sauna.

WHAT TO EAT: A dozen oysters (only \$2 each on Tuesday nights).

WHAT TO DRINK: An equally briny dirty martini.

BAR GONDOLA

209 Hurontario St., Collingwood,
bargondola.com

THIS APRÈS-SKI-themed bar schussed onto Collingwood's food-and-drink scene last spring. Inside, an avalanche of cedar paneling, retro posters and vintage sports equipment brings Alpine chalet vibes just a 15-minute drive from Blue Mountain. And while winter is for snow bunnies, summertime means the sidewalk patio is in full swing.

WHAT TO EAT: Guests can scarf fresh slices from Bar Gondola's sister spot, Later Pizza.

WHAT TO DRINK: Pints of locally made lager, refreshing highballs or (for those who don't plan on rising with the sun) the "shotski," four shots lined up on a vintage Fischer ski for friends to shoot back in tandem.



Georgian Bay Surf Club

135 Hurontario St.,
Collingwood,
georgianbaysurfclub.com

WHAT'S A SURF CLUB doing in Ontario? It turns out that salt water doesn't get to have all the fun. Freshwater surfing is just as cool, which is why Curtis Eichenberger started his community surf club in 2017. Earlier this year, he joined forces with some local entrepreneurs and opened their new spot: a totally tubular restaurant, bar and surf shop in a former Play It Again Sports.

WHAT TO EAT: The menu transports guests to beach towns—be they in Hawaii, Florida, Spain, Mexico or Morocco—with dishes like ahi tuna and avocado salad served on a bed of fresh greens, confit beef tongue skewers slathered in guava barbecue sauce, and octopus and bone marrow tacos with Spanish romesco sauce and tomatillo salsa.

WHAT TO DRINK: Tequila, mezcal and rum cocktails adhere to the tropical theme. Try the rummy Kingston Negroni, the Italian classic by way of Jamaica.



Pom Pom

6 Bruce St. N., Thornbury,
and 25 Sykes St. N.,
unit 2, Meaford, pompomtreats.com



ANDREA GREYERBIEHL and Rheanna Kish have been making small-batch dairy- and plant-based ice cream (the latter with an oat and coconut milk mix) for more than a decade, and their pints have made it into the freezers of Summerhill Market. They churn out a list of flavours that includes classics like bubblegum, cookies and cream, and rocky road as well as seasonal one-offs like strawberry-rhubarb and cherry-lemonade. Pom Pom's butter-yellow-and-white-brick hut in Thornbury is a go-to for scoops, floats and ice cream sandwiches, while the year-round storefront in Meaford also offers coffee, making for some interesting affogato-esque combos.

Bonus: both locations are within walking distance of a beach.

WHAT TO EAT: A family-sized ice cream flight of five flavours.

WHAT TO DRINK: A Neapolitan ice cream latte—the best of both worlds—or a key lime float.



THE PINE

7535 County Rd. 9,
Creemore,
thepinecreemore.ca

HUSBAND-AND-WIFE team

Jeremy and Cassie Austin co-own this Michelin-starred kitchen, where they serve up a dynamic tasting menu inspired by Jeremy's travels to Italy, Hong Kong and China. Currently, the set 17-course journey highlights hyper-local seasonal produce, much of which is grown on Cassie's parents' farm in Proton Station.

WHAT TO EAT: Jeremy's signature dish, the Tea Egg, is a free-range hen's egg from Conestoga Farms soaked in black tea, star anise and tsaoko (Chinese black cardamom); stuffed with smoked mustard and whipped yolk; and topped with red frill, Acadian sturgeon caviar and coriander blossom.

WHAT TO DRINK: The PEC sparkling wine that starts and steals the show, Last House Vineyard's Joie de Vivre.



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Elle Cuisine dinner series with chef Taeyoung Jang: TL Insiders enjoyed an intimate and immersive evening at Archive Studios, where chef Taeyoung Jang served a seven-course tasting menu inspired by his Korean roots, French training and love of seasonal Canadian ingredients. Each dish reflected a chapter of his story, blending bold flavours with elegant presentation. The night was a true celebration of culinary creativity and cultural fusion.



Rooftop spring fashion soirée at the Taylor with Tricon Residential: The stylish soirée at the Taylor treated members to an evening of fashion-forward fun atop one of the city's most chic rooftops. Guests sipped signature cocktails inspired by fashion icons, enjoyed light bites and danced to the beats of a live DJ—all while soaking in the stunning CN Tower views. It was the perfect opportunity for guests to flaunt their spring style and connect with fellow fashion lovers in a uniquely curated downtown setting.



**Biff's Bistro 25th anniversary dinner—
a celebration through stories and cuisine:**

In Biff's Bistro's intimate Red Room, members gathered for a memorable evening celebrating decades of culinary excellence through stories, flavours and fine wine. Guests were welcomed with oysters and canapés followed by a beautifully curated four-course meal from Biff's most celebrated chefs, including special guest Amanda Ray. Each dish paid tribute to the restaurant's legacy, making for a heartfelt celebration of one of Toronto's most iconic French dining spots.



Silversmithing workshop at the Gem Studio:
TL Insider's spent a creative evening at the Gem Studio, crafting custom sterling silver pieces with the help of expert silversmiths. Guests enjoyed wine, snacks and a relaxed atmosphere as they designed one-of-a-kind rings, pendants and more. Each attendee left with their handmade creation and a voucher for a complimentary permanent jewellery session—a sparkling night of craftsmanship and connection.



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GREAT SPACES

The High Life

Four condo rooftops built for resort-level relaxation

BY ANDREA YU



Maple House

Where: Canary Landing

Developer: Dream Unlimited, Tricon Residential and Kilmer Group

Landscape architect: CCxA

Year opened: 2023

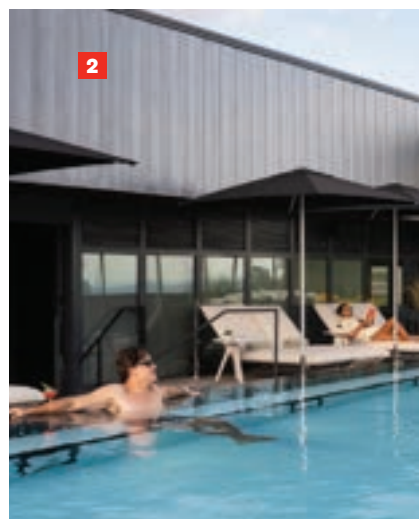
Amenities: Pool, community garden, kids' play area, green roof, barbecue and lounge, covering 17,768 square feet

CCxA, the architects behind Sugar Beach, Berczy Park and Love Park, among other downtown public spaces, brought a similar ethos to the design of the outdoor areas of Maple House at Canary Landing. “We approach amenities like parks,” says landscape architect Marc Hallé. “We wanted to build in flexibility so that there are opportunities for activities across all hours of the day and into the evening.”

Maple House has five outdoor spaces spanning more than 17,000 square feet across three residential buildings: Maple East, Maple Central and Maple South. While each building has its own eighth-floor barbecue and lounge area, additional amenities on the third floors are open to residents of all three buildings. On Maple Central's third-floor deck are loungers and sun umbrellas around an oblong pool [1] that sits on a raised lawn, with a lower perimeter and safety railing below. “The pool area is higher than the guardrails, so you don't feel like you're enclosed,” Hallé says.

The sprawling lawn [2] provides space for outdoor activities. There's also a semi-circular sunken kids' play area connected to an indoor children's room. It's bordered by a bronze-coloured enclosure that sits on a curved wall with synthetic-turf-covered seating. “It's like a little amphitheatre for kids,” says Hallé.

A bridge [3] connects the pool area to a community garden on the third floor of Maple West. Evergreen Brick Works maintains the 12 raised concrete beds and leads monthly gardening classes and plant workshops here, including an annual spring planning session where residents choose what they want to grow. A green roof [4] loaded with sun-loving plants like asters, ferns and sumac provides even more outdoor zen.



Elm-Ledbury

Where: Queen and Church

Developer: Fitzrovia

Landscape architect: Hariri Pontarini Architects

Year opened: 2024

Amenities: Infinity pool, dog run, kids' play area, lounge, barbecues, pizza oven, DJ area and fire tables, covering 12,385 square feet

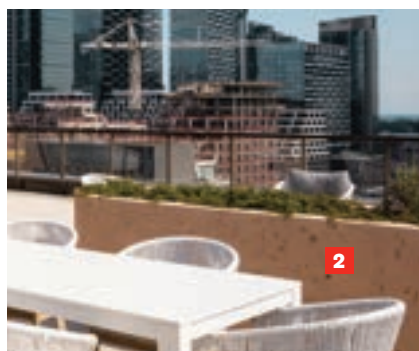
When planning the outdoor amenities for this pair of purpose-built rental towers in the Garden District, developer Fitzrovia focused on giving residents an extension of their living spaces. They enlisted the architects at Hariri Pontarini to design an infinity pool [1], lounge and barbecue area for each tower, plus a kids' play space and a dog run, located on bridges connecting the two buildings.

The pools are on the penthouse levels [2], surrounded by cabanas and sun loungers. A lawn for outdoor yoga and

themed parties is in the works at Ledbury. Below, a separate 10th-floor lounge area is equipped with commercial-grade Napoleon barbecues and pizza ovens [3], along with gas fire tables and seating. There's even a DJ booth with all the necessary equipment plug-ins.

The kitchen and lounge are free for residents to use, and the appliances are bookable via the building's app. "We want to give people enough offerings so that they can host their own parties here," says Bahar Joshan Poosh, Fitzrovia's executive vice-president of design. The outdoor floors are heated to melt any snow, so the kitchens are usable year-round. In the winter, the building sets up heated domes that seat up to 12 for cozy "outdoor" dining.

Joshan Poosh has seen how the shared amenities and events—the building hosts two or three every month—have created opportunities for residents to connect. "People meet each other through the events, and then they become friends and start hosting their own parties together," she says.



123 Portland

Where: Portland and Adelaide

Developer: Minto

Landscape architect: NAK Design Strategies

Year opened: 2024

Amenities: Cabanas, outdoor yoga and fitness lawn, outdoor fire tables, lounge and green roof, covering 3,250 square feet

Robert Ng, a principal landscape architect at NAK, has been designing outdoor spaces for more than five decades. While he's worked on high-profile public projects like Maple Leaf Square (also known as Jurassic Park) and the Rutherford GO station, his brief for 123 Portland was to create an alfresco space with an intimate, boutique-y feel.

The north side of the rooftop features

a curved bench made of ipe, or Brazilian walnut. Herringbone and checkerboard pavers [1] add visual interest, and terracotta planters [2] create a soft, organic feel. There are three kitchen areas with dining tables, plus cushy lounge seating around natural-gas fire tables.

At the southern edge, a second lounge area serves as a flex space for socializing or remote work (it's equipped with plugs and Wi-Fi). There's a pergola overhead for shade and more of those terracotta planters holding Indigenous grassy reeds. "You're embraced by vegetation out here," says Ng.

For even more serious lounging, cabanas with daybeds [3] are tucked into a green roof [4] with native trees, shrubs and grasses. A flat expanse of lawn nearby can be used for outdoor yoga or, as Ng says, for when you just want to feel the grass underneath your feet.

The Well, Classic Series I

Where: Front and Spadina

Developer: Tridel

Landscape architect: The MBTW Group

Year opened: 2024

Amenities: Rooftop pool, dog run, lounge with barbecues, TV lounge with fireplace and community plots, covering 21,904 square feet

Landscape architects at the MBTW Group designed the outdoor areas at four of the Well's seven residential buildings. "They were all different shapes, so it wasn't a cookie-cutter approach where we could just copy and paste," says principal designer and partner Christine Abe.

The tallest of the towers is the 38-storey Classic Series I. Its sky-high rooftop features a pool and a large wood deck with cabanas and loungers. Beside it is a tiled misting area where residents who aren't in the mood to fully submerge can still cool down and enjoy the view.

The rest of the amenities are located on a seventh-floor podium. A green space enclosed by a walkable pathway [1] connects to what Abe describes as a "series of outdoor rooms": seating, kitchen and dining areas, plus a TV lounge. On the north side of the podium, there's an outdoor dog run as well as a second seating area with chaise lounges and bistro tables. "People can read and relax or use this as a co-working space," says Abe. There are also three outdoor dining pods [2], each with custom-designed overhead trellises that create dappled shade. Two outdoor kitchens outfitted with sinks, Kalamazoo pizza ovens and Napoleon barbecues [3] round out the amenities.

The bookable outdoor TV lounge is equipped with a 65-inch screen and a two-sided linear gas fireplace [4]. "It's usable in fall or early spring with a fire on," says Abe. Along the sunny southern edge of the building, facing Front Street, there's a large garden that's maintained by the building, plus 12 prefabricated garden beds that are "auctioned off" to residents who wish to grow their own plants.





NEIGHBOURHOOD CRAWL

Kardinal Offishall's Queen West

The multi-platinum artist and music exec shares his go-to spots

BY ARISA VALYEAR

KARDINAL OFFISHALL is Canada's hip hop ambassador and one of Toronto's pioneering rappers. When he was growing up, his family moved frequently, bouncing around Scarborough, Flemingdon Park and Oakwood Village. Today, as a vice-president at Universal Music, he splits his time between his home in Vaughan and his Queen West pied-à-terre, hosting celebrities at his three-bedroom loft. "There's a pulse here," he says. "Queen West has its own energy." This month, he drops his new EP, *Everyday, Sometimes*, and it hits close to home—he filmed the video for its single, "Let Em Out," in the Queen alleys at the foot of his loft. Here, he takes us on a tour of his favourite haunts.

For a portal to Japan

SANKO TRADING CO.

"My wife was raised in Japan, so we like to pop in here and pick up anything from candies to toys to specialty foods. They have so many different items, and part of the fun is



seeing what's new. Maybe it's a red bean-flavoured Kit Kat or a new type of soda. We've visited Japan several times, and whenever we start missing it, we come here. It's our mini source of Japanese culture." 730 Queen St. W., toronto-sanko.com



For pumping out bangers

NOBLE STREET STUDIOS

"I've always had my own studio where I record by myself, but when it comes to collaborative sessions, I like vibing in a big space. At Noble Street, we've done some great things. Just the other day, we recorded a Toronto choir for Skip Marley's album. Around 2015, when Will Smith was in town filming *Suicide Squad*, I got a call to record with him at Noble. It was legendary, but the music never got released." 17 Noble St., noblestreestudios.com

For spectacular specs

SPECTACLE

"This place carries so many different types of glasses, and they make and sell their own line named after Toronto streets. Years ago, I bought a pair inspired by a street in Oakwood Village. They know glasses, and they know what you need." 752 Queen St. W., spectaclelovesyou.com



For Prince-approved 'fits

CALL AND RESPONSE

"I discovered this place many moons ago. I needed something to wear to an awards show, and someone told me

to go here. Apparently they used to dress Prince. If it was good enough for Prince, it was good enough for me. I'd say about 60 to 70 per cent of my red-carpet outfits have been from Call and Response. Shout-out to owners Cathy, Lori and Annie—they craft some of the most intricate clothes in the world." 793 Queen St. W., second floor, callandresponseclothing.com



For dinner with a side of party

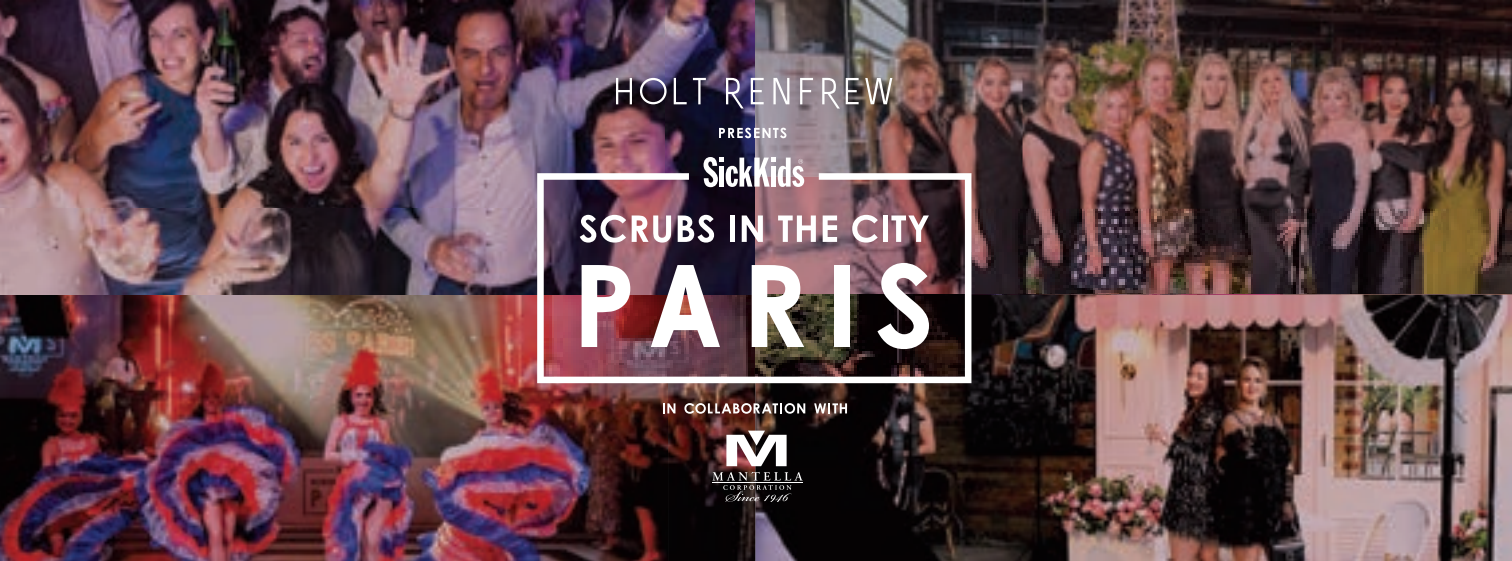
HARLEM RESTAURANT

"For Black folks in Toronto, this spot is more than a restaurant; it's a gathering place. It closed for six years, and we really missed it. Now it's reopened. The staff are so welcoming, and the food is top-notch. I love their Shrimp Rundown, and the candied plantain is out of control. They smoke the jerk chicken out back in the alley, which is fantastic. They've also got a dance floor and a stage, so at any time, it can go from a chill dinner to an all-out party." 745 Queen St. W., harlemrestaurant.com

For a belt-busting meal on a budget

ALI'S ROTI

"Ali's is downtown's best roti. I've taken many visitors from around the world here. My staple is the paratha roti. If you're on the move and need to bet on one meal to last you, it's the best bang for your buck. Once you see how huge their roti is, you won't question the value. And their ice cream is good too." 1446 Queen St. W., alisroti.ca



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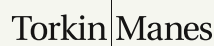
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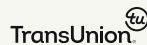
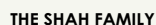
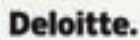
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The best things to see, do, read and hear this month in Toronto

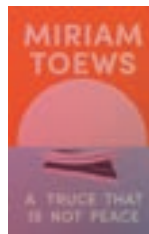
BY ANTHONY MILTON



A memoir about family and futility

A Truce That Is Not Peace Out August 26

BOOK Miriam Toews grew up in a small Mennonite community in Steinbach, Manitoba, a setting that has coloured many of her novels, including *A Complicated Kindness*, *All My Puny Sorrows* and *Women Talking*, which was adapted into an Oscar-winning film by Sarah Polley in 2022. But Toews's latest book, *A Truce That Is Not Peace*, is her first true memoir. Beginning with a deceptively simple question—Why do I write?—the author casts herself back to her childhood and recalls memories of her father and sister, who both died by suicide. These recollections are interspersed with contemporary scenes from the writer's family life, which unfolds around the west-end Toronto home she shares with her partner, mother, daughter, son-in-law and grandkids. We spoke to Toews about the futility of writing, the oppressiveness of her hometown and the joys of a matriarchal household.



First things first: what prompted you to write *A Truce That Is Not Peace*?

I started it about a year and a half ago. I was in a period of reflection, wrestling with the question, Why do I write? I was struggling with it. I tend to find

out why I wrote something after the fact. Writing itself always seems futile. How could I possibly choose the right words to describe a feeling? But, knowing myself, I had to try. A friend of mine once described this book as

building a wall and tearing it down at the same time.

That sounds surprisingly pessimistic coming from such a successful writer.

From the moment any writer starts working on a new piece, they already know it's a failure. We try to express our thoughts and emotions, to get them fully outside of ourselves, and of course, we can't. But the work becomes something in the process. Early on in my so-called career, I would have things so planned out. But, these days, going into a book is like going into a darkness. I'm always a little blind. It's only afterward that I think, *Oh, this was about that*. Or I don't even try. I leave it up to others to figure it out. The parsing of things—I do that less and less.

Does the title of your memoir describe your relationship to writing, then?

Yes, exactly. It's a line from a prose piece by Christian Wiman, an American poet. I thought it was perfect. I'm never going to be calm or at peace or aware or hip to this wisdom that people say they achieve in old age. There are times when writing seems ridiculous and self-indulgent—I should be out there in the world, squirrelling away emotions and experiences, not trying to represent them on the page. But I do. I'm a writer, but I don't know why.

Many of your books have incorporated events from your life, but this is your first true memoir. What made you want to write more directly about your experiences?

I have difficulty with the term *memoir*. I suppose I've been writing about myself forever. But, as I wrote this, and as the structure and tone of the book came together, nonfiction seemed to be the genre that fit it best.

Do you feel any differently about your past after writing about it?

I've been trying very hard, late in my life, to focus on the present—drink lots of water, live in the moment, be healthy—and also to move forward, look ahead. But I'm obsessive about my past. I keep thinking, wondering and writing about it. My thoughts about it are changing all the time, and sometimes they're contradictory. I was born and raised—

organically, free range!—in a Mennonite community in Manitoba, and so many of my memories of it, its oppressiveness, fill me with rage. Yet I'm also feeling more love for and connection to my past and how it shaped me. I was recently on a road trip through the Prairies, and while I didn't stop in Steinbach, I thought about it every day. Those big skies brought me back to my life there.

A major figure in the book is your late sister, Marjorie, who died in 2010.

I'm in constant dialogue with my sister, whether she's here or not. She encouraged me to write, all those years ago, and my curiosity and obsession with her is one of the reasons I am a writer. She was my only sibling, six years older, and she had a major impact on me. We grew up together. She introduced me to the world, then she went into it, and then she was gone. She plays a central role in my life to this day. There's no way I could write a book without her and our conversations being a major part of it.

How did it feel to dive into those memories?

It was certainly different from writing fiction. I wrote it so quickly. It was like I was being led through it, forced by some outside power. I was just there in my little room in my laneway suite in Queen West, writing and remembering. The difference was the mental work. I've used memory to write all of my books, but I didn't have the freedom of fiction with this one, and I knew I was asking a question that I had no answer to. In the book, I fantasize about making a Wind Museum, which is a metaphor for what writing is for me: a futile attempt at housing wind.

Another motif is the distempered skunk that keeps getting trapped in your window well. Is that a comment on the city's animal control, or does it have a deeper meaning?

That particular skunk has since been taken away by the city. It was sick, and they felt it needed to be euthanized. But now there are other skunks! Its offspring keep coming back. They try to dig into the space under my mother's bedroom. It must have been their home

once. They're a metaphor for needing to go home but not being able to get there. Part of me thinks we should provide that place for them. But do we really want to say, "Come into our house, skunks, and have your babies"?

This is a home you share not only with your 90-year-old mother but also with your daughter, her husband and their two children. It must be chaotic.

Four generations in the same house! I love it. It's a dream come true. We all have our own space, so we're not in one another's laps. I love that my mother is still around and can be with us. And the grandkids too. They'll come zipping over to my laneway suite for books, taking them from my shelves and pretending to read them. It's like my own little Mennonite colony—but matriarchal.

You've seen your stories appear onscreen, and you've even acted in a film. How does the medium differ?

Just wait for my contemporary dance. The films were adaptations of my work,

but they were their own things. And acting was just a weird one-off. This book feels like a truer fulfillment than the films. I'm protective of it. It's closer to who I am and what I think. By the same token, I feel uncertain about it. It's like a conversation—even this conversation. When we're done, I'll think, *Why did I say what I said? I should have said that differently.* I have the same questions you do. Why did I write this? Why did I need to? I'm working through that as a person and as a writer. It's all just one big why.

After meditating on the question for a whole book, do you have any new insight into why you write?

Yes and no. I can say things that sound like answers. Writing makes me feel good. But, really, it's always been something I just need to do. It's a necessity for me: water, oxygen, friendship, writing.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.



A larger-than-life stadium show

The Weeknd August 7 and 8, Rogers Centre

MUSIC Scarborough-raised superstar Abel Tesfaye has been busy lately. In January, he released a new album, *Hurry Up Tomorrow*, along with a companion film of the same name starring Jenna Ortega and Barry Keoghan. The film was a critical disaster, but the album was well-received, and the tour is nothing less than a genuine spectacle. Tesfaye, dwarfed by towering metallic structures and flanked by robed acolytes, takes the stage as a chrome-masked techno-priest with glowing eyes. He's joined onstage by trap rapper Playboi Carti.

A COLLECTION OF LANDSCAPE-INSPIRED SCULPTURES

Faye HeavyShield

Opens August 16, AGO

ART Hailing from the Kainai Nation in southern Alberta, sculptor Faye HeavyShield has been exhibiting across Canada and the US for more than 30 years. Her AGO show features some of her most recognizable works, including sculptures characterized by repeating fractal motifs like spirals, circles, grids and lines. Among them is *Venus as Torpedo*, a large root-like form that protrudes from the wall and is draped in clothing stained a deep ochre. In the background, HeavyShield speaks via audio tape about her experience in the residential school system, accompanied by a chorus in Blackfoot.

AN OFF-THE-WALL COMEDY SHOW

Chris Fleming

August 12, Queen Elizabeth Theatre

COMEDY Chris Fleming is one of the internet's most popular comedians right now. Snippets of Fleming's off-the-wall sets have amassed more than 80 million views on YouTube, with *Vulture* declaring their work "some of the most bizarrely funny performance art" around. Fleming is unpredictable, prone to going off on wild tangents, which makes for both viral TikToks and side-splitting stand-up. Fresh off a new Peacock special called *Hell* and with appearances on *Abbott Elementary*, *Adventure Time* and Netflix's *Last Laugh* under their belt, Fleming is swinging through Toronto this month on an otherwise all-American tour.



A SOLO SHOW FROM A SEPTUAGENARIAN ROCK ICON

Stevie Nicks

August 15, Scotiabank Arena

MUSIC Fleetwood Mac is one of the rare classic rock bands to have successfully crossed the generational divide, with Stevie Nicks's woozy "Dreams" striking a chord on TikTok. At 77, Nicks is playing nine shows across the US and Canada—a tour that was supposed to include Billy Joel before he pulled out for health reasons. Nicks's Toronto performance is likely to feature her latest single, "The Lighthouse," a powerful anthem written in protest of the US Supreme Court's overturning of *Roe v. Wade*.



A sensational musical's big-league second run

Natasha, Pierre and the Great

Comet of 1812 July 15 to August 24, Royal Alexandra Theatre

THEATRE Crow's Theatre wowed audiences and critics when it premiered this Tony-winning, Tolstoy-inspired play in 2023; it ran for 16 weeks of sold-out shows at the east-end theatre. Now the electro-pop musical is back for round two, with the original cast reuniting for a big-league Mirvish run. Based on a slice of *War and Peace*, the show follows Natasha, a young and impulsive bride-to-be who becomes entangled with a notorious playboy while visiting Moscow. It falls to her friend, Pierre, to repair her reputation while struggling with his own existential crisis.



A four-day fest of madcap entertainment

Toronto Buskerfest

August 29 to Sept 1, Woodbine Park

FESTIVAL Acrobats, fire eaters and stand-up comics are descending on Woodbine Park for four days of zany street performances. Attendees can expect to see Heromacro, a Japanese acrobatic ninja and geisha duo; the Jambo Brothers, pyrotechnic stunt performers from Kenya; Julia Perron's wheel-spinning circus art; a juggling stand-up comedian; and more. Also on the schedule: dogs. Mutts Gone Nuts is a canine cabaret of rescue pups that perform

stunts under the guidance of world-class trainers. Dog owners can also put their own pooches through a lure course, photo ops and a costume contest. And to cap things off, there's a daily kids' foam party and a beer garden with live music.



FLEWING BY LUKE FONTANA; BUSKERFEST BY TORONTO BUSKERFEST FOR EPILEPSY; NATASHA, PIERRE AND THE GREAT COMET OF 1812 BY MIRVISH PRODUCTIONS

AN OPEN-AIR PERFORMANCE OF A DOOMED ROMANCE

Romeo and Juliet

July 13 to August 31,

High Park Amphitheatre

THEATRE Canadian Stage's annual play in the park returns for its 42nd year with the classic tale of young star-crossed lovers. *SkyMed* hunk Praneet Akilla parachutes in to play Romeo, and stage and voice actor Lili Beaudoin stars as Juliet. Beaudoin is primed for the part: her last role was in SoHo Playhouse's *Juliet: A Revenge Comedy*, in which the title character gets smart, decides Romeo isn't worth dying for and lives her own damn life. Marie Farsi, who led the hit stage adaptation of André Alexis's *Fifteen Dogs*, directs, with one performance that's literally for the dogs: well-behaved pups are invited to join the audience for Dog Night on August 6.

A HOTLY ANTICIPATED REUNION TOUR

Oasis August 24 and 25, Rogers Stadium

MUSIC Noel and Liam Gallagher are miraculously back on speaking terms, kicking off one of the most anticipated reunion tours in music history. The Manchester brothers had been estranged since at least 2009, when they officially dissolved their beloved Britpop outfit. Now, they're playing a sold-out show for 50,000 of their most rabid fans at Rogers Stadium, the new colosseum on the Downsview Airport tarmac purpose-built for the event of the summer. For those new to town, note that the stadium is different from the Rogers Centre—if you see the CN Tower, look back in anger.

AN AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR'S FEVERISH FOLLOW-UP

People Like Us by

Jason Mott Out August 5

BOOK Bestselling author Jason Mott has a way of writing about other bestselling authors—especially ones who hallucinate, which may or may not be autobiographical. *People Like Us* is his follow-up

to 2021's *Hell of a Book*, which won a National Book Award. The novel traces the lives of two Black writers, one on a global book tour after winning a prize and the other preparing to give a speech at a school that's reeling from a shooting. From there, truth and fiction merge in ever-more-bizarre ways.



Game Boy

At 21, I was making six figures playing video games competitively. Then I walked away

BY JUAN GUIBERT



I'VE BEEN gaming pretty much my whole life. When I was three, my older brother gave me an unplugged PlayStation controller so I could pretend to play with him. Growing up in Lima, Peru, we'd go to computer cafés and play games like *Age of Empires* and *Counter-Strike*. By the time I was seven, my parents decided to move to Brampton to give me and my brother better opportunities.

In 2010, when I was 13, two friends told me about *League of Legends*, a strategy game where the objective is to destroy the opposing team's base. I decided to give it a try, and from the first match, I was hooked. I liked being constantly challenged. After school, I'd watch livestreams of the best players. To me, it was like watching LeBron James practise basketball.

I started out at the lowest level but worked my way up to gold after a few months. In the summer, I'd game for up to 10 hours a day, often until 1 or 2 a.m. In 2013, I hit the Diamond 1 ranking, which meant I was one of the top 300 players in North America. My friends and I put together a team and entered a *League of Legends* tournament at a game shop in Mississauga, and we ended up winning. I loved the adrenaline rush of playing in front of an audience.

By the time I was in Grade 12, I was playing at the Challenger level, meaning I'd cracked the top 200 players. Still, gaming was just a hobby, and I decided to study business at the University of Toronto. But the school had a *League of Legends* team, so during my first year, in 2015, I tried out and made the cut.

In my second year, we won the eastern conference in North America, which earned us a place in the collegiate *League of Legends* championship in LA. We won second place there, qualifying us for the collegiate world championships in Wuhan, China. The tournament was held in a university stadium

with 5,000 people watching. We ended up losing in the finals to the best Chinese team, but the experience was exhilarating. We were invited to another event, in Taiwan, for the top teams from that tournament. There, we beat the team that we'd lost to in Wuhan. At that point, we could honestly say we were the best collegiate team in the world.

That's when I started receiving attention from the pros. In 2018, the *League of Legends* Championship Series, which was the pro league, franchised. It had a season of weekly games and playoffs. Two of my teammates and I got offers to play pro for the North American League. I was beyond excited, but I was nervous about telling my parents. Dropping out of school to move to LA and become a gamer was a tough sell. They didn't approve, but I did it anyway.

In LA, players often live in competitive gaming houses. The schedule of a pro gamer is intense. Every day, our manager would pick us up and bring us to the mansion in Santa Monica where Flyquest, the main team that I was an alternate for, lived and practised for eight to 10 hours a day. I would wake up at 9 a.m., be at work by 10:30 a.m., eat whatever they had ordered for us, meet with the team to figure out what we were practising, then practise as a team from noon to 6 p.m. Then I'd eat again, unwind for 30 minutes, practise on my own until midnight and go home—six days a week.

I earned the equivalent of what you'd make working full time at McDonald's. But, because housing and food were provided, most of the money went straight into my pocket. After a year, I moved up to the main team and started earning a six-figure salary. I was now in the same league as players I'd previously idolized, but catching up to their level was overwhelming.

Gaming began to feel like work. I wanted to prove that I deserved to be there, but the pressure was getting to me. Some 150,000 to 200,000 people watched each match, and they scrutinized every play.

"I was anxious all the time and started having panic attacks"

During my third year, Covid hit. I missed my friends and family, which took a toll on my gameplay. Halfway through the year, I got dropped from my team. I found another team in LA pretty quickly, but I realized that everything could be taken away at any point. I decided to work harder. By my fourth year, I was burnt out and having an identity crisis. After five years of professional gaming, I wondered who I was beyond an e-sports player. I knew I didn't want to do this for the rest of my life, but I didn't have many other options, so I signed on for another year.

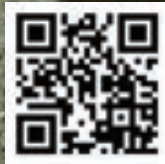
That last year was miserable. I was anxious all the time and started having panic attacks. I was spending all day doing something I no longer enjoyed. At the end of the season, I quit, and in 2022, I moved home with my parents. I went back to U of T to finish my business degree and graduated this spring.

I'd like to become an executive or work in policy, but first I need to find an entry-level job. Being a pro gamer doesn't give you transferable skills that are recognized by Fortune 500 companies. I still watch competitive *League of Legends* matches, but I hardly ever play video games anymore. When I do, my brain goes into e-sports mode, and I get incredibly competitive. It also brings a heavy dose of anxiety and stress. I hope one day I'll be able to play purely for the fun of it again.

Email submissions to memoir@torontolife.com

CIVIC PRIDE MEETS STYLE

Toronto Life's limited-edition canvas totes have landed, featuring our new logo. They're 100 per cent cotton, made in Toronto and available in two styles. Just \$20 if you act fast.



torontolife.com/shop

A woman with long blonde hair, wearing a bright pink jacket and black leggings, is walking towards the right. She is holding a rolled-up pink yoga mat in her right hand and a green water bottle in her left. She is wearing black sneakers with white soles. The background is a brick wall with a large, colorful mural featuring abstract shapes in shades of pink, orange, yellow, and black. The overall mood is active and vibrant.

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