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ON THE COVER: photograph by iStock.com/dulezidar

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By Christopher Luongo

“If this is a cult, then joining a cult is the best thing that’s ever happened to me”

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Bloor-Yorkville is a celebration of the very best fashion, food, wellness and culture. Explore luxury shops, unique restaurants, and the best salons & spas Toronto has to offer. #BYTIME
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Beautiful things tend to happen while sharing an incredible meal. Around the dinner table, we celebrate victories, mourn losses and thank each other. If this past year has shown us anything, it’s that we’re stronger when we come together. No one knows this reality more intimately than Canada’s frontline healthcare workers. In March 2020, nurses, doctors, personal-support workers and so many more were asked to do the unthinkable—to put their lives on the line, pause everything and help save lives as COVID-19 spread across the country. They’ve been fighting in the trenches of a global pandemic, sacrificing their safety for a cause bigger than all of us. Better, healthier days are on the horizon for everyone, thanks to them.

A proper night out is an indulgence that we collectively took for granted before the world as we knew it was forever changed. It was especially a privilege lost for our healthcare workers, and this sacrifice has not gone unnoticed. Canada’s most prestigious appliance brand, Monogram, teamed up with world-renowned chef Patrick Kriss to give these heroes something extra special: an unforgettable dining experience conceived by Kriss himself using the new Monogram Professional Range.

Monogram and Toronto Life put the call out for nominations for frontline healthcare workers who made a difference throughout the pandemic and received hundreds of touching stories from friends, family and colleagues of workers throughout the GTA. From doctors and nurses to physiotherapists, cardiologists, surgeons and paramedics, deserving frontline healthcare workers and their guests joined Monogram and Patrick Kriss for an unforgettable meal. These workers toiled tirelessly at COVID clinics and hospitals like Toronto Western, Brampton Civic, Mount Sinai and many more—this experience was for them.

Kriss served up five beautifully prepared courses—including a scallop sashimi starter (an Alo classic), agnolotti, beef tenderloin, pain au lait and a peach labneh for dessert. Plus, Monogram’s resident mixologist, Orlando Carriera, served up signature cocktails inspired by the details and design of the Monogram Professional Range.

Monogram is familiar with meticulous craftsmanship and intense attention to detail. Providing an unparalleled cooking experience, the new Professional Range brings all the power and precision demanded by the world’s finest chefs into homes everywhere. World-renowned chefs expect their cooking tools to match their desire to create perfect dishes. As a result, Michelin–pedigreed artists like Patrick Kriss most often choose Monogram.

Kriss is an icon in Toronto’s fine-dining scene as the talented chef behind his award-winning restaurants Alo, Alobar and Aloette. His career began at Auberge du Pommier in Toronto before relocating to New York to work as a sous chef under Daniel Boulud and France, where he worked at Régis Marcon and La Maison Troigros. Since then, Kriss has gone on to become one of Canada’s best chefs and recognized internationally on San Pelligrino’s World’s 50 Best Restaurants list.

Much like Monogram, Kriss has perfected his craft, only sourcing the best ingredients (or, in Monogram’s case, materials) to support his work. With these core values in mind, it’s no surprise that they came together to create something extra special for those who deserve it the most.

Monogram and Alo’s Patrick Kriss crafted a bespoke dining experience to thank our frontline healthcare workers

Toronto Life readers nominated frontline healthcare workers to enjoy a stunning five-course celebration curated by Kriss using the new Monogram Professional Range
Awakenings
Our September cover story documented the exuberance of a double-vaxxed summer in our semi-reopened city: family reunions, outdoor theatre, rooftop gyms, weddings, roller coasters, haircuts! Some readers loved the stories of Toronto reawakening from lockdown.

“Such a beautiful story! Dining with my parents after 17 months was indeed a special event. After a long time with nothing but online communication, it was wonderful to see family and friends again in backyards and on our favourite downtown patios.”
—@yyz_bliss, Twitter

“Yes, it felt soooo good!!”
—ledolci, Instagram

“I’m fascinated by what projects (or hobbies) people took on during lockdown.”
—@EmilySchneider, Twitter

Other readers thought our celebration of Toronto’s reopening was premature:

“How easily people forget that last summer we were in this exact same situation. Restrictions relaxed in the summer and then we were locked down all fall and winter...”
—ian.michaels416, Instagram

Virtual Reality
Our package on the pandemic-induced e-health revolution included memoirs from patients about the virtual care experience, interviews with physicians on the pros and cons of going digital, a Q&A with the doctor who launched an online ER, and other insights into the new frontier. Most readers felt that recent changes to the delivery of health care have been a good thing.

“Wow. Very interesting perspective about virtual care and preserving patient dignity when they can do appointments from home.”
—Helena Dhamko, Facebook

However, some readers (doctors among them) felt that certain types of care (emergency medicine, for example) can only be delivered in person.

“Lockdowns are coming back soon to a neighbourhood near you.”
—liveshere_travelsthere, Instagram

“To soon.”
—@RichUnderhill, Twitter

“I’m a community emergency department physician, so I was interested to read Haley Steinberg’s Q&A with UHN’s chief of emergency medicine, Sam Sabbah. However, I strongly disagree with the merit of UHN’s virtual emergency department.

“In the article, Dr. Sabbah outlines a virtual ER that is staffed for seven hours per day and ‘sees’ two patients per hour. The visits are scheduled. By definition these are not emergency department visits, as emergencies are not scheduled. It’s true that many patients who seek care in the ER could and should be seen in other settings. However, that does not mean that the best solution for this issue is a virtual ER visit.

“Dr. Sabbah points out that some patients have difficulty getting to an ER. If this is the case, and it is not a true emergency, they would be better served by a family physician doing a home visit. I don’t know of a community emergency department physician who sees two patients per hour. Factoring in the combination of both acute and non-acute cases, we see four to six patients per hour on average. If you legitimately wanted to help the flow in an ER, providing an additional seven hours of in-person ER MD time would seem like a much better use of this resource.”
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“I am completely in favour of the use of technology in medicine, but I believe this plan seriously misses the mark. It would seem the biggest winners here are the MD providers who get to see two patients per hour without examining the patients instead of the usual, more complete care they would provide in a bricks-and-mortar emergency department.”

— Pierre Mikhail

Buzz Words
Nichole Jankowski’s exposé of 6ixBuzz sketched out the trajectory of the social media phenomenon, from its founding by two ambitious George Brown students to its meteoric rise. Readers called it a “wild ride” and “an absolute must-read” and “the piece I’ve wanted to read for a few years now.” The article was particularly well-received by former 6ixBuzz followers who had adamantly unfollowed the account.

“I wonder how many posts they made criticizing Amazon working conditions, meanwhile they’re exploiting the youth they claim to represent. I stopped following that account over a year ago. In one post they would condemn gun violence, and in the next they would post one of their hip-hop artists glorifying gun violence. It’s toxic exploitation of youth culture.”

— Octavio Umana, Facebook

“So many real issues in Canada and good content that 6ixBuzz could be posting, and instead they choose to post nonsense like:

“So your son’s gay, are you kicking him out or nahhh?” To get arguments and interactions for their page.”

— @HeroOfCanada, Twitter

“They jacked the WorldStar business model, where racism sells. But they weren’t willing to even show their faces.”

— @limkiladze, Twitter

“It’s not a source of news. I was originally taken in by the misconception that it was, and then I saw what was being posted. It’s very divisive and obviously meant to be that way. They’ve created a clickbait machine, and they want to keep their identities covert for a reason. They aren’t proud of what they’ve created. At least own it.”

— jackbarry007, Instagram

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EDITOR’S LETTER

How to Turn Anti-Vaxxers Into Happy Vaxxers

True confession: I love it when people ask to see my vaccine record. (I’d call it a passport, but that seems like a lofty word for the battered piece of paper I keep folded up in my wallet.) Each time—at a pool, or restaurant, or cultural event—is a little bit thrilling. It reminds me of the joy I felt when I got my first dose and the freedom the vaccines allow us all to enjoy: in-person school, meals with friends, concerts, travel, gallery visits, hugs.

It also assures me that the people I’m about to hang out with are committed to the common good, like me. It makes me feel safer, but I realize that not everyone reacts to vaccine passports like I do. A slim minority of Torontonians believe they should be entitled to go anywhere without being vaccinated. Some protest outside hospitals, parade down the street in anger and give gym and restaurant managers a hard time. More significantly, they stand in the way of our ability to confidently face the threat of menacing new variants.

The anger and frustration go both ways. Many members of the vaccinated majority are fed up with anti-vaxxers and have turned hostile. Op-eds are calling for hospital workers to deny unvaccinated Ontarians health care and take away their OHIP cards. The sense of unity we felt as a society during lockdown is gone. The last mile, it turns out, is the ugliest.

Public health professionals tend to be less judgmental about the unvaccinated. To meet the 90 per cent goal, a few hundred thousand more Torontonians need to be double-vaxxed. Eileen de Villa doesn’t believe in condemning them. It’s her job to understand them so she can gently persuade them. Her research shows that of the 15 per cent of Torontonians who are unvaccinated, only about five per cent are truly lost causes. She calls them vaccine resistant (as opposed to vaccine hesitant). She’s focused on the 10 per cent who are open to getting the shot but haven’t yet bothered. Reaching them, she thinks, is a question of convenience. This fall, Toronto Public Health is hosting pop-up clinics in malls, TTC stations and on street corners. And it’s working. Slowly.

As for the vaccine resistant, it’s an oddly heterogeneous group that includes left-wingers and right-wingers. One strain of anti-vaxxers is the health-conscious, environmentally minded types who won’t accept anything lab-made into their bodies. They lump vaccines into the same category as genetically modified foods and synthetic drugs. A vegan restaurant in Roncesvalles called the Goods closed its dine-in area in September rather than enforce a proof-of-vaccine door policy.

Another strain of the vaccine resistant is the ultra-religious, who rely heavily on their clergy for guidance, and are suspicious of secular authority. In “The Anti-Vax Crusaders” (page 42), Luc Rinaldi takes a close look at one of the most vocal anti-vaccine subgroups in Ontario: the followers of the Church of God Restoration in Aylmer, a town that has become a microcosm of the tensions bubbling all over Canada. Church of God members held large gatherings throughout lockdowns and staged so-called freedom rallies. Meanwhile, vaccinated residents of Aylmer hold their own counter-rallies and boycott businesses with ties to the church.

Rinaldi approaches Church of God members with an open-minded curiosity. Though the congregants seem immovable, in some cases they’ve modified their practices in the direction of reason—it struck me as a flicker of hope that the vaccine resistant can turn into the vaccine hesitant and ultimately join the vast army of Canadians doing the right thing.

—Sarah Fulford
Email: editor@torontolife.com
Twitter: @sarah_fulford

Coming up
Our annual ranking of the year’s most influential people; the inside story of Christine Jessop’s real killer, the cop who solved the murder and the devastating fallout from a case that took 36 years to close; and our holiday gift guide, with dozens of ideas, from stocking-stuffers to big-ticket splurges.

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Toronto Life’s free newsletter This City is all about Toronto during this extraordinary time and is sent directly to your inbox on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. It features stories about how Torontonians are adapting to the new realities of life in the city, as well as essential information about what’s going on in the real estate market, the best patios, cultural events and everything else you need to know right now. Sign up at torontolife.com/newsletters

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“I’m going to ask each student to send me their playlists on Spotify”
—Music professor Dalton Higgins, p. 28

Welcome Back, Kovrig

Canadians were overjoyed when the two Michaels (Kovrig and Spavor) came home

When former diplomat Michael Kovrig landed in Toronto after spending 1,020 days as a political detainee in a Chinese prison, the whole city rejoiced. His first stops, after reuniting with his family, were a haircut and a jab, receiving a hero’s welcome at both appointments. It marked the beginning of his life as a special kind of local celebrity, dropped into a very different Toronto than the one he remembers.
Your new class is called “Deconstructing Drake and the Weeknd.” Where did the idea come from?
I was approached by Ryerson University, or X University as it is now known, last year about joining their faculty as the music professional and professor in residence. I’m involved in hiring diverse staff for a new four-year program called professional music, which is the umbrella that the new class falls under. The class is the first of its kind in Canada, and it’s for people who want to work in the industry.

So aspiring Drakes and Weeknds? Or aspiring managers, publicists, publishers and booking agents. Our goal is to make education feel hands-on and practical, something that will help you work toward a career. The careers of these two Black Canadian artists are a lens through which we can learn about entrepreneurship, marketing, branding. And then there are the social issues like race and class. It’s a concept that’s been around in the States for a while. One of my books is in the hip hop archives in the library at Harvard. In Canada, we’re about 20 years behind.

Why is that?
Drake and the Weeknd are the product of a local music scene that does very little to foster its Black artists. Drake’s career took off because Lil Wayne took an interest in him. In Toronto, investment goes into three things: hockey, rock ‘n’ roll, and beer drinking. That’s the holy trinity—or the unholy trinity if you’re racialized.

On a scale of bird course to brainiacs-only, where does your class fall?
If students are thinking, I’m going to listen to hot beats for a semester, that’s not the case. My focus will be academic, just with a contemporary approach. So for example, Drake is a really good writer. In his rhymes he employs the same literary devices that I studied when I took English lit at York: metaphor, simile, iambic pentameter and more.

How would you describe your teaching style?
I’m fairly active on social media, engaging in debates with people half my age, so I think that’s going to trickle into the classroom. It goes both ways. I’m going to ask each student to send me their playlists on Spotify. I’ll probably be that prof students want to go for a beer with after class. Because I’m a hip hop junkie myself, I figure they’ll want to drag me to shows after class.

That sounds great. Particularly after 18 months of Covid.
The pandemic has been godawful. My mother was in the ICU for 12 weeks and almost passed away. So to people who don’t believe this virus is real or who call it a plandemic, you have no clue.

As you mentioned, Ryerson plans to change its name, given Egerton Ryerson’s role in the residential school system. Presumably you are in favour of the change?
The school should have changed its name yesterday. Outside of my work in the ivory tower, I am an activist. I was overjoyed when protesters and students defaced the statue, which was horrific and disgusting. As far as the name change, I understand there is a process involved. I’m going to be among the happiest in the building when the administration announces the name change. As a Black man of African descent, I’m not comfortable with streets or institutions named after slaveholders.

Okay, back to Drizzy. Does he know about the class?
Word is getting out, so maybe. I’m interested in bringing in special guests, so Drake, holla at your boy. We would welcome you or the Weeknd with open arms.

Drake is opening a new music venue in Toronto. Will you go?
I definitely want to check it out. Toronto is lacking in medium-sized venues, so this will be a game changer. It’s called History. Drake is trying to make history with History. That’s so Drake. How apropos.

Sorry, but I have to ask the desert island question: you can only bring one album. Is it Drake or the Weeknd?
I’m from the hip hop generation. I’d bring a mixtape.

Q&A

Professor X
Dalton Higgins is teaching a class at the soon-to-be-renamed Ryerson University about Drake and the Weeknd. Students expecting a bird course are in for a surprise

BY COURTNEY SHEA

PHOTOGRAPH BY ERIN LITTOY

28 TORONTO LIFE November 2021
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**Ego Meter**

What’s making and shaking the city’s self-image

**Ego Boost**

Global News weather guy Anthony Farnell’s mini goldendoodle, Storm, makes an appearance during a forecast, reportedly on the lookout for treats. The cameo goes supernova on social media.

NBA legend Shaquille O’Neal claims Toronto has the most beautiful women of any city in the league. “I’m into nice people,” he says.

Simu Liu, star of Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings, shows off his superhero bona fides at a baseball game, throwing a perfect opening pitch and executing a backflip on the mound.

Emma Raducanu, a Toronto-born Brit, smashes her way to the U.S. Open title, defeating Montreal’s Leylah Fernandez in a highly publicized battle of unseeded super teens.

Critics pan the cover art for Drake’s new album, Certified Lover Boy, suggesting even a fifth-grader could cluster together a bunch of pregnant-woman emojis. (In fact, the top-selling British artist Damien Hirst designed it.)

The Conservative party drops Beaches-East York candidate Lisa Robinson when Islamophobic tweets allegedly written by Robinson (though she denies it) surface on the internet.

**Ego Bruise**

A group of unmasked individuals attempt to storm the Eaton Centre, prompted by a speech from notorious anti-vaxxer Chris Sky. Following the incident—which draws tenuous comparisons to the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol—a man and a woman are charged with assault.

Scottie Barnes, the Raptors’ top draft pick, pens a love letter to the city in the Players’ Tribune, with references to visiting Drake’s house and eating Jamaican food with Kardinal Offishall. Says Barnes: “I couldn’t be happier to be in Toronto.”

Emma Raducanu, a Toronto-born Brit, smashes her way to the U.S. Open title, defeating Montreal’s Leylah Fernandez in a highly publicized battle of unseeded super teens.

Bramptonian Sasha Ruddock wins an international fashion prize (and $100,000) for her body-positive designs, garnering praise from celebrity judge Khloe Kardashian.

AOC makes a splash at the Met Gala with Toronto-bred fashion designer Aurora James’s off-the-shoulder “Tax the Rich” dress.

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**AN URBAN RETREAT:** The Drake hosted Insiders for a cottage-country-in-the-city evening featuring a menu of smoked and wood-fired dishes from chef Laura Maxwell and cocktails by Grey Goose and St-Germain

**A ROOFTOP RENDEZVOUS:** TL Insider teamed up with Patrón Tequila for a three-course dinner of Latin-American hits (and boozy drinks, of course) on Baro’s beautiful rooftop patio overlooking King West
CLASSY COCKTAILS:
Members had the chance to get (really) dressed up and learn how to make three Gatsby-inspired drinks at Ahma, a new pop-up venue on Queen West.

GOOD BEER, GOOD CHEER:
Insiders enjoyed tasty pub grub on the rooftop of midtown watering hole Shenanigan’s paired with beer from the Furnace Room Brewery in Georgetown.

BRAIN FOOD:
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The Audit  An appraisal of the month in money

$0  Cost to print a proof of vaccination at the Toronto Public Library. TPL introduced the service when the province introduced the first phase of vaccine passports in September.

$30  Price of a one-way GO train ticket from Toronto to London, as part of a Metrolinx pilot project extending service from Kitchener. The entire ride will take about four hours.

$328  Cost of a crewneck sweater from the limited-release Maple Leafs x Drew House collection, a collaboration between the hockey team and Justin Bieber’s clothing line.

$12,000  Fine issued to Thelma and Glen Perry, vaccinated octogenarians from Barrie who refused to quarantine at a hotel after a flight from Jamaica in July. Hours after they were ticketed, the feds nixed the hotel quarantine rule for fully vaccinated travellers.

$50,000  Donation made by Toronto property developer Wais Habibzai to buy supplies for Afghan refugees fleeing the Taliban. Habibzai left Afghanistan and settled in Canada in 1992.

$92,900  Severance pay for former Kitchener Centre MP Raj Saini, who resigned after facing allegations of harassing a female staffer (he denied the claims). MPs receive a payout worth half their salary when they retire or lose their seat.

$1,989,795  Cost for the city to clear encampments in three downtown parks this summer (Trinity Bellwoods, Alexandra and Lamport Stadium). Expenses included security, green space remediation and fencing surrounding the sites.

$93,000,000  Projected City of Toronto budget shortfall by the end of 2021, despite $2.6 billion in provincial and federal funding since the beginning of the pandemic. About $74 million of that deficit is attributable to a decrease in TTC ridership.
The Massey Hall Revitalization Campaign is generously supported by Allied Properties, the Government of Canada, the Province of Ontario, the City of Toronto, The Slaight Family Foundation, and our community of 2,033 supporters.
The Upstart

Toronto’s boldest innovators on what they’re making and how it works

Jane J. Wang
Founder and CEO of Optimity, an app that lets users earn rewards by meeting health and wellness goals

Company HQ: Kensington Market
Founded: 2017
Employees: 45

How It Works:
“Optimity links up to health apps or wearable devices, like a Fitbit, to track your activity levels. You then earn points for completing tasks, like walking or meditating. Those credits can be redeemed for rewards, including meal kits and gadgets.”

Eureka Moment:
“When my mom died in 2011, I decided I wanted to create something that could make the people I love live longer and better. I was working at a pharmaceutical company at the time, building software to get patients to take their medication, and I noticed people could change their behaviour if you incentivized them.”

Tech Jargon You Hate:
“‘Disrupt.’ I don’t want to create more chaos, I want to invent more fluid, optimized ways of doing things.”

App You Can’t Live Without:
“Slack. It’s a very useful tool for team collaboration, especially during remote work.”

Typical Work-From-Home Attire:
“Yoga pants from Lululemon or Nike, plus a comfy white T-shirt.”

Past Life:
“I worked as a mortality risk specialist, helping insurance companies determine how long someone would live based on their daily habits.”

Best Advice You’ve Received:
“‘Think bigger.’ It’s critical if you want to change the world.”

Worst Advice You’ve Received:
“That’s not possible.’ It’s funny, you usually hear it from people who haven’t accomplished anything themselves.”

How Much You Spent Initially:
“$750,000. Of that, I put up $250,000 of my own money. It went toward developing the minimum viable product.”

Turning Point:
“In 2019, we purchased Carrot, another behaviour science app. Their data, content and infrastructure helped expand our reach in North America. Now, Optimity has 2.6 million users across the continent.”

Big-Time Backers:
“We’ve raised $4.8 million. Most of our investors are retired CEOs of really big companies, like Bryan Pearson, who used to run LoyaltyOne, the Air Miles rewards service.”

Role Model:
“Steve Jobs. He paid very close attention to design and detail.”

Toronto Life’s free newsletter features everything you need to know about what’s going on in your city right now

torontolife.com/newsletters
Accelerated by the pandemic, tech integration has shifted nearly every industry into the future, and the financial sector is no exception. Pineapple Financial has secured its role in kick-starting that shift with an integrated network of more than 400 mortgage brokers, AI-driven systems and cloud-based tools to make the home-buying experience seamless and transparent. The digital-first brokerage believes that the road to home ownership, a major milestone in your financial journey, ought to be a process inspired by the brand’s namesake—a symbol of warmth and hospitality.

The company’s forward-thinking approach has established itself as a single destination for all types of home buyers looking for trustworthy expertise to assist in their purchasing power. Smart software makes communication easy, while a flexible range of products makes every client experience custom to them. Many Canadians have successfully secured their dream homes by working with a Pineapple broker—let their stories inspire you.

Meet Micky & Elana: Two young professionals ready to buy their dream home in the city. Making a confident offer on a home can seem nearly impossible when you’re relying on the sale of your current property in order to do so. But Micky and Elana’s dream home in Toronto was too good to pass up.

Pineapple assisted them by leveraging the equity in their existing properties to maximize their down payment. Their broker bridged the down payment by securing an affordable line of credit with payment privileges. Micky and Elana weren’t hit with a penalty fee for paying their credit back in full once their existing properties sold. They were able to meet any closing date requested by the seller, which enabled them to better negotiate and finally purchase their dream home.

Meet Jeremy: A solo shopper with the means to make it happen. For Jeremy, purchasing his first home alone in Toronto meant partnering with Pineapple’s team of experts. He followed their guidance and eventually found the perfect property, but the appraisal report for the property came back under value.

Luckily, Pineapple’s underwriting team quickly identified some critical property specifics that the appraiser missed—allowing the property to be reassessed accordingly. Ultimately, Jeremy’s mortgage was approved and he was able to meet the closing date requested by the seller.

Meet Irene & Robert: Longtime home owners looking to grow their investment portfolio. This married couple was in search of a pre-construction property and believed they found the perfect one about two hours north of the city, in Collingwood. Aware that pre-construction loans can often be limited, they worked with a broker at Pineapple to evaluate all of their options. In the end, the couple chose to facilitate an equity takeout via refinancing, which would allow them to access funds to use toward their upcoming pre-construction. But, the real estate firm’s closing date was fast approaching.

Using Pineapple’s pre-construction journey on its AI-driven Business Management platform allowed the brokerage to send a follow-up to their clients, actively updating them on their upcoming deposit payment and closing dates. The couple successfully increased their down payment for their pre-construction closing and eagerly await the completion of their new rental property.

Whether you need a clear assessment of your buying power or find yourself in a time-crunch to secure a mortgage, Pineapple takes on the heavy lifting to save you time and money. Start with an online application, explore the intelligent MyPineapple platform and gain full insight into deals and optimal offers.

The Pineapple Financial success stories you ought to know

The innovative brokerage is on a mission to guide all of Canada into a new age of mortgages.
I live on the 33rd floor of a condo. During Covid, the building only allows two passengers in the elevator, and the wait times have been hellacious. I recently noticed a group flouting the rules, packing seven people in. When I called them out, they told me to mind my own business. I’m considering going to the condo board. What do you think?

— Elevator Snitch, Liberty Village

Technically, you were in the right. Per the city bylaw, elevator riders must maintain six feet of distance unless they live together, which explains the two-person rule. But it’s no surprise you got some pushback—people are weary of self-appointed pandemic police. Unfortunately, complaining to the condo board probably won’t solve anything. Best-case scenario, they put up more signage, which your neighbours ignore anyway. The good news is that the risk of infection during a short elevator ride is minimal if everyone masks up. So just keep calm, carry on and pray for herd immunity.

Dear Urban Diplomat,

My new neighbours are vacationing in Florida this month, and they hired me to take care of their cats while they’re away. When I went to their apartment, I was shocked to find the place was squalid, and they had not two, not three, but five yowling cats, all using the same overflowing litter box. At this point, I’m just need some guidance on proper litter boxes—anything to make the cats more comfortable. If they’re willing to pony up a few bucks, then they probably just need some guidance on proper pet parenting. If they refuse, you can assume the situation won’t ever improve, and, yes, call animal services (1-833-9-ANIMAL). Protecting the cats trumps neighbour relations.

Dear Urban Diplomat,

One of my co-workers has long Covid, so he’s been on unpaid leave for a couple of months. He sent around a link to a GoFundMe page meant to cover his lost wages. I know for a fact that he isn’t vaccinated, even though he could have gotten the jab well before he got sick. It seems wrong that he’s asking for help in a situation of his own making, and I’m considering telling my colleagues. Should I?

— Charity Case, Thorncliffe Park

You don’t have to pitch in to this guy’s get-well fund, but you should show him some sympathy—he’s ill, off the job and probably broke. Rather than rally your workmates against him, inquire about the source of his vaccine hesitancy and give him some facts to consider: early research shows that vaccination can improve Covid symptoms, and some long-haulers have reported that their symptoms disappeared altogether post-jab. It might be just the nudge he needs to bring him around to getting dosed.

Dear Urban Diplomat,

I work part time in retail, and my manager just banned us from wearing poppies for Remembrance Day, sending out an internal memo that said it would be “inappropriate to glorify war in today’s political climate.” My grandfather fought in World War II, and several other family members are in the military. I think everyone should have the right to wear a poppy if they want.

Should I say something at the risk of pissing off my boss?

— Must We Forget?, Pickering

Plenty of people understandably see poppies as a symbol of jingoism. Try telling your manager that you want to wear one to honour veterans and fallen soldiers, not war itself. Be sure to share a few details about your family’s service. If your workplace refuses to reconsider, you can still flout the rules with impunity—Queen’s Park introduced legislation last year protecting employees’ right to wear a poppy. Ask yourself what’s more important: respecting your ancestors or pleasing a middle manager.

Dear Urban Diplomat,

Every morning, I take my dog to the off-leash park. A few weeks ago, a random guy started showing up (without a dog of his own, mind you) and doling out treats. I’m totally not cool with it. First, there’s no way to know what he’s feeding them. Second, the dogs go into an absolute frenzy, surrounding the man instead of frolicking around. I’d like to intervene, but the other dog owners don’t seem to think this guy is a problem. Thoughts?

— Paw Patrol, Humber Heights

This biscuit-bearing stranger probably isn’t trying to poison your pooch. It’s more likely that he just wants to make a few friends, both furry and human. The only way to find out is to talk to him. Next time you’re at the park, introduce yourself and ask which dog is his. Maybe he’ll volunteer that he doesn’t have a dog but he’s thinking of getting one, or that he just lost his dog and visiting the park helps with the healing. If his explanation seems sketchy, inform the other owners. But if he just wants to spread his dog love, throw him a (figurative) bone and let it go.

Send your questions to the Urban Diplomat at urbandiplomat@torontolife.com
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In Aylmer, Ontario, a fiery doomsday preacher has amassed a diverse following of evangelicals, libertarians, conspiracy theorists and anti-vaxxers, united by their distrust of government, science and mainstream media. They're loud, mad and organized.

And their gospel is spreading

By Luc Rinaldi

Photography by
Christopher Wahl
Hildebrandt and his flock refuse to get vaccinated for a raft of religious, anecdotal and pseudo-scientific reasons, and it will take more than a few line graphs and statistics to change their minds. Public health units have disseminated pamphlets and WhatsApp messages in English, Spanish and Plattdutsch, the languages commonly spoken among Aylmer’s dense concentration of Amish, Mexican Mennonites and migrant workers. Front-line workers have held pop-up vaccination clinics at hockey arenas and beaches. Still, just 50 per cent of the region’s residents are fully vaccinated, the lowest of any postal code in Ontario. The provincial and national rate is about 70 per cent. The ministry of health suggests we could achieve herd immunity—the point at which the virus fails to find new hosts and dies out—at around 85 or 90 per cent, which would require virtually everyone in Canada over 12 to get immunized. The vaccine is the ticket back to a world without distancing, lockdowns and travel restrictions, a time when you can ride the TTC without a mask and attend a Raptors game without scanning a QR code. But as long as nearly 20 per cent of Canadians opt out of vaccination, that’s not going to happen.

The immovable naysayers who have coalesced around Hildebrandt are so difficult to convince because, for many of them, the choice is not really about the vaccine. According to polling by Abacus, the number-one reason Canadians refuse to get vaccinated is that they hate government telling them what to do. Hildebrandt’s followers see themselves as an oppressed minority, proverbial Davids up against modern-day Goliaths: Bill Gates, Anthony Fauci, the World Health Organization. They use the language of the persecuted, comparing themselves to Jews in Nazi Germany and hoisting “Don’t tread on me” flags. To them, defiance is necessary and noble; refusing the vaccine is an act of righteous rebellion against a greedy overclass bent on world domination. Their common dogma has nothing to do with medical science. It’s about resistance.

Hildebrandt looks every part the preacher. At 58, he has a thick salt-and-pepper beard and a wardrobe of white shirts, black vests and polished dress shoes. He is a vivacious orator; when he preaches, his neck gets veiny and his face turns red. He pontificates about familiar subject matter—the depths of hell and the saving power of Jesus—but, unlike some ministers, he is cheeky and self-deprecating, pausing mid-sermon to flash his incandescent smile. Before and after Sunday-morning services, he greets adoring churchgoers and quietly consoles wayward young men. If Tarantino were to direct a Hildebrandt biopic, he’d cast Christoph Waltz to capture the preacher’s verve and subtle German accent.

Hildebrandt grew up speaking Plattdutsch in a Mennonite colony in Mexico. At 22, he and his wife, Martha, drove north with their young son, Herbert, and settled in Hamilton, where they attended a German-speaking church. Over time, Hildebrandt grew worried that the congregation was spiritually dead, merely going through the motions of Christianity. So he started looking for a more vibrant church, unwavering in its devotion to God and the Bible.

In 1990, Hildebrandt went to see a travelling preacher named Daniel Layne speak at a rented schoolroom in Aylmer. Layne, the son of a minister, had spent the 1960s and ’70s drifting around San Francisco, shooting heroin and serving time in prison and psych wards. In 1980, he says, God spoke to him, so he got clean, started preaching and eventually founded the Church of God Restoration. He borrowed much of its doctrine—pacifism, anti-
racism, a strict adherence to the Bible—from existing Churches of God (there are so many congregations that go by that name, including two in Aylmer alone, that each requires an additional identifier). He believed that, to be holy, Christians must be free from sin, and he had an unyielding interpretation of what constituted sinful behaviour: not just homosexuality, divorce and abortion, but anything deemed superfluous, like neckties, musical instruments used during worship, and haircuts for women. The church was radical, residing on the fringes of conservative Christianity. To join, members had to adhere to Layne's austere rules, which dictated what they wore (plain, old-fashioned clothing in white, black and grey) and what colour cars they drove (also white, black or grey). His followers weren't allowed to listen to the radio or read the news. He counselled his followers on who to marry and whether they could go on vacation. In exchange for observing his stringent restrictions, Layne promised the ultimate reward. He said the only way to get to heaven—and not burn in hell—was to join him.

Hildebrandt fell for Layne's fervent, unrelenting vision of Christianity. He began preaching in 1991. Layne ordained Hildebrandt two years later, then left the Aylmer congregation in his hands and took off to start another church someplace else. Thanks to his prolific proselytizing, the Restoration now has more than 3,000 members and roughly two dozen congregations scattered across the U.S., Canada, Latin America, Ireland, Austria and the Philippines. Layne died in 2011 at the age of 67 after a series of illnesses, so leadership of the church fell to Ray Tinsman, an Ohio man who claims to be an earthly conduit to God, as well as an inner circle of 10 senior preachers, including Hildebrandt, who call themselves apostles.

By that point, Hildebrandt had bought a piece of land at the edge of Aylmer and built a house of worship for his growing flock. Even among the town’s Amish and Mennonite population, his followers stood out because of their monochromatic garb. “People are curious about us because, to be honest, we’re a curious group,” says Adolf Friesen, a genial 47-year-old church member with a tuft of facial hair at the end of his chin. He understands outsiders’ bemused fascination because he had the same reaction when he first attended a Restoration service in 1991. “I was like, ‘Seriously? These people are fanatical.’” He was a teenager then, more obsessed with BMX bikes than the Bible. But he was struck by Hildebrandt’s passion and his followers’ genuine belief, so he kept coming back. Eventually, he cut ties with his old friends, stopped listening to rock ‘n’ roll and joined the church, baptized by Hildebrandt in the frigid waters of Lake Erie. For him, adopting the church’s uniform was an act of both faith and resistance. “We’re doing it in rebellion to Hollywood and every fashion magazine that tells us we need to dress a certain way.”

Members of the Restoration don’t date. Rather, they consult their pastors about potential partners within the congregation with an eye to marrying and starting a family. When Friesen asked Hildebrandt about a girl he was interested in, Hildebrandt instead recommended Eva Peters, a devout young woman who’d grown up with the pastor in Mexico. Adolf and Eva hardly knew each other, so they’d never considered pairing up, but the idea grew on them. On Friesen’s 25th birthday, they got married.

Today, the Friesens’ lives are inextricably linked to the church. They usually attend service three times a week, and the majority of their friends are also members of the church. Adolf works as a tool and die maker for a business owned by another member and spends most Sundays cooking communal post-service meals. Like most of Hildebrandt’s followers, the Friesens sent their children, Jonathon and Serena, to the Church of God Academy, a private, four-classroom school located in the church building. Jonathon, now an eloquent 21-year-old, spent nine months as a missionary in the Philippines and later started broadcasting livestreams of Sunday services during the pandemic; it was his first time recording video. Serena, a soft-spoken and sweet-natured 18-year-old who sings in the church choir, recently moved to Leamington to help start a Restoration congregation there.

On paper, the church’s rules are rigid. In practice, they’re more fluid. Inside the Friesens’ home, a charming brick bungalow with a pristine front garden, there is a shelf of encyclopedias but no TV. Adolf reads the news on his smartphone occasionally, but Eva doesn’t use the internet except for email. The kids aren’t on social media, but they don’t think they’re missing much—“I’d rather have
real friends than virtual friends on Facebook,” says Jonathon. Serena listens mostly to classical music, but Adolf has played the Beatles and Kanye West for her. Like most people, the Friesens know who Kim Kardashian is.

Adolf acknowledges the Restoration lifestyle is demanding. “To be a Christian is a challenge,” he says. But he is more concerned with what the family is gaining than with what they’re giving up. He says they have a tight-knit community that looks out for them, and a pastor who does the same. They describe Hildebrandt as a father figure, a friend of 30 years who has helped them raise their kids, find work and brave difficult patches in their lives. More importantly, as members of the Restoration, they feel they’re doing right by God. “It’s a sense of fulfillment,” says Jonathon. “You’re doing what you know in your heart is right. I don’t think there’s a better feeling than that.”

The Friesens have never been tested for Covid, but they told me they’d all had the symptoms. They have chosen not to get vaccinated for a host of reasons: they know people who they say have suffered severe side effects from other vaccines; they don’t believe the Covid vaccines to be effective; and their church generally distrusts modern medicine. “I know Covid is real, but there’s been too much fear-mongering,” says Adolf. “There seems to be an agenda that everybody has to conform to one idea, and it seems to be an attack on religion.”

Before Zvonko Horvat became Aylmer’s chief of police, he helped oversee law enforcement at a year’s worth of protests over First Nations land rights in Caledonia. One misbehaving church did not alarm him. When he heard about Hildebrandt’s drive-in service, he was hesitant to start handing out tickets. Though the church was in clear contravention of the Reopening Ontario Act at the time, Horvat says, he wanted to start with education. So, he assigned an officer to make sure the congregation understood the restrictions and why they were in place. Shortly thereafter, the province amended the legislation to allow for drive-ins. “I’ve got to give them credit,” says Horvat. “They were pioneers. It was outside-the-box thinking.”

The Restoration caused little trouble throughout the first Covid summer, when lockdowns eased and religious gatherings resumed. But when the province tightened restrictions again in the fall, the church became more rebellious. In October of 2020, a local couple, Kimberly and Terry Neudorf, organized a freedom rally at the public bandshell behind Aylmer’s town hall. Speakers called for the community to come together, for businesses to open without fear. They railed against masks and prophesied that the Trudeau government would, like the Nazis, be judged harshly for their actions. Hildebrandt led a prayer for the crowd of 200, which included dozens of Restoration members, one holding a sign with a quote attributed to Hildebrandt’s son: “If you’ve ever wondered whether you would have been a Stasi informant and snitched on your neighbours in East Germany, well, now you know.”

The rally caught Aylmer by surprise. The Neudorfs hadn’t applied for a permit to use the bandshell (they would have been denied), so town officials didn’t know what was coming. Horvat dispatched a number of officers to keep the peace. Passersby had started shouting at the demonstrators; one local loaded large speakers onto his pickup truck and played heavy metal to drown them out. Police refrained from issuing fines again, instead doubling down on warnings and education, hoping the church would fall in line. It didn’t work. “In fact,” Horvat says, “they became more defiant.”

In early November, the Neudorfs organized another freedom rally. It was 10 times bigger than the first, attracting 2,000 people from across Ontario. On high alert this time, the town declared a state of emergency. A dozen local shops closed for the day, anticipating a maskless mob. Horvat, whose small service employs 13 full-time officers, paired up with the nearby OPP detachment. Hildebrandt says the church was not involved in planning the rally, but Restoration members wearing reflective vests and earpieces provided security, and Hildebrandt once again ministered to the masses, exclaiming, “Welcome home to the nicest town in Canada.”

Later that day, united by their displeasure with the state, a bizarre coalition of devout churchgoers, fed-up parents, small business owners and agitated radicals chanted “freedom” as they marched through the streets of Aylmer. Protesters in MAGA hats walked alongside children in their Sunday best holding signs that said “Please let me be with my friends.”

At least one fight broke out between marchers and counter-protesters. A local sprayed the procession with his garden hose; when demonstrators charged at him, his wife launched a gourd at their heads. For many Aylmer residents, it was the most disruptive day in recent memory. Police eventually laid nine criminal charges on six members of the Restoration group—one assault, plus three counts of intimidation and five counts of obstructing
as a sign that the Rapture is imminent

the end times, and they see the pandemic

Members of the church have been awaiting
the end times, and they see the pandemic

as a sign that the Rapture is imminent

In the wake of the rallies, a number of locals called for Horvat’s resignation. Residents asked why the church and its ilk got away with massive gatherings while law-abiding citizens were holed up in their homes. Conversely, Hildebrandt and his followers cried religious persecution. Thanks to media coverage of the rally, Horvat received letters from around the world telling him he was on the wrong side of the law, no better than a spineless official following Nazi orders. “You have to stay the course,” says Horvat. “You can’t try to please one side or the other. You have to look at the law.”

The Charter of Rights and Freedoms guarantees Canadians freedom of religion and the right to peaceful assembly. Several churches, including Hildebrandt’s, have filed Charter challenges against the government, arguing that Covid restrictions, including bans on religious gatherings, infringe on those freedoms. The courts will rule on those challenges in 2022. Many legal scholars suspect that judges will find that the government acted constitutionally, thanks to the first section of the Charter, which acknowledges that “reasonable limits” may be imposed upon Canadians’ rights and freedoms if those limits are “demonstrably justified in a free and democratic society.” During a global pandemic, the state has reasoned, it is sensible to limit individual freedoms if it benefits the collective citizenry. Restrictions might hinder the spiritual and mental health of Hildebrandt’s followers, but they do so in the service of saving lives.

The unenviable task of enforcing this line of thinking has largely fallen to Horvat and his officers. Throughout the winter and spring, they became a fixture at Restoration services, monitoring by drone, handing out tickets and maintaining order. Most of the interactions between the church and police have been the picture of small-town politeness, a string of thank yous and sorrys. But there have been exceptions. In December of 2020, Hildebrandt’s son Herbert allegedly shoved an 84-year-old man to the ground, leaving him with a cracked rib, after the man posted a pro-mask sign across the road from the church. (Herbert was charged with assault but says he acted in self-defence, and threatened to sue the man for libel.) This past spring, an out-of-town church attendee—easily distinguishable by his street clothes—violently charged at a local reporter, resulting in another assault charge. Visitors to Hildebrandt’s church have threatened police, blocking a cruiser from exiting the parking lot and asking where the officers’ children lived. Several locals say that church members have tailed their cars and photographed their licence plates. “We have tried to work with them,” says Horvat. But they continue to resist. “I am a little surprised by the stance they’ve taken because, at the end of the day, when this thing is over, they will still have to be part of this community.”

The tension between the Church of God Restoration and the rest of Aylmer is now palpable. In late 2020, locals began holding roadside protests against the church on Sunday mornings and boycotting local businesses with ties to the church, including a berry farm, a towing company and a restaurant. Eva Friesen was berated and banned from a store after walking in maskless. For a while, Adolf says, “I hated going into town.” In December, an anonymous Aylmerite started posting disturbing videos of a masked figure with a computerized voice threatening Hildebrandt and Kimberly Neudorf. “We have made it our mission to excommunicate you from the peaceful community of Aylmer,” the video warned.

“The community is split,” says Rayne Gelinas, a long-time resident who helped organize the roadside protests. “Aylmer used to be a quaint little town. Now it’s a hot spot for hate, intolerance and stupidity. And I can’t see a way back from that.” The unrest has taken a toll on the town. Mayor Mary French is worried people from surrounding regions will stop visiting and shopping in Aylmer. Brett Hueston, whose family runs the community newspaper and a printing company called the Aylmer Express Graphics Group, says he’s considering a rebrand of the printing division because of the name’s new baggage. “I’m born and raised here. My father is born and raised here. We’re Aylmer people,” he says. But, he continues, “Aylmer is hard to say, hard to spell, and now I’m worried about its reputation.”

On a sweltering afternoon in mid-August, I pulled into the Church of God Restoration parking lot to meet Hildebrandt. The church, a plain one-storey brick building, sits on a large, grassy lot on the north end of town, sandwiched between a Jehovah’s Witness temple and a No Frills where Hildebrandt can no longer shop—he was banned after refusing
to wear a mask. The doors to the church were still padlocked by the province, so Hildebrandt greeted me outside, toting a bible and laminated copies of the Charter and the Criminal Code. As we sat down at a shaded picnic table, he introduced me to his entourage: Susan Mutch, a fellow Restoration apostle and long-time editor of the Gospel Trumpet, the church’s magazine; his son Herbert, who now serves as the church’s chief of security and publicist; and two 12-year-old boys, his grandson and a friend, who would record our interview.

I told Hildebrandt I wanted to understand his view on vaccines. At the core of his resistance is Restoration doctrine, which largely rejects Big Pharma and medical intervention and instead mandates holistic medicine (including exercise and nutrition) and relies on the power of prayer and divine healing. The church applies this approach unevenly, taking no issue with dental work or eyeglasses yet shunning medicine and surgery unless absolutely necessary. And if it is necessary, it carries social stigma. When members get sick, they consult the church’s elders, who pray for them. Illness and even death are treated as God’s will—to interfere would be a sign of spiritual weakness.

Hildebrandt also offered anecdotal reasoning. He told me he’d witnessed friends and family suffer ailments, including partial paralysis, after getting other vaccines. For that reason, he said, “My personal stance is that I would shy away from vaccination, period.” When I asked how he was sure the problems were caused by immunization, he said that doctors will admit, under pressure, that vaccines are unsafe. He then claimed that the Covid vaccine was an “experimental injection” with severe side effects—blood clots, paralysis, death—and no credible track record of being safe and effective.

When I asked how he would counsel a parishioner who was on the fence about getting vaccinated, he said he’d encourage them to do their own research and let them make their own decision. But members who break rank with church doctrine are often rebuked; Bob Mutch, the husband of apostle Susan Mutch, was excommunicated in 2008 for questioning the church’s stance on refusing medical help. Hildebrandt’s followers also have limited access to material produced outside the church. In the last year, the Gospel Trumpet has published erroneous and misleading articles about the health hazards of masks, the potential side effects of vaccines (cancer, Alzheimer’s and death, supposedly) and the checkered history of the pharmaceutical companies manufacturing them. An editorial by Susan Mutch begins, “If someone were to approach Bill Gates and Tony Fauci with the intent to give them a dose of the real Covid vaccine, I envision the vaccine duo running in horror for their lives. They know too much.”

This mirrors the stance of the Church of God Restoration at large. At a doctrinal meeting in November of 2020, the church’s leaders claimed that vaccines cause autism, ADHD, infertility and other serious illnesses. They intimated that U.S. politicians are profiting monetarily from vaccine development, and they suggested that Bill Gates is the devil in human form, trying to prevent the church from gathering. One apostle performed an original song that mentioned Gates by name, singing, If I was the devil, I’d make up a brew / I’d get a needle and inject it into you. Hildebrandt commented on a livestream of the meeting, saying, “Praise the Lord from Ontario, Canada.”

I asked Hildebrandt if he’d considered the possibility that he and his church might be wrong. Research shows that vaccines greatly reduce the likelihood of hospitalization and death. Could they be putting members in danger by advising against getting the vaccine? Hildebrandt wouldn’t entertain the premise of my question. “I would be putting people in danger by encouraging them to get vaccinated,” he said. “How am I supposed to be an advocate for the devil and play both sides?”

The Restoration’s rejection of modern medicine has led to tragedy before. Twenty years ago, a couple from the church were charged with involuntary manslaughter after their 11-month-old daughter died from untreated meningitis. Around the same time, Manitoba officials investigated Hildebrandt’s brother, who’d lost two children of his own; the London Free Press reported that one child died after being born at home prematurely and that the other passed away from a lung ailment when the family refused to put the child on oxygen. (Hildebrandt denies these reports, claiming that his sister-in-law had two miscarriages. No charges were laid.)

In the early 2000s, Children’s Aid received a tip that a couple who followed Hildebrandt were striking their children with straps, and failing to procure necessary medical care for their injuries. Social workers removed seven children from the home, resulting in a media frenzy. Church members called it a “barbaric raid” and argued that corporal punishment was sanctioned by the Bible. In the following months, more than 100 women and children from the Aylmer congregation temporarily fled to the U.S. over fears that Children’s Aid

Peter Blahut, a retired Canada Post mail carrier, was drawn to Hildebrandt’s don’t-tread-on-me zeal. He intends to stick around.
November 2021

Toronto Life

Hildebrandt says that Covid-19 is basically a harsh flu. He preaches that illness and even death are God’s will and to interfere would be a sign of spiritual weakness.

would come for their kids, too. In 2002, the church changed its doctrine to permit children to access necessary medical attention.

Adults, however, are still expected to refrain. A few years ago, Elizabeth Oppel, one of the church’s apostles, visited an Aylmer congregant named Diedrich Froese, who’d fallen ill. Afterwards, she publicly proclaimed that God would heal Froese; in fact, she’d told him to do so. “We can command God,” Oppel allegedly said. “Lord, you’re going to look real bad now unless you do something here for us.” Froese died in June 2019. He was 29. Several other members of the Restoration have reportedly died after neglecting to take medication or seek medical attention for conditions including heart failure, cancer and diabetes.

In the past, the church put only its own members in danger by eschewing medical intervention. Covid changes the equation. By refusing to get vaccinated, church members aren’t just putting themselves at risk; they could also infect others, including the hundreds of unvaccinated new churchgoers who flock to the Restoration every Sunday. So far, apart from a rash of 100 cases at the Ontario Police College in Aylmer, the town has escaped a major outbreak. Gelinas, the counter-protest organizer, worries that may change: “If Henry continues to do this stuff and exposes the community to Delta, people will die.”

On the eve of the American election in November 2016, the Gospel Trumpet published an article titled “8 Reasons Why We Are Not Involved in Politics,” outlining why Restoration members don’t vote, run for office or opine on government. Why, just five years later, has Hildebrandt become a political provocateur, haranguing Justin Trudeau and Doug Ford in his sermons, inviting elected officials to speak to his congregation and endorsing the People’s Party of Canada?

Hildebrandt told me he’s been accused of seeking attention. “I’ve been doing this since 1991,” he continued. “Shame on me if it took me 30 years to get attention.” Hueston, the Aylmer Express editor, says Hildebrandt doesn’t seem motivated by money, either. He doesn’t pass around a collection basket at Sunday service. He lives in a modest single-storey home in Aylmer and drives a workaday Volkswagen crossover. “I don’t see Henry driving around in a Rolls-Royce,” says Hueston. “I don’t see him jet-setting to Hawaii.”

Like any serious preacher, Hildebrandt wants to scale his operation. The Restoration is, at its core, an evangelical church, dedicated to growing its numbers. And nothing has attracted followers like Hildebrandt’s anti-authority activism. In recent months, Hildebrandt’s services have attracted not just Restoration members but a colourful collection of visitors, some of them wearing purple People’s Party caps and Infowars T-shirts. “When the judge ordered the doors locked, that instantly doubled the attendance,” he says. “A revival has begun. An awakening is taking place.”

To Hildebrandt, the newcomers are the fulfillment of a grim prophecy millennia in the making. The Restoration believes that the end of the world is imminent, that Jesus will return to save true believers and, in church parlance, “take vengeance in flaming fire on all sinners and dissolve the universe.” Layne believed that the one true church would grow by the millions right before the Rapture. The church has repeated this prophecy ad nauseam. “We stand on the verge of eternity and the soon-coming of our blessed Lord,” a typical Gospel Trumpet editorial proclaimed. “Prepare to meet your God.” Through the eyes of a church anticipating the apocalypse, 2021 probably looks a lot like the end: a worldwide pandemic, climate change, civil unrest, oceans on fire and, now, a surging membership. After decades of preparing for Earth’s grand finale, Hildebrandt and his church can taste it. “We know that the end is coming,” he says.

When Hildebrandt approached the microphone on a Sunday morning in early September, the crowd rose to its feet, clapping
and cheering. They sat rapt, listening as he began to tell the story of Gamaliel, a lawyer who appears in the Acts of the Apostles, the section of the Bible following Jesus’ death. When Jewish authorities prohibited the apostles from preaching the gospel, Gamaliel argued that the government should leave them alone. The message was clear: Gamaliel resisted government to serve God; so should the Restoration. “Just let us be,” a man shouted from the congregation.

After the service, as a mix of old-guard Restoration members and neophytes lined up for a build-your-own-taco station, I spoke with Peter Blahut, a retired Canada Post mail carrier in a baseball cap. When his usual church, a Catholic parish in Brantford, closed due to Covid, he called the local diocese and asked why they weren’t defying the law and opening up. “Church is essential,” he says. The diocese wasn’t willing to breach provincial guidelines, but Blahut soon found a church that would. In May, he came across footage of Hildebrandt being locked out of the church and vowing to keep gathering. Every Sunday since, Blahut and his wife and son have attended Hildebrandt’s services, drawn by the Restoration’s energy and excitement. He’s followed Hildebrandt to rallies around southern Ontario. Even when his old parish reopens, he says, “I’d rather just come back here.” I asked Blahut whether he’d ever trade in his civvies for the Restoration’s black and white uniform. He didn’t hesitate: no. For Hildebrandt, that’s okay. For now, at least, the relationship is symbiotic. Hildebrandt fills his pews, and the newcomers find a like-minded community.

At a recent church-wide doctrinal meeting, chief apostle Tinsman told members that it was time for the church to cut ties with banks and governments and form a self-sustaining agrarian community, where members would take up work as farmers, tailors, cooks and cobblers. Then he asked for their help building another complex—a sacred, self-sufficient community, where members would take up work as farmers, tailors, cooks and cobblers. Then he asked for their help building such a society. “It’s time to put our money where our faith is. We don’t need bullets. We don’t need tanks. We need your George Washingtons,” he said. He told members to downsize their houses and give the funds to the church. “If you believe this, you need to empty out your IRAs and your 401(k)s. It’s time to go for broke.”

James DeGraffenreid, a former Restoration minister in Indiana, says Tinsman’s ambitions are a radical departure from the church that Layne founded. DeGraffenreid is a bespectacled, bearded man in his 60s who is warm but serious. He says Layne would not have asked members to forfeit their savings, nor to pray to God through his name, as Tinsman often does. “The Restoration is full of dear, dear people who want to love the Lord and live for him. Some of them have been there a long time, and these ministers have browbeaten them and forced them to accept changes that were not a part of their beliefs even 10 years ago,” he says. Like others who have left the Restoration, he was shunned and separated from his loved ones. It seems as if he’s still reeling from the rift that the church created in his family: his wife and son and some grandchildren have left the church, but his daughter-in-law and other kids and grandkids remain. “I fear for my family that is still there,” he says. “These people are completely and entirely under the thumb of this ministry, and it’s not going to get better. It’s going to get worse. People know what happened in Jonestown in the late ’70s, when the doomsday preacher Jim Jones convinced more than 900 of his followers to kill themselves by drinking cyanide-laced Kool-Aid. “I’m not exaggerating when I say that this Restoration group is headed for the same thing.”

It was the spirit of resistance that drew hundreds to Hildebrandt. Given the level of compliance he demands from his followers, the same spirit may eventually drive them away. “We’re not claiming that every single one of them will stay,” says Hildebrandt. Yet he has plans to grow. He told me he wants to convert his existing church into a bigger school and build another complex—a sacred, self-sufficient church hall with space for a thousand worshippers, a gym, a cafeteria and an extended parking lot. In the meantime, he is considering pitching a heated tent on the lawn so that he and his followers can continue to gather through the winter and lament the next wave of Covid-containment measures: vaccine passports, immunization mandates, booster shots. “You’ll have to get ready to burn us at the stake, because Christians are known to never give up.”

The question is not so much what to do with Hildebrandt and his followers, but how to come to grips with what he represents: the millions who embrace misinformation and ignore science. There are pockets of defiant malcontent in hundreds of communities across Canada, hurling gravel at Trudeau and picketing hospitals. The pandemic won’t go away so long as they persist. And they will persist. To them, the fate of the world depends on it.
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TSE CHI LOP, the suspected ringleader of a $21-billion crime syndicate, may be the world’s most innovative drug lord. And Toronto was his training ground.

SE CHI LOP DOESN’T LOOK LIKE the biggest drug lord in history. He looks like a bedraggled, exhausted, late-middle-aged trader in commodities, which is exactly what he is. Tse’s commodities just happen to be high-margin, addictive, illegal drugs—heroin, ketamine and methamphetamine. Tse runs a drug syndicate known to law enforcement as “Sam Gor,” Cantonese for “Third Brother,” and to its members simply as the Company. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime estimates that Sam Gor’s annual revenue could be as high as $21 billion, the same as Citibank’s.

Practically every newspaper in the West has described Tse Chi Lop as Asia’s El Chapo. The comparison could hardly be less accurate. Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán, the leader of Mexico’s Sinaloa Cartel, has claimed personal responsibility for up to 3,000 murders in a drug war that took some...
300,000 lives. That is not Tse’s way. He achieved the size of Sam Gor not by murder and torture, but by industrializing his business, reducing the cost per unit, providing an excellent product at a fair price, and establishing well-maintained networks of key partnerships. There’s also the question of scale. El Chapo’s cartel was worth, at its peak, $3 billion—a fraction of Sam Gor’s value.

Toronto taught Tse his business. The seeds for what would become the world’s largest drug empire were planted during his days surviving what police still remember as the “wild wild west” of the heroin glut in the late ’80s and early ’90s. Insofar as a man as cosmopolitan and as mobile as Tse Chi Lop has a home, Toronto is his.

Tse’s career reflects the changing nature of crime, and of the methods of synthetic drug manufacture that are rendering traditional police practices null, but it also reflects the changing nature of business in general. Traditional organized crime was a 20th-century affair. Sam Gor is pure 21st-century innovation. Its success comes down to technological innovation, relentless focus on customer experience, and mastery of globalized logistics. Tse Chi Lop is much more effective—and dangerous—than El Chapo. He is the Jeff Bezos of the drug trade.

From Early in His Career, Tse Chi Lop was an innovator. He was born in 1963 and grew up in Guangzhou in Guangdong province, the mainland neighbour to Hong Kong. When he was 25, he moved to Canada, part of the wave of emigration before Hong Kong’s transfer of sovereignty. Tse brought his fiancée with him, and his parents soon followed. He and his wife had children in Toronto, first a daughter, then a son. He also got decent jobs, working for Fujifilm and Kodak.

Back then, Toronto was a cauldron of competing Asian criminal organizations, including a group of Vietnamese gangsters supported by Born to Kill from New York City, and the Boston-backed Fukienese, all fighting for territory. Tse brought his fiancée with him, and his parents soon followed. He and his wife had children in Toronto, first a daughter, then a son. He also got decent jobs, working for Fujifilm and Kodak.

In 1990, Peter Yuen, now a deputy chief of the Toronto Police Service, was a detective constable working undercover during the height of the violence. “You had gun battles, 15 rounds at the middle of the table, and around the table are the police investigators, and they can study the jar of marbles. And by studying this jar of marbles, you see where every marble sits.” In Au’s metaphor, the BCB is the jar turned over, with all the marbles bouncing around, constantly in motion. Anyone on the street can call themselves a Big Circle Boy. As a police officer, how do you know you’ve got who you think you’ve got? When you’ve broken up a cell, what have you broken up? How do you infiltrate an organization that breaks up and reforms for every project?

These radical criminal businessmen began as Communist partisans and Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution, and were sent to Guangdong province in southeast China for re-education in the 1960s and ’70s. Some later fled to Hong Kong, either across the mountains or by swimming 12 kilometres across Deep Bay, with many drowning en route.

Unlike local Hong Kong gangs, the BCB had paramilitary training, and by the late 1970s they were famous for street battles with local police using hand grenades and AK-47s. They regularly robbed jewellery stores and banks. Hong Kong police identified the new brand of Guangzhou criminals as Big Circle Boys because Guangzhou, on their maps, was a big red circle. Within a few years, the Guangzhou criminals were spreading out from Hong Kong to the U.S., South America, Thailand, the Netherlands and, later, Canada.

Once they were in Canada, however, the BCB discovered that their old criminal methodologies didn’t work in their new country. They didn’t understand the systems well enough. They couldn’t rob a bank because they didn’t know how the money flowed into banks. They couldn’t rob jewellery stores either, because unlike Hong Kong, Toronto operates mostly on credit instead of cash.

Bereft of options, they started at the bottom: pickpocketing. But they quickly realized that the credit cards and IDs in the wallets they stole were more valuable than the cash, if exploited correctly. They used the IDs for human smuggling, converting real passports and cards into flawless fake ones. They used the credit cards for fraud, flattening the original number on a stolen card and embossing a new one, often provided by waiters who’d swipe cards twice, once for the actual restaurant bill and a second time to keep a record of the number so they could sell it. Soon, they’d scaled the credit card racket, forging between 10,000 and 30,000 cards at a time through their Chinese manufacturing connections. The BCB are one
of the reasons you have to use a pass-word for large purchases on your credit card today. These were Tse Chi Lop’s people, massively adaptable global citizens with an instinct for big money. While other criminal organizations in Toronto were murdering each other over minuscule sums, the BCB created whole new enterprises. Alex Chung is a lecturer at Oxford University who wrote his dissertation on the BCB in Canada. “They learned quickly that violence was too costly,” Chung says. “Canada is, to them, very orderly.” They reacted to that orderliness by educating themselves in the realities of the marketplace rather than killing their enemies. The BCB hired “sifu,” a Cantonese term that loosely translates to “masters” but corresponds in practice to consultants. “Whenever they wanted to get into a new area, a new market, a new trade, they would hire someone to teach them how to get it done,” Chung says. To learn the credit card business, they hired manufacturers. For the drug trade, they hired chemists. They brought an industrial approach to organized crime. And Tse would become their greatest innovator.

In the 1990s, Tse helped establish one of the most impressive drug shipment networks in history. He and his colleagues observed a couple of basic facts: it was easy to smuggle drugs from Asia into Canada, it was relatively easy to smuggle drugs across the border from Canada into the U.S., and the U.S. was the biggest narcotics marketplace in the world. So, if the right connections could be made, there was a chance to build a stable logistical chain to smuggle heroin through Canada.

At the time, the Rizzuto family in Montreal, an infamous Canadian mafia organization, had an established cocaine network, buying directly from Colombian cartels, using Hells Angels as distributors in Canada, and shipping to the States. The Big Circle Boys came up with the idea to piggyback their heroin trade on the Rizzutos’ cocaine routes. And the Rizzutos agreed.

The BCB imported the highest-quality heroin from Thailand, grown in the poppy fields of the Golden Triangle. From Thailand they shipped it to Vancouver, then Toronto, and then into the United States via the Rizzuto family’s distribution network. “The BCB dominated the drug trade by being efficient and out-competing others,” Chung says. They were flexible, always adaptable to the market.

Tse was part of the group who negotiated the deal, and by 1997, he was the person sourcing all the drugs from Asia. Mark Calnan, an FBI agent who tracked Tse for years, says networking was the key to Tse’s success. “He had great skills in diplomacy and he thought outside the box. The fact that he used Sicilians to transport heroin— it takes a lot of guts.” The Rizzutos’ network included the Bonanno family on the American side and the ‘Ndrangheta in Europe. Tse learned from the collaborative spirit of the Rizzutos. The drugs moved down the eastern seaboard, hidden in trucks. They went from Toronto to a barber shop on Long Island run by Emanuele LoGiudice, known as Manny the Barber, to be sold on the streets of New York, then down the east coast to Florida.

The BCB earned hundreds of millions of dollars in the deal, and they enjoyed their lavish lifestyles, says Chung. Investigators surveilling the BCB used to complain about having to eat out seven days a week at nice restaurants to observe them. Sometimes, a handful of BCB members would take over an entire restaurant for the night and pay the proprietor what they would have earned if the place was full. Tse was one of those people. He moved with movie stars, and it was a great era for Chinese movie stars coming to Toronto—celebrities like Anita Mui, the Madonna of Hong Kong. But with success in the drug trade comes notoriety, and eventually the police hear your name. It’s your name that breaks you.

**T**he FBI knew that Canada was the source of most of the heroin in the United States, and they wanted to know who was bringing the drugs in. That question sparked a multi-year collaboration between the FBI, the RCMP and local police in Toronto, Montreal and Hong Kong. The investigation began in 1992 with the arrest of a street dealer on a corner in the Bronx. They soon learned his supplier was a man named Yong Bing Gong, known as Sonny, who was orchestrating an extensive trafficking business from prison, where he was serving a life sentence for abduction and extortion. The investigation was dubbed Sunblock as a kind of portmanteau of “Sonny” and the cellblock where he lived.

Operation Sunblock worked its way through traffickers on both sides of the border, from Paul Kwok, a Scarborough resident who first met Sonny in prison and who would facilitate the transport of heroin across the border, to Manny the Barber on Long Island. The operation resulted in dozens of indictments, including those of Kwok and Gong in 1996. The name the cops kept hearing over and over again, as the ultimate source of the connection, was Tse Chi Lop. By 1998, he was the last man standing.

The problem was, Tse was in China. The United States had no extradition agreement with China, but it did have one with Hong
Tse recognized that he could change the entire business model of illegal drugs.

By 2011, Tse and his family had left Toronto and moved to Hong Kong. Around this time, police believe, he teamed up with Lee Chung Chak to form the meth syndicate that would become Sam Gor. One of Tse's major innovations, which defined his organization and overturned the structure of the illegal drug industry, was guaranteed delivery. If a dealer paid for the drugs, he'd receive them. If they were seized, Sam Gor would replace them at no cost to the buyer. Guaranteed delivery was possible because the production costs were negligible. This was the idea on which Tse built an empire.

In the early days of Sam Gor, Tse did what he does best: solving people's problems and bringing them together. Hong Kong and Macau's three biggest triads—14K, Wo Shing Wo and Sun Yee On—are enormous, powerful, violent criminal organizations; 14K alone has some 20,000 members. These triads are rivals and often go to war, but Tse united them and got them to co-operate on the drug trade. He also brought in members of the Big Circle Boys, the Bamboo Union out of Taiwan, and even biker gangs from Australia. This coordination was an enormous feat of criminality—to take army-size groups of violent criminals and get them to work together.

Guaranteed delivery was the source of Tse's power. Why would Australian biker gangs struggle to bring in chemicals in bulk (which are much harder to buy in Australia), manufacture meth, then compete to make the best product? Sam Gor would supply the highest-quality meth, sell it to them for a reasonable price and guarantee a risk-free delivery. In one sense, the bikers and the triads were losing control. They were depending on a supplier.

Traditional organized crime was a 20th-century affair. Tse's business is pure 21st-century innovation. He's the Jeff Bezos of the drug trade.

On the other hand, an ocean of uncertainty and risk had been removed. It's like Amazon. Why do you, and everyone you know, use Amazon even though you don't want to, even though you read nightmare stories about working conditions at their warehouses and you want to support local businesses? Because if you order a book from Amazon, it doesn't cost any more but it arrives at your door, sometimes the same day. And if there's a problem with your delivery, they fix it. After a while, you start to think of Amazon less as a retail option and more as a utility. In the 21st century, the way to conquer people is by giving them what they want.

In return for its guarantees and risk reduction, Tse used the triads and biker gangs to scale his business. As the syndicate...
In November of 2016, a Taiwanese man named Cai Jeng Ze walked nervously through Yangon International Airport in Myanmar, en route to Taiwan. He was stopped by airport police, who allegedly found 80 grams of ketamine taped to each of his thighs and arrested him. When anti-narcotic agents hacked into his two iPhones, they found what one officer described as an “Aladdin’s cave of intel”: a huge photo and video library, texts, calls and social media conversations. In one of the photos, officers saw a face they recognized from previous drug surveillance: it was Tse Chi Lop.

The Australian police spearheaded the pursuit, because meth in Australia had become, under Tse, a grotesque epidemic. Australia has the highest use of methamphetamine in the English-speaking world: seven per cent of the population have used it, compared to 0.4 per cent of Americans. In 2019, officers saw a face they recognized from previous drug surveillance: it was Tse Chi Lop.

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Tse has run two of the largest drug networks in history, on different continents and in different decades. This makes him unique. In the memories of the people who pursued him, he is a massive contradiction: a man who has arguably done more to spread human immiseration than any other person on the planet but whom everybody seems to like. A genius in the business of illegal commodities whose capture will make little to no difference to the marketplace. He’s a node on a network. There are many other people who can replace him. Ultimately, he is the ideal middleman, positioning himself perfectly as a key interceptor in a world grown radically interconnected.

The war on heroin was never winnable. The war on synthetic drugs is even less so: it makes no difference how many criminals are arrested or how many drug shipments are seized. There’s always more of both. Crime only diminishes when demand declines, or when governments take over supply. Peter Yuen says the legalization of casinos killed Asian organized crime in Toronto. He estimates there was an 80 per cent decline in street-level crime when underground gaming houses dissolved.

Tse rose to prominence as a criminal disciple of open multicultural hypercapitalism. David Au of the RCMP says that’s what sets Canada apart. “When I used to go down to the western U.S., every group was very siolated,” Au says. “The Chinese would only work with the Chinese. The Vietnamese would only work with the Vietnamese. The African-Americans among themselves, Latinos among themselves.” The inter-ethnic collaboration here is distinctly Canadian. “Other jurisdictions find it unique,” Au says.

What gave traditional organized crime its strength in the past—the violence, the control of territory, the ethnic loyalty and defined hierarchies—are the heart of its weakness in the present. Tse had a better system. Instead of ethnic loyalty, transnational and inter-organizational co-operation. Instead of territory, logistics. Instead of hierarchy, metrics. Instead of centralized control, connections. Tse Chi Lop is easily the most significant criminal in Toronto’s history, and he represents, in an entirely diseased way, a perverse triumph of the city. His vast criminal organization flourished through open-mindedness and entrepreneurship, by creating markets and exploiting them in a spirit of eager globalization and cosmopoliticism. He is one of capitalism’s grandest and most polite monsters. He is very much one of us.
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I lived in downtown Toronto for 35 years and loved every second of it. My Trinity-Bellwoods home was my retirement plan. When the pandemic came along, I cashed in early—just like so many other claustrophobic, Covid-weary Torontonians. Now I’m in the country, far from everything, and left wondering, Now what?

BY DAVID EDDIE
ON THE SURFACE, AT LEAST, WE HAD IT MADE. My wife, Pam, and I lived across from Trinity Bellwoods Park, in a lovely three-storey Victorian house, which we bought in 1999 for $300,000. Someone in a coffee shop had told me an old lady died on Crawford Street, and her house might come up for sale.

Me: “Crawford?”

Pam, when I told her later: “Crawford?” It was her dream street. Right on the park! With a playground and a community centre to boot! A great school nearby for our three boys. The house, built in 1874, had been in the same family for more than 80 years. And they’d never been wealthy. The house was untouched by the hubris of intervening generations and their notions of “modernization.” Through two world wars, they’d jerry-rigged anything that went wrong, and then only when they absolutely had to. And there must have been a sale on pink paint at some point, because everything from top to bottom was pink: the walls, the basement, the falling-to-pieces garage. Even a couple of high-back wooden chairs. In other words, a blank, if pink, slate. The walls were insulated with old newspapers, as we later found out: one, from 1939, read: “WAR AVERTED IN EUROPE.” I wish I’d kept that artifact, to prove I’m not guilty of writer’s embellishment. As it stands, you’ll just have to take my word for it.

Since our house was directly on the perimeter of a large urban park, “our street,” I would brag to bored people who couldn’t care less, “is kind of like the Central Park West of Toronto.” Since it was half a block from the city’s premier district for clothing, jewellery, glasses, sunglasses, Japanese stationery, specialty olive oil, “our neighbourhood,” I would brag to the same bored, couldn’t-care-less people, “is kind of like the Soho of Toronto.”

Just one little problem, a wee cumulonimbus gathering force on the horizon: in order to be able to afford to live on “the Central Park West of Toronto” in “the Soho of Toronto,” Pam and I were quietly but inexorably sinking like a horse and buggy into a quicksand of debt. And that was basically all my fault. I hope you appreciate how painful it is for me to admit that fact. As a news reporter for Citytv, Pam made her steady salary, month in, month out, and had a triple-A, pre-approved credit rating. Bankers practically offered her brie and wine as she sashayed through their doors.

Me, though, they tended to eyeball with skepticism. Looking up from a stack of papers: “Says here you’re a… writer?” One miraculous year, I became the co-creator and co-executive producer of a (short-lived) HBO (Canada) TV show and actually outearned Pam. Huzzah! Other years? Not so much.

Helping our cause—well, mine anyway—was the fact that we had another earner in the family: our humble Victorian earned on average $100,000 a year, every year. Not bad when you consider it never went to university or received any other type of formal training. Unable to help ourselves, salivating over all that toothsome equity, we borrowed to pay not only for an endless string of renovations, but also for just about everything else, including vacations, a second-hand car and so forth. Basically, we used our house like a giant, three-storey credit card, to the point where our mortgage stood at just about exactly triple the house’s original price: $900,000.

Let’s pause. I know what you’re thinking, and I understand. What does this alternately braggy and whiny boomer have to complain about? Just the other day, I was talking to my nephew. Almost 30, his two-year-old playing at his feet, he was telling me he couldn’t foresee owning a house in Toronto. He’d given up on the idea a long time ago. And it was the same for everyone he
knew. Me, 60: “I felt the same way at your age.” Him, dourly: “Yeah, well, a lot has changed since then.” I told him I once wrote a novel (never published) called Born to Rent. At that, he looked up from his toddler, his eyes locked with mine, and he said, with conviction: “That’s exactly how I feel. How all my friends feel. Like we were born to rent.” So I get it. The notion of home ownership is slipping away, starting to seem like it belongs to another, sepia-toned, horse-and-buggy-type era. And, believe me, it makes me sad: for him, for his kid, for his friends, for myself, for my kids—for everyone. Alas, what can I do? This is how it happened. To continue:

And so our financial situation might have continued indefinitely, the bills and collection notices slowly rising to our eyeballs like the salt water (spoiler alert) rises to the eyeballs of the sailors at the end of A Perfect Storm. Me typing furiously, pitching, hoping against hope for that miraculous call from my agent, like the one Stephen King got from his when he was still working in a laundromat about the paperback rights to Carrie (in today’s dollars: $2.3 million): “Dave, are you sitting down?”

But then this pernicious pandemic struck. And not only struck but stuck around. Covid up, Covid down, everything’s closed, stay inside. Like everyone else, we became time killers: minute murderers, hour assassins, playing chess, cards, doing the Jumble, the crossword, watching TV until our eyes began to bleed just a bit.

The articles appeared, slowly at first: “Toronto experiences record population loss as more move away from city amid Covid-19 pandemic” and “Space is the new luxury: could the coronavirus prompt an urban exodus in Ontario?” Over 12 months during the first big wave, something like 50,000 Toronto residents packed up and left the city, relocating to places like Oshawa, Kitchener-Waterloo, Cambridge and Collingwood, where prices are less prohibitive and Manhattan-like, at least for the moment.

Were they happy? The notion worked its way inside my head and wouldn’t leave. Should we think about doing something similar? Outside the walls of our cozy domicile, everyone was suspicious, grumpy, wearing masks. We started to think maybe Sartre had a point when he said: “Hell is other people.” Picturing ourselves installed in that “new luxury,” a wide-open space somewhere, breeze gently ruffling the cornstalks, horses gambolling about. Fresh air, rejuvenation—all that stuff.

Pam and I started talking seriously about a rural relocation. And of course, in the mood we were in, our discussions tended to focus on the downside, rather than the upside, of our lives in the Covid-soaked concrete jungle.

Me, cheapskate, perpetually focused on money: “We can’t do anything anymore. We can’t shop, see friends or family, can’t go to the movies, can’t play ping-pong at the community centre, can’t go out to dinner, can’t go to bars or museums. So why are we paying such sky-high property taxes at this point? You tell me! And you know they’re just going to go up!”

Before I’d even finished, Pam, con allegro: “I’m sick of being stuck in traffic all the time! There is so much congestion and construction they might as well put up a sign: YOU CAN’T GET THERE FROM HERE. I’m gonna lose it one of these days, I swear to God. You think I’m joking, Dave, but I’m not! I’ve actually burst into tears in the car:”

What in Hollywood they call the “inciting incident” arrived in the form of a buy-out package at Pam’s work. She’d been wanting one for a while, so she accepted, signing off tearfully. Suddenly, with no office or desk job to keep us tethered to the city, the question was no longer hypothetical: could two lifelong urbanites such as Pam and me survive in the rural environment?

“LIFELONG URBANITE” is no exaggeration. I’d have to speak at the speed of an auctioneer for several hours to enumerate all the ways the city’s streets and tracks and tunnels had intertwined over the years with the twin helixes of my DNA, from the time I moved there with my family at age 11 (from Madison, Wisconsin) to the city’s east end, and my friends and I, looking like a pint-sized ragtag UN delegation, ran up and down the Don Valley like hooligans; then, to cool off, if you can even picture this now, jumped off tire swings, arms and legs windmilling, into the Don River. I lost my virginity in Toronto. I proposed to my first serious girlfriend on the rooftop patio of the Park Plaza.

In my 20s and early 30s, I went out just about every night. No lie. I was even offered a “man about town” column, an offer that was summarily rescinded when I was spotted one too many times pushing a stroller. Anyway, dinner parties, art openings, book launches… I even attended the opening of an escalator once. “I’d go to the opening of an outhouse,” I used to say. I’m kidding. Although if there were an open bar, I would have considered it.
I was always ambitious, loved my work, and worked hard during the day, but I came alive after sunset. Time to go out! Getting dressed, sipping drink, listening to music, shaking rump, pointing to the mirror: “Creature of the night!” And: “Two minutes for looking so good!”

Pam was more a daytime creature, but her attachment to city living was no less firm. Together, we sat on patios with friends, sipping mimosas and Caesars, dropping bon mots, laughing in the sunshine, waiting for our eggs Benedict to arrive. We popped over to friends’ houses, and they to ours. Along with the kids, we took taxis and Ubers and streetcars everywhere not in walking distance, by which I mean a few blocks. I didn’t even have a driver’s licence.

Every morning and evening, we walked our dog in the park, kibitzing with neighbours and other downtowners while our canines sniffed each other’s derrières. There was a juice bar on the corner, where, for a mere dozen dollars (more if the juice barista squirted an ultrabiotic ingredient into it, e.g., wheatgrass or spirulina) you could obtain a special concoction with a name like “Green Goblin” or “Urban Detox.”

Tuesday afternoons we might saunter over to the farmer’s market, its farmers having practically limo’d or choppered in their wares, us urbanites paying top dollar to hear the story of our vegetables: “These mushrooms were hand-picked in a sustainable forest in the interior of British Columbia.” But we would also kibitz, exhibit babies, exchange gossip.

Most days, sometimes more than once, we played ping-pong in the community centre across the street, learning to up our game from all the fiends who played there, some of them all day, every day. In the mornings, Pam would get together with her exercise crew in Trinity Bellwoods and prance around to music, doing lunges, squats and “burpees,” whatever they are, and chat.

And so, picture now painted, you can understand the heartbeat when we sold. It wasn’t so much the structure—our crumbling, 145-year-old pile of bricks—as it was everything around it. We closed on November 13, a Friday (a portent we ignored), in 2020. The selling price: $2.5 million.

My boys held tearful goodbyes with their friends. I was almost thankful for the way the many logistics of moving elbowed out a lot of time for emotion and reflection. There’s work to be done! Could you grab that box? Did you call that guy? But as I watched the city skyline shrink in the rear-view, I felt a hurricane of emotions, among them a worrying pang of anxiety: what if we were making a big mistake?

**SO NOW HERE WE ARE. OR RATHER, HERE I AM.** Quintessentially, existentially alone, about which more later. Just outside Burford, Ontario, population 1,600, a charming little waypoint west of Brantford, which is west of Hamilton. I’m sitting on the porch of our newfound rural redoubt, which we’re renting for $2,800 a month. They call it “ranch-style,” which only means everything is spread out horizontally, except for a loft that functions as a rec room. Four bedrooms. Three bathrooms. A massive basement and a massive two-car garage. Built circa 1960. Also: there’s a wraparound porch. If I look up from my laptop, I see: a driveway, a field full of soybeans, some corn, trees, some... other shrubbery, a barn, and outside the barn... a paddock? Anyway, some kind of wooden-fence enclosure, which obviously used to contain an animal. Horses? It’s overgrown with weeds now.

What I don’t see: humans, or any type of building that could possibly enclose a person or people. Thus raising the tree-falls-in-the-forest type question that’s been ping-pong-ing around my brain since we got here: If you can’t see a person’s house from your house, is that person still your “neighbour”? The idea is simply to experiment via renting, in case we wind up missing our friends and family and decent Chinese food too much and want to skedaddle back to the city.

Our current driveway is longer than the city block we used to live on. True story! We measured it with the car’s odometer: 0.4 kilometres. The nearest town-like concentration of humanity, Burford, isn’t even all that near; and isn’t even really much of a town, no offence. It’s like: gas-station-hardware-store-liquor-store-supermarket-pizza-place and it’s in the rear-view. “Home of Adam Henrique” the sign proudly proclaims as you enter. By the time you think, Who the heck is Adam Henrique? it’s in the rear-view.

(I’ve since looked him up: he’s an NHL player. I’m sure he’s very talented, but the sign feels like a charming little-brother boast from a town trying to compete with neighbouring Brantford, where “The Great One,” Wayne Gretzky, was born and raised. And that’s all I want to say about him, or the not-really-a-town he emanates from, for the moment—because those guys are good at fighting, and I picture him, back for a charity hockey game in the off-season, spotting me in the Foodland parking lot, dropping his winter gloves and beating the crap out of me.)

Pam and I are trying to adapt to our rural lifestyle. We even bought a ride-on lawn mower. I have the pictures to prove it, though I think some of my urban friends think they’re photoshopped. In the city, we had literally zero lawn: there was a fashionable “wild garden” in our postage-stamp-sized front yard; our postage-stamp-sized backyard was covered in paving stones. Out here, though, there’s so much lawn it would be impossible to mow it all with a push mower. I mean, I suppose it’s theoretically possible. But there are about three acres of lawn attached to our house. It’d take days of mind-numbing, back-breaking, dawn-to-dusk labour, by which time the first part would be growing back again. You’d find yourself doing little else. You’d become a Sisyphus of lawn mowing.

We’ve also learned that out here, when you’re driving around, you’re supposed to wave at every single person who goes by in the other direction. I think. I’m still working out the details on that one. To be on the safe side, Pam and I wave at everyone, even if they have tinted windows and we can’t see if they’re waving back. Apparently it’s acceptable rural etiquette to just raise your index finger on the steering wheel when someone goes by.

Still, it’s exhausting.

It’s been nearly a year out here in Burford, and I have yet to be invited to anyone’s house, apartment or mobile home, let alone any type of catered event. So sometimes I fall prey to—well, FOMO is a bit of a shopworn acronym at this point, and anyway not accurate, in my case. How about FOBLO: fear of being left
out. The difference is crucial. I don’t mind missing out on things as long as I was invited. I want to be invited to things I would work actively to avoid. In the city, Pam might say to me: “Oh, by the way, I’m getting together with [persons A and B] and we’re all going to [a boring event] on Tuesday. Just so you know.” Me: “Was I invited?” Her: “Well, I just assumed you wouldn’t want to go.” Me: “Yes, but that’s not the point. Was I invited?”

Not entirely rational, I know. But then these types of longings are not entirely based on reason. “Man is by nature a political animal,” Aristotle said. He meant not that we all secretly yearn to run for political office, but that it is in our nature to live in a polis, or community. In the book Sapiens, the historian Yuval Noah Harari takes it a step further: the reason this weak, slow, furless, fangless, clawless creature has achieved its status as the planet’s apex predator is our ability to form communities and co-operate. And I have given up all of that. People ask me: “Hey, you made any friends up there yet?” Me, blank-faced, slack-jawed: “What do you mean?” Kidding, a bit. But I don’t see how it could ever happen. On a given day, I might see: dog, cat, owl, wife, kid, chipmunk, Amazon driver, raccoon (we have those out here, too), but that’s about it.

There’s so much I miss about city life in general, and Toronto in particular, that I scarcely know where to begin. In no particular order, a little sample platter: decent Chinese food; Chinatown in general; ultra-fresh seafood, seafood so fresh it’s still swimming around a few moments before you point to it (for me this is linked to Chinatown, where I always used to shop for groceries); non-supermarket shopping in general; grabbing lattes and, say, bagels without really thinking about it, certainly without having to drive to get them; serendipitous encounters in the street with someone you used to know, or work with, or know only vaguely; biking everywhere; having a “local,” that go-to bar you automatically meet your friends in; meeting friends for a spur-of-the-moment cinq-a-sept at said local; watching sports with a bunch of people in someone’s living room, eating nachos; playing poker around a dimly lit table; playing pool; playing ping-pong in the community centre across the street. And kimchi. O kimchi, how I miss thee—and there’s no way to obtain thee out here.

Mostly, though, I miss my friends (my mother is my only relative in the city, and we see her a lot) like a phantom limb. True, I have my best friend up here, Pam, and behold: it is enough. But they say men, in particular, shouldn’t just pull the ripcord and run out there? Guy comes over, heads downstairs with flashlight, then says, “It’s… a thousand dollars.” What’s that sound in the basement? Guy comes over, peers up chimney, punches some digits into his calculator, then says, “It’s… a thousand dollars.”

The next morning, I tramped around the house, picking up a sock here, a shirt there. In the kitchen, my youngest had left a half-eaten granola bar on the counter in a crumpled wrapper. A few weeks ago, this might have annoyed me. Now I was almost in tears: “Poor guy. He must have forgotten to take it with him. I hope he didn’t get too hungry.”

My sensitivities are exacerbated, no doubt, by the silence and solitude of my current geographical location. Would being surrounded by bottle-popping, bon-mot-dropping and (ideally) Chinese-food-producing friends help alleviate this anguish? I don’t know. But I’m pretty sure it wouldn’t hurt. And of course I know I’m not the first parent in the history of humanity to experience these emotions. But damn it sure feels like it today.

In Anton Chekhov’s short story “Gooseberries,” a character speaks about his brother, who’s moved to the country: “He was a kind and gentle soul and I loved him, but I never sympathized with his desire to shut himself up for the rest of his life on a little property of his own...To retire from the city, the struggle, from the hubbub, to go off and hide on one’s own farm—that’s not life, it is selfishness, it is sloth, it is a kind of monasticism, but it is monasticism without works.”

And I’m pretty sure a lot of my friends and contemporaries look at me the same way. Well, I know they do. One friend, knowing I was fixing to write a book out here, said in his own less-than-Chekhovian terms: “Okay Dave, take a year in the country. Write your book. But if you spend any more time out there, you’re a chump. You’re out of the game.”

Since we sold our house, there is some money in the bank. But it all has an illusory, evanescent quality. Evil tongues might have their say. The night before, we’d had dinner, just the two of us. My maudlin thought-balloon: “This is the last time we break bread together.” Afterwards, we had a beautiful conversation on the porch and he actually listened to my advice! (Study hard, but also follow your intellectual interests, even if they’re not on the syllabus; try not to drink too much, but have fun.)

And that could spell trouble for me. There has been a reverie-like quality to our rural retreat. And the beauty of renting is: if something goes wrong in your house, you just call the landlord. We’ve done that twice now: when the fridge went on the fritz and when the water heater sprang a leak. Pull phone out of pocket, punch in landlord’s digits: “Looks like you’ve got a little problem.” (More politely than that, of course, but that was the gist.) He calls his guy, his guy comes over and deals with it. No charge! Whereas when you own, I noticed over the years, everything’s a thousand dollars. What’s that pinkish dust in the fireplace? Guy comes over, peers up chimney, punches some digits into his calculator, then says, “It’s... a thousand dollars.” What’s that sound in the basement? Guy comes over, heads downstairs with flashlight, returns, sits in kitchen, ponders, then: “It’s... a thousand dollars.”
say: “All you really did, Pam and Dave, when all is said and done, setting aside all the metaphors and aphorisms and word-tapestries Dave might weave around it, was cash in your nest egg early.” And they’d have a point. Yet our expenses remain. The bills keep rolling in. Oh, the bill collectors had no trouble finding us at our new address. Taxes, credit card bills, rent, gas, groceries (which thanks to the pandy have gone up a whopping 30-some per cent in a year, across the board, but also seem weirdly pricier in the country). And don’t forget tuition! As if I could, for more than about to waking minutes in succession. There’s also his rent and food, not to mention the expensive tastes he’ll inevitably develop hanging out with all the popped-collar, tennis-playing Gatsbys and Daisys of his fancy-pants new campus.

To make ends meet, Pam is freelancing and mulling a second act, which might have something to do with home renovation, which she developed a taste for. But it’s time for me to shoulder the financial burden, or at least contribute in a more meaningful way. I’m working hard up here. Sorry, Chekhov, but my rural retreat has been a form of monasticism with works. And hey, I don’t think I’m the first writer in the history of humanity who has repaired to some bucolic, rustic fortress of solitude to get away from all the distractions of the city. The thing is, they usually only do it briefly before returning to the city; have lunch with publisher; soak up gossip; order third martini and mention new book idea; make fresh deal; walk to bank; deposit cheque. It’s a sexagenarian’s-eye view of the whole matter, I know. But it’s also true that face-to-face encounters can have a powerful, positive effect on one’s bank balance.

I’ve alluded to what a mountain of marbles it is to earn money writing. The good news is: I have no choice at this point but to strap on my crampons and have at it. I don’t need to become Stephen King or J.K. Rowling. Just earn a decent living. I know: it’s late. Early in our relationship, Pam said: “I’ll shoulder the lion’s share of the financial burden, until I’m 55. But here’s the deal: you have to work hard so you can take over at that point, so I can retire in style.” She’s 57 now.

And all I can say about that is: better late than never. (I’ve heard it said that many things—e.g., one’s favourite jeans—are at their best right before they fall apart: I’m hoping that will be my story.) So without mincing words or weaving any evasive word tapestries: at the present moment in time, we are not sitting pretty financially. We made what seemed, to our Covid-warped, debt-addled brains, like the right move at the time. But questions whirl around our financial future. Will we decide to buy again, and if so, will we be able to break back into the Toronto market? That is doubtful. How about on the outskirts, in a place like, say, Stouffville? That is unlikely. Perhaps if no one else had joined the rural migration, but expats like Pam and me have driven up the market rate for a house just about everywhere. So what then? What’s our plan? Will our rural reverie be shattered by a donkey kick of reality? Will things somehow magically work out?

The only honest answer to these questions is: TBD. In darker moments, I think that I was born to rent after all, just like my nephew. And I wonder: Will I wind up buried in the acres out back, that is if we can still afford to rent here? Of course, I (or I suppose Pam) would have to ask the landlord’s permission first. In which case I can only imagine him forming his fingers into a little steeple, and, having quietly bided his time, because as we all know revenge is a dish best served cold, smiling and saying: “Well. Looks like you have a little problem.”

For $2,800 a month in rent, Dave and Pam (and their son JJ, on some weekends) live in a ranch-style home with a two-car garage. But there’s not a soul in sight in any direction.
A huge movement is afoot. Suddenly in Toronto, clinics seem to be popping up all over, offering “guided trips” on magic mushrooms, MDMA, ketamine and other psychoactive drugs. People are microdosing and macrodosing and every other imaginable type of dosing. Not to get high, necessarily, but to get better.

Clinical trials are showing that psychedelics can help treat chronic depression, PTSD, mood disorders and addiction. Did the illicit drugs of our youth suddenly gain superpowers? Will they—like weed—be legalized for casual consumption? You have questions. We have answers. In the following pages, we investigate the new frontier of therapeutic hallucinogens, from the clinics to the substances to the frequent flyers benefiting from it all.
The snazzy one
FIELD TRIP
Entertainment District

Field Trip is Toronto’s new kid on the psychedelic-enhanced-therapy block. Its spa-like location in the Entertainment District offers integrated ketamine therapy for those with treatment-resistant mental health conditions like depression, generalized anxiety disorder and trauma.

A treatment cycle consists of three parts: preparation, exploration and integration. In the first phase, patients establish their goals with a therapist and discuss safety and consent measures. Next, they’re brought to a treatment room, “designed quite carefully to be aesthetically comfortable and welcoming and bright,” says Ronan Levy, the clinic’s co-founder and executive chairman. Then, with a social worker, psychotherapist or psychologist present, the patient gets a dose of ketamine, puts on eye shades and noise-cancelling headphones, and is invited to look inward.

“Sometimes, patients will have very colourful experiences full of imagery,” says Levy, “kind of like you’d imagine a stereotypical psychedelic experience to be; sometimes, they’ll have a lot of quiet, and they’re able to have some peace. It really gives people perspective and objectivity about what’s going on in their lives.”

Following the guided trip—which typically lasts an hour—patients head to a lounge with tea, coffee and water, where they can stay as long as they want. Then, for the final phase, they speak with their therapist again, in a session that includes conventional cognitive behavioural therapy. Typically, patients go for three or four cycles over two months, and many say they see noticeable changes in their mood and behaviour.

In addition to its in-clinic offerings, Field Trip has taken on the role of spreading the gospel of psychedelics—via blog posts, a podcast and an app—to provide broader education on the novel therapy. “The best way to get broad-based buy-in and support is to focus on doing really good medicine, being thorough and showing great results,” says Levy. Suite 400, 30 Duncan St. Starting at $750 for an introductory session.

The holistic one
REMEDY
Koreatown

Remedy is what psychologist and founder Anne Wagner describes as a home for both research and practice. The team—which includes psychologists and social workers—facilitates individual, group and couples therapy and specializes in...
research on psychedelic therapies using MDMA.

Wagner opened Remedy in 2018, after running a pilot study in Charleston, South Carolina, that used MDMA as a treatment for PTSD. She’s currently recruiting patients for an upcoming clinical trial combining cognitive processing therapy for PTSD with MDMA. That drug is still classified as an illegal substance in Canada, but Health Canada allows exemptions for certain uses in research and clinical settings. Potential participants are screened for eligibility then prepped for takeoff.

For the trial, a therapist stays with the patient in one of the clinic’s stylish, minimalist rooms. The duration of the guided trip runs about eight hours, depending on the dosage, which varies from patient to patient. Wagner says many patients wear headphones and listen to a playlist that’s designed to help unfold their emotions. “We’re with them to support any strong emotions or somatic experiences that come up.”

A treatment cycle includes two sessions with MDMA, plus several therapy sessions, which will integrate the insights gleaned from the trips. “We see these psychedelic sessions as being an adjunct to psychotherapy,” Wagner says. “They’re catalysts for the psychotherapeutic process, and they’re embedded within a full treatment.”

Wagner is optimistic that ongoing studies on the drug’s ability to aid PTSD sufferers will open the door for more medicinal and therapeutic use in the future. “We’re not that far away from MDMA being prescribed as medicine,” she says. “If used consciously and with intention, it can be an incredible tool for healing and growth by helping patients tap into the nuances of their buried traumas.”

Field Trip’s Entertainment District clinic administers trips in a comfortable and relaxed atmosphere.

CRTCE, which is owned by Braxia Scientific, specializes in treating mood disorders with ketamine. They opened their first location, in Mississauga, three years ago. Since then, they’ve launched outposts in Ottawa, Montreal and—in November of 2020—a midtown Toronto location, and have treated hundreds of patients for depression, PTSD and OCD.

Ketamine is not recommended for the everyday blues. “To be eligible, you need to have what’s called treatment-resistant depression,” says Roger McIntyre, a psychiatrist, pharmacologist and the founder of CRTCE. “That’s defined as a mental illness that has not benefited from at least two types of conventional approaches.”

After an initial assessment to determine eligibility, patients are counselled on what they may experience and discuss which delivery method is right for them—that can sometimes be a case of affordability. Clinicians at CRTCE administer ketamine in one of three ways: via a nasal spray, an IV drip or a pill. The drip is the most reliable, but also the costliest.

Treatments typically last between 45 and 60 minutes. Since one side effect of ketamine is a spike in blood pressure, clinicians recommend lyric-free, downtempo music during the sessions. The typical dose is relatively low (0.5 milligrams per kilogram), so the patient doesn’t experience hallucinations, like with psilocybin, MDMA or LSD treatments. But patients cannot undergo therapy while experiencing the effects of the drug. “For over 90 per cent of our patients, there’s no way they would be able to engage in a conversation,” says clinician Joshua Rosenblat, “because the dissociative effects are very, very strong.”

McIntyre and Rosenblat say the main benefit of ketamine therapy is that it works quickly: patients with treatment-resistant depression often report a significant change in attitude after the second week of treatment. “A common outcome is not just the depression being gone,” Rosenblat says, “but actually being able to experience joy.”

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**THE SUBSTANCES**

A recent history of therapeutic psychedelics

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<tr>
<th>Substance</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>PSILOCYBIN</td>
<td>Recreational use of magic mushrooms, or any products containing psilocybin extracts, is illegal in Canada, but you wouldn’t know it from the dispensaries sprouting up, both IRL and online. Microdosing has gone mainstream, and police (so far) are turning a blind eye—a sure sign of the changing times, and the changing attitudes to tripping. The bar for legalizing medicinal uses of shrooms is also moving. In August of 2020, TheraPsil, a B.C.-based advocacy group, successfully campaigned for the right to have psilocybin prescribed to terminally ill Canadians to reduce anxiety and depression. Now, dozens of exemptions have been made all over the country for terminal patients and medical research.</td>
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<td>KETAMINE</td>
<td>Used illegally as a party drug for decades and legally as an anaesthetic for even longer, ketamine has now entered the realm of therapy. In May of 2020, Health Canada approved its use for cases of treatment-resistant depression in adults. Since then, a number of clinics have begun popping up across the city offering supervised ketamine treatments for depression, anxiety and PTSD—though these treatments are not covered by OHIP, and come at a steep out-of-pocket cost.</td>
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<td>MDMA</td>
<td>The synthetic psychoactive drug more commonly known as ecstasy is also gaining momentum in the therapeutic sphere. A number of clinical trials are under way or in development this year to establish MDMA’s efficacy in treating various mental health and psychiatric illnesses—most notably PTSD and eating disorders—with hopes of FDA approval arriving in 2023, and Health Canada approval coming shortly after.</td>
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<td>LSD</td>
<td>Most of us know LSD for its potential to create powerful hallucinations. It was the subject of numerous studies in the 1950s, ’60s and ’70s to investigate its potential for treating mental illness and addiction, but it’s been a prohibited substance in Canada since 1968, and studies largely ceased by the early 1980s. Though a smattering of new research is now looking into using LSD to treat depression, anxiety and addiction, the drug has no approved medical uses yet.</td>
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IBOgabe
This psyche-
delic drug
made from the
bark of the
Tabernanthe
iboga was used
widely as a treatment for addiction in
Canada until 2015, particularly among
opioid users. At the time, it was
unregulated, meaning there were no
legal restrictions to its use. However,
in 2017, following a spate of serious
and fatal reactions, it was placed on
Canada’s prescription drug list.
Now, clinical trials are attempting to
determine its efficacy in treating
substance abuse without harm.

Mescaline
Derived from
the peyote cact-
us, Mescaline
has been used
for spiritual and
ceremonial pur-
poses by Indigenous North Americans
for more than 5,000 years. Apart from
its religious uses, it’s also taken as a
recreational drug and to supplement
meditation and psychedelic therapy.
Research into its mental health bene-
fits is in its early stages. Somewhat
confusingly, growing and consuming
peyote is not a criminal offence in
Canada, but mescaline, which can
also be made synthetically, is illegal.

Ayahuasca
Two plants—
Banisteriopsis
caapi and
Psychotria
viridis—are
combined to
make Ayahuasca, a brewed beverage
containing the psychoactive compound
DMT. It’s used both recreationally
and in religious ceremonies. While
there have been exemptions made for
some religious groups, DMT—and by
default ayahuasca—is controlled in
Canada. Recent research has found
that ayahuasca may help treat
depression, and its ability to treat
addiction is currently being studied.

Real experiences with psychoactive medications

WHO: Andrea Bird a 60-year-old artist and former art educator
based in Caledon
TREATMENT: Psilocybin microdoses, one to three times a year

I’m an artist, and my husband and I ran an art school in Caledon. In
2012, I went for my first mammogram, and they found a large tumour in
my right breast. I was diagnosed with Stage 2 cancer. I felt shocked and
confused. I had surgery, followed by chemo, followed by radiation. That
took about a year, and then I was told, “You’re cancer free. Go live your
life.” And so I did.

About four years later, my cancer had metastasized to my bones and
lungs, and last summer, it spread to my brain as well. I was diagnosed with
Stage 4, which is terminal. My doctors and I were now talking about
end-of-life plans. The estimated timeline is about two years. It was really
challenging for me to wrap my brain around mortality. I had all this
internal turmoil, thinking, How do I want to spend this time?

I read about psilocybin in Michael Pollan’s book How to Change Your
Mind, and mentioned it to a friend, who knew someone who could help. It
felt like the universe was aligning. I had my first
trip in December of 2018 with an experienced
guide, who boiled three and a half grams of
mushrooms in hot water with lemon and ginger.
I started to feel the effects in half an hour, a full
spectrum of emotions: gratitude toward my
husband, then sadness that I was dying, and then
a deep realization of how fortunate I had been.

Last summer, through TheraPsil, a Vancouver-
based advocacy group, I got a legal exemption
from the federal government to take psilocybin
legally. I know psychedelic therapy is all relatively new, but it feels like it’s
overdue because it’s so effective. Taking psilocybin was the most helpful
thing I did in the last four years in coming to terms with my own death.

I’m currently on a cancer regimen that involves a monthly injection,
morphine for pain and all kinds of other drugs to treat the side effects of
opiates. But I mostly feel like myself. The doctors don’t understand why,
four and a half years later, I’m still here, feeling as well as I do. Clearly the
treatment plan I’m on is working. That’s part of it, but I think the peace of
mind psilocybin has given me has been huge.
WHO: Janine Bajnauth, a 33-year-old tech worker
TREATMENT: Six ketamine-assisted therapy sessions

FROM THE TIME I was in elementary school, I always felt like something was off. I had this voice in my head that constantly put me down. By 2017, things got really bad and I attempted suicide. I started talk therapy and went on antidepressants. I also started experimenting with cannabis, which was so beneficial. It got me out of bed in the morning and eased my social anxiety.

In 2019, I tried MDMA for the first time at a music festival. Everything that had always been in my mind went quiet. All the dark parts inside of me melted away, and I felt free-spirited and light. I researched psychedelic-assisted therapies but didn’t follow through. Then, in May of 2021, I hit another rock bottom and booked an appointment with Field Trip. I went for two ketamine sessions and one integration therapy session, every week for three weeks. My therapist and I talked through how the session would go, and the dosages. I started with a strong dose of ketamine, and we upped it in every subsequent session. The medicine itself is lozenges. I’d put it in my mouth, swish it back and forth for 10 minutes, then spit it out.

Gradually, the visions diminished. A week later, I had an integration session with my therapist, and we talked about what I’d experienced, and continued to talk about it for our next two sessions. We made sure there were no stones left unturned. I live alone, so after 15 months of being locked up and holding so much physical stress in my body, it was a release.

WHO: Bryan Atkinson, 42, a film editor
TREATMENT: One MDMA session

I HAVEN’T BEEN DIAGNOSED with a specific mental illness, but I’ve been in and out of therapy for six years for personal improvement. In 2017, a friend of mine visited Toronto for psychedelic-assisted therapy—she took MDMA. I thought, That sounds interesting. Since the pandemic, I’ve been having trouble with rigidity in my thoughts, and I wondered whether psychedelics might help.

I talked about it with my therapist in the fall of 2020. They suggested I get a “sitter,” someone who was experienced with MDMA use and could be there if I needed support. I purchased some MDMA and had it tested at a safe injection site. Even then, there was still a chance it could be laced with fentanyl, so I also picked up a naloxone kit.

We did the session on a Saturday morning in early June. I put on a blindfold and headphones with a playlist from Mendel Kaelen, an artist who makes music specifically for psychedelic-assisted therapy.

I took my dose: 125 milligrams to start, followed by a 65 milligram booster, which was based on my extensive research. A vision came to me, as if I was dreaming. I saw a plant blossom up through the word “generosity.” I had been expecting reciprocity from the world, instead of bringing light into my own life. I transitioned from that vision into a feeling of walking over a hill on a big expanse of land. It had been a dream of mine to have a cabin, but I had been so focused on my career and retirement plans that I wasn’t taking care of my current self. I made it a goal to enjoy life in my 40s and 50s and not wait until I’m 70.

Gradually, the visions diminished. A week later, I had an integration session with my therapist, and we talked about what I’d experienced, and continued to talk about it for our next two sessions. We made sure there were no stones left unturned. I live alone, so after 15 months of being locked up and holding so much physical stress in my body, it was a release.

“I picked up a naloxone kit in case of emergency”
A new approach to mental health care

Through the re-emergence of psychedelics and psychedelic-enhanced therapies, Field Trip Health is helping individuals discover an enhanced, evidence-based approach to healing mental health.

Now more than ever, healthcare providers across Canada are becoming serious about the world of psychedelic medicine. With a rise in mental health diagnoses such as anxiety, depression1 being accelerated by the pandemic, more and more researchers and therapists are seeing psychedelics as a promising form of mental health treatment. This is where Field Trip Health comes into play, with eight locations operating worldwide, including one in Toronto, with many more slated to open later this year.

For those who have only ever known psychedelics as controlled substances in Canada and the United States, Ronan Levy, co-founder and executive chairman of Field Trip Health, believes they can offer a watershed of opportunity. Levy notes that for many patients who have come through the doors of Field Trip Health, it has given them “an incredible capacity to start to make changes, often achieving more in a single session than they achieve in years and years of conventional therapy.” An initial consultation at Field Trip Health costs $750, which covers the initial consultations with Field Trip Health’s physicians, initial conversations with their therapeutic team, the first ketamine exploratory session and a 30-minute integration therapy session. Each subsequent ketamine session is $750, and integration sessions are $250. During the integration sessions, patients can speak with their therapist about what came up during their ketamine session and safely explore past experiences or trauma. While these therapies are not currently covered under OHIP, Field Trip Health notes that many benefit plans have started providing their partners with coverage for psychedelic therapy.

While there is certainly still a significant degree of stigma that exists around psychedelic drugs and their use in the mental health world, Levy and the Field Trip Health team are firm believers that stigma doesn’t survive in the face of data and science. “There is a significant education effort, but many psychiatrists, therapists and scientists are becoming quite vocal about the fact that the evidence for these therapies is incredibly profound in terms of both safety and efficacy,” Levy shares. One of the things they are currently focusing on is the impact of psychedelic therapies on treatment-resistant depression. Levy notes that Field Trip Health has published a white paper examining how patients with treatment-resistant depression and anxiety responded overall to the treatment. They also expect to commence Phase 1 clinical trials early next year on a novel synthetic psychedelic known as FT-104, developed by their Chief Science Officer, Dr. Nathan Bryson, a graduate of MIT.

Levy shares, “Since inception, our philosophy at Field Trip has been that any psychedelics company needs to focus on both the development of psychedelic medicines and the delivery of psychedelic therapies. We want to continue to build that footprint, as much as possible, as quickly as possible, because I think psychedelics are very quickly going to become a key component in psychiatry and the treatment of mental health conditions across North America and globally.”

1Rise in Mental Health due to Pandemic - Stats Canada - https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/210318/dq210318a-eng.htm
Wait, ketamine is good for me now? If you’re severely depressed, it might be. In trials, about 70 per cent of people with depression started feeling happier after pairing ketamine doses with therapy. In Canada, a similar drug called esketamine is legal as a nasal spray.

So do I just pick it up at Shoppers? Not even close. It has to be taken in a clinic, under the supervision of trained health care professionals. Woodstock this is not.

Is there actual science behind chaperoned tripping? Plenty. Harvard, Yale and Johns Hopkins have all published studies showing that people with depression, PTSD, anxiety and other conditions have benefited from therapy with ketamine and other psychedelics.

What other psychedelics? Mostly the classics: MDMA, LSD, psilocybin—the chemicals found in ecstasy, acid and magic mushrooms. Less research has been done on DMT, mescaline, salvia and PCP, but some of them may have similar effects.

Aren’t those illegal? Technically, yes. Producing and possessing these drugs is still a criminal act, and abusing them can cause long-term problems: psychosis, paranoia and decisions your sober mind will seriously regret. But in the summer of 2020, Canada’s Minister of Health Patty Hajdu started handing out exemptions, allowing people to use psychedelics without any criminal liability if caught with the drug.

How might one get an exemption? Asking for a friend. You can apply directly to Health Canada, but you’ll need a good reason. They typically give exemptions only on valid scientific, medical or compassionate grounds: researchers running clinical trials, terminal cancer patients dreading the end, depressed people who have tried everything else. There are advocacy groups that will help you through the application—for a price.

How much does this type of therapy cost? It depends. Some people report results after a single dose; others require regular use over many months to get results. So it might cost you $750, or it could just as easily be $7,500.

So will OHIP cover any of this? Yeah right.

Let’s say I get an appointment. Will I go nuts on a trip? The clinicians will prepare you, make sure you’re comfortable and give you the correct dose, all of which will help you avoid a bad trip. A handful of magic mushrooms might convince you that you’re dying, but you almost certainly won’t. Psychedelic overdoses are exceptionally rare, and usually involve existing conditions or other substances. But high doses of hallucinogens can be rough on your mind and body, which is why some people prefer to microdose.

What the hell is microdosing? Taking just a teensy bit of something—usually psilocybin or LSD—which many believe can subtly improve mood, creativity and concentration.

Will I get addicted to shrooms if I’m popping them like Tic Tacs? Negative. Mushrooms aren’t addictive. In fact, some people have used them to kick their alcohol and cigarette addictions.

How long until those of us without exemptions can go on our first legal trips? Hard to say. The federal government says it has no intention of amending Canada’s drug laws to decriminalize or legalize psychedelics. But by approving research and clinical trials, the feds may be putting these drugs on the same path as cannabis. Illegal psychedelic dispensaries are already popping up in Toronto, and activists are beginning to challenge prohibition in the courts. It took 20 years for Canada to get from medical marijuana to recreational pre-rolls. Psychedelics may not take that long, but don’t expect to trip legally and recreationally any time soon.
MENTAL ILLNESS DOESN'T EXIST IN A VACUUM – it impacts not only those who face the challenges of it, but their loved ones too. One in four people will be affected by mental illness at some point in their lives, and those caring for someone with mental illness will experience anxiety or depression at a higher rate.

Cybin has raised over $120 million to focus on progressing psychedelic therapeutics. Cybin currently has four active drug programs targeting Major Depressive Disorder, Alcohol Use Disorder, Anxiety Disorders, and Therapy Resistant Psychiatric Disorders. Our team is strategically composed of ex-pharmaceutical executives and regulatory team members that include the former Director for the Division of Psychiatry Products, Center for Drug Evaluation and Research at the FDA and the former Ontario Health Minister.

Our mission is to create breakthroughs in stagnant mental health care by utilizing proprietary drug discovery platforms, innovative drug delivery systems, novel formulation approaches, and treatment regimens for psychiatric disorders.

WILL YOU JOIN US ON OUR MISSION?
Rent to Buy

This family moved to Toronto, rented for a while, then started the search for a million-dollar starter home

BY ALI AMAD

THE BUYERS: Viviana Zea, 41, project manager at Ryerson University; Edison Vallejo, 45, project manager at Scotiabank; their kids, Ariana, 17, and Eduardo, 13; and their nine-year-old schnauzer, Jack.

THE STORY: In 2019, the family emigrated from Ecuador to Toronto. While getting settled in the city, they rented a detached in East York, with plans to eventually purchase their first home. They enjoyed being close to Taylor Creek Park and the Danforth. By the spring of 2021, both Edison and Viviana had found stable employment, so they set a budget of $1.1 million and started searching for a three-bed, two-bath semi or detached in the area. Also on their wish list: a yard for Jack and ample outdoor space for hosting barbecues.

The following week, Viviana and Edison visited this two-bed, three-bath semi, about a five-minute drive from their rental. The house had a white façade with large windows and a grey gabled roof, plus a couple of pretty trees in the front yard. Like the first property they saw, it had a backyard and a stone patio with serious barbecue potential. But the house sat on a large corner lot, and Edison worried about shovelling the seemingly endless sidewalk in the winter. It also only had two bedrooms. So they moved on without making an offer.

A few days later, the couple came across this four-bed, one-bath detached, located just two blocks north of their rental. The house had a white and grey exterior, and in the back, there was a spacious yard plus a large deck. And although the 1,500-square-foot home was more than 116 years old, it was move-in ready with a renovated kitchen. They decided to go for it. After a mini bidding war, they submitted an offer of $120,000 over asking, which sealed the deal. In June, the family moved in, with plans to add a second bathroom within the next year.
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**IN THIS MONTH’S THREE-PACK**
A vertical tasting of the heartbreak grape, with a 2016 and 2017 pinot noir and the 2018 Mile High rosé from Queenston Mile, Niagara’s acclaimed pinot noir house.

**2016 Pinot Noir**
VQA St. David’s Bench, $45
Boldness defines the 2016 vintage with its earthy notes of slate, cola, cigar box and cinnamon, and its audacious and unapologetic tannins. Match it with flavourful mains like rabbit au vin, smoked duck and herbed wild rice with truffles.

**2017 Pinot Noir**
VQA St. David’s Bench, $40
Luscious yet refined, this gorgeous pinot is a testament to the ideal growing conditions of the 2017 vintage. Notes of violet, plum and tobacco lead into a silky mouthfeel and lingering finish. Pair with miso-glazed salmon and caramelized Brussels sprouts.

**2018 Mile High Rosé**
VQA Ontario, $35
Delightfully uncomplicated, this Charmat-method bubbly sings with ripe red berry fruit and zings with a palate-cleansing touch of acidity. Pop the cork and enjoy with pals over shrimp cocktail, lox with caviar and baked brie with marmalade preserves.

*TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THE WINEMAKERS AND SIGN UP, VISIT torontolife.wine*
Bun Fight

Our artery-busting, deeply researched ranking of the city’s best burgers, from smash patty to veggie

BY ALEX BALDINGER AND REBECCA FLEMING

The show-stopping Montera burger from the Bullger
Aloette’s Aloette Burger
Chef Patrick Kriss’s signature burger features a chuck-brisket patty stuffed into a house-made potato roll and topped with a thick slice of buttery Beaufort cheese grilled until it glows golden-brown, thin slices of pickled Vidalia onion, cheddar cheese aioli and shredded lettuce so crunchy it could trigger an ASMR. It’s so popular that they just opened a burger-driven Liberty Village takeout joint, too. $24. 163 Spadina Ave., aloetterestaurant.com

Matty’s Patty’s Matty Burger
For those who prefer their burgers unsmashed, Matty Matheson’s Trinity-Bellwoods burger joint makes a patty that’s downright Rubenesque. This standout slab is seven ounces of beef, cooked medium-rare and fully enrobed in American cheese. It’s served on a smooshy sesame bun with a house-made mustard sauce, pickles and sliced white onion. $12. 923 Queen St. W., mattyspattysburgerclub.com

Emmer’s Patty Melt
A patty melt is really just a burger on grilled bread, so it’s no wonder the city’s best hails from Philip Haddad’s new Harbord Street bakery known for its perfect loaves of sourdough. The standout melt arrives as chiaroscuro slices of sourdough marble rye hugging a smashed beef patty, layered with caramelized onions, melted Swiss and a supernaturally flavourful house-made Russian dressing. $16.50. 161 Harbord St., emmertoronto.ca

Stock T.C’s Dry-Aged Smashed Burger
Smash burgers are the new normal in this town, and so far there’s none better than this double-stacked sensation. It’s built on dry-aged Cumbrae’s beef patties—a mix of chuck rib-eye and picanha—which add next-level umami and a nutty note that supercharges every bite, along with melted Canadian cheddar and a pickle-packed burger sauce on a Terroni bun. $13. 2388 Yonge St., stocktc.com
Gold Standard’s Telway Burger
Grilled in mustard with onions, topped with pickles and American cheese, wedged into a Martin’s potato roll and wrapped in shiny gold foil, these four-bite burgers aren’t going to win any beauty awards, but it’s what’s inside that counts. Buy one for a snack, two for a meal that might require a little nap afterwards. $7. 385 Roncesvalles Ave., 1574 Queen St. W., breakfastsandwich.ca

Barberian’s Wine-Friendly Burger
Jesse Vallins recently took over the kitchen of this iconic steakhouse, adding a few new items to the menu of already great hits. One of them is this beast of a burger meant to go with a glass (or bottle) of red from the restaurant’s cellar. The luxe patty—a blend of house-butchered and dry-aged rib-eye and short loin patty—is topped with a red-wine onion relish, black truffle mustard and raclette, on a potato milk bun. $38. 7 Elm St., barberians.com

Manita’s Quarter Pounder
Ossington’s new darling wears a lot of hats: it’s a café, a wine bar, a one-stop artisanal grocery shop. The food can be fancy— asparagus with preserved lemon, black bass crudo—but then there is the burger: decidedly unfancy but with a lot of hidden frills. It comes on a sesame seed Blackbird bun so pillowy it deflates on contact, with American cheese, white onion, bread-and-butter pickles (you had a good run, dill) and house remoulade. $21. 210 Ossington Ave., manita.ca
**Aunty Lucy’s Labadi Burger**
Harry’s may have lost its original diner digs, but the Red Burger is still a classic. A red chorizo patty comes topped with pickled jalapeño mayo, havarti and a ring of juicy charred pineapple on (you guessed it) a Martin’s potato roll. $10.79. 293 Palmerston Ave., harryscharbroiled.com

**Burger Drops’ American Veggie Burger**
Aloette alum Greg Bouriolas specializes in beefy smash burgers, but don’t overlook the months-in-the-making meatless patty of cashews, barley, mushrooms and other fresh veg in a Panko crust. Get the American option with iceberg, onions, cheese, house sauce and a tangy ketchup relish. $11.176 Atlantic Ave., burgerdrops.com

**Harry’s Charbroiled’s Red Burger**
This offshoot of King West’s Marben brings a PhD-level approach to burgerology. The beefiness comes from retired dairy cows—their beef is leaner but much more flavourful—and a fermented beef paste that’s pure Noma cookbook. There’s more: a crisp layer of grilled cheddar, and a chili-crisp mayo on a Japanese milk bun. $14. 488 Wellington St. W., rodie.ca

**Rōdie’s Rōdie Burger**
Chef Rob McKim’s meatless burger is such a marvel that you might need to check your order. It’s seasoned perfectly, smothered in cheddar and stacked with lettuce, tomato, pickle and—throwback-style—ketchup and mustard. $14.50. 1681 Lake Shore Blvd., ggsburgers.com

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**Robby’s Rude Dude**
The burger that made the smash patty a household name in Toronto is the Rude Dude from this growing local chain. The formula hasn’t changed: patties smashed so flat that they’re basically just crispy bits held together by melted American cheese, beneath sliced tomato, a leaf of lettuce and a shmeer of tangy sauce. $10.49. Various locations, rudyresto.com

**Desi Burger’s Veggie Burger**
Desi burgers are ubiquitous throughout the shops of Little India, but the best of the bunch comes from this eponymous storefront with the red sign. The veggie version is a boldly spiced potato-and herb patty buried under a canopy of chopped onions, tamarind chutney, chili sauce, mayo and a freshly fried egg. $4. 1342 Gerrard St. E., desiburger.ca

**Nobs’ Cheeseburger**
The food cart selling one of the city’s best steak sandwiches now offers a mean burger. Fadi Zreik cooks halal beef sous-vide before grilling it for seriously juicy patties charred in all the right places, then tops them with American cheese, baby greens, tomato, caramelized onions and house mayo on a sesame seed bun. $8 (single) or $12 (double). 505 University Ave., @nobsofficial

**Aunty Lucy’s Labadi Burger**
The burgers at this Annex joint wear their Ghanaian influences proudly, none more than this burger, named for the most popular beach in Accra. A Beyond Meat patty is topped with jalapeño havarti cheese, caramelized onions, secret sauce and, yes, those are fried plantain wedges peeking out from the potato bun. $13. 296 Brunswick Ave., auntylucysburgers.com

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The burgers at this Annex joint wear their Ghanaian influences proudly, none more than this burger, named for the most popular beach in Accra. A Beyond Meat patty is topped with jalapeño havarti cheese, caramelized onions, secret sauce and, yes, those are fried plantain wedges peeking out from the potato bun. $13. 296 Brunswick Ave., auntylucysburgers.com

**Robby’s Rude Dude**
The burger that made the smash patty a household name in Toronto is the Rude Dude from this growing local chain. The formula hasn’t changed: patties smashed so flat that they’re basically just crispy bits held together by melted American cheese, beneath sliced tomato, a leaf of lettuce and a shmeer of tangy sauce. $10.49. Various locations, rudyresto.com

**Desi Burger’s Veggie Burger**
Desi burgers are ubiquitous throughout the shops of Little India, but the best of the bunch comes from this eponymous storefront with the red sign. The veggie version is a boldly spiced potato-and herb patty buried under a canopy of chopped onions, tamarind chutney, chili sauce, mayo and a freshly fried egg. $4. 1342 Gerrard St. E., desiburger.ca

**Nobs’ Cheeseburger**
The food cart selling one of the city’s best steak sandwiches now offers a mean burger. Fadi Zreik cooks halal beef sous-vide before grilling it for seriously juicy patties charred in all the right places, then tops them with American cheese, baby greens, tomato, caramelized onions and house mayo on a sesame seed bun. $8 (single) or $12 (double). 505 University Ave., @nobsofficial

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11. Rasa’s Rasa Burger
The namesake burger at the Food Dudes’ OG restaurant has never changed because when something ain’t broke, you don’t fix it. A prime beef patty is sandwiched between toppings that include provolone, pickles, gochujang mayo and house kimchi, on a black-sesame brioche bun. It’s spicy, it’s tangy, it’s funky and it’s one of our all-time faves. $21.
196 Robert St., rasabar.ca

12. Richmond Station’s STN Burger
Carl Heinrich’s signature burger has been a mainstay of the menu since day one. It’s made from organic, grass-fed beef (Heinrich is a stickler for sourcing locally and ethically) and topped with a beet chutney that introduces a pop of colour and earthy sweetness to the mix, along with aged cheddar, pickled onions and a creamy garlic aioli. $27. 1 Richmond St. W., richmondstation.ca

13. Bymark’s Bymark Burger
Almost 20 years in and Mark McEwan’s burger—a favourite of Financial District power-lunchers—still means business, even though it’s come down in size. The six-ounce patty on a bed of greens is topped with brie de Meaux, grilled porcini and truffles two ways (shaved, aioli), making it an umami bomb worthy of its price tag. $33. 66 Wellington St. W., mcewangroup.ca/bymark

17. The Butcher’s Son’s Bacon Cheeseburger
When he’s not busy with butchery, Matthew Kumprey builds a damn fine bacon cheeseburger. The coarse-ground chuck-sirloin patties are the star. But the crunch of the smoked bacon, the snap of the pickles and the iceberg, and the tang of the house secret sauce add up to something special. $12. 2055 Yonge St., thebutchersson.ca

18. Rasa’s Rasa Burger
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19. Maple Leaf Tavern’s Cheeseburger
It’s gone through a few changes—new chef, new cheese, new house-made bun—but the burger at this east-end favourite has still got it. A juicy prime-rib-and-brisket patty is topped with zesty gruyère, creamy garlic aioli, iceberg lettuce and—the star of this show—a chunky, tangy house-made dill pickle relish. $22. 955 Gerrard St. E., mapleleaftavern.ca

23. The Bullger’s Montera
The burgers from this toro-inspired mini chain may border on Instagram bait, but the best compromise between ridiculous and ridiculously good is this double-patty creation that adds a puck of crusted cheese to the middle of the stack, along with beef bacon and creamy house sauce. $15.99. 348 Queen St. E., 424 Danforth Ave., 869 Dundas St. W., thebullger.ca

24. Rosie’s Burgers’ Single Burger
This takeout counter started life in Port Credit last year, and opened a second shop on Queen West soon after. They promise “just the classics” here, and they deliver: smash burgers topped with American cheese, shredded lettuce, tomato, dill pickle and house sauce on potato rolls. A single is the perfect size to save room for a side of fries and a shake. $8. 573 Queen St. W., rosiesburgers.ca

25. Happy Burger’s Pastrami Burger
Chris Kalisperas opened this patty shop during the pandemic, when everyone was craving comfort food. One of his smash burgers is not like the others: along with the usual suspects (beef patty, cheese, onion, iceberg, pickles, secret sauce) and the Martin’s potato roll, there’s a pile of salty pastrami. It’s beef two ways and we’re here for it. $11.95. 76 Lippincott St., happyburger.ca

White Lily Diner’s OG Patty Melt
The second of its kind to make this list, White Lily’s patty melt replaces a standard bun with two thick, toasted slices of house-baked bread. A juicy six-ounce beef patty nestled between them is topped with chef Ben Denham’s own American cheese sauce and smoky poblano relish. $16.50. 678 Queen St. E., whitelilydiner.ca

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CULTURE

What notable Torontonians are watching, reading and listening to this month—plus a few choice in-person events (remember those?)

A madcap 1960s black comedy

WHAT A WAY TO GO!
Recommended by Lindsay Dunn,
reporter, CityNews

“I like every movie that features the legendary crooner Dean Martin. His role in What a Way to Go! starring Shirley MacLaine is too ridiculous not to love. The film follows MacLaine’s unlucky-in-love character whose rich husbands keep dying off. It’s a wild and hilarious ride from beginning to end with a great lineup of cameos from Paul Newman, Gene Kelly and Dick Van Dyke.”

A romance — literary classic

OF HUMAN BONDAGE
by William Somerset Maugham
Recommended by Julia Dawson, musician

“I am utterly obsessed with this book. I spent the first 150 pages complaining about the entitled and self-obsessed protagonist. Then I spent the next 500-odd pages obsessively binge-reading, pausing only to weep at the painful accuracy with which Maugham describes falling in love. When you finish this one, read Theatre.”

A chilling — history podcast

DARK HISTORY
Recommended by Candace Daniel,
co-anchor, Global News Morning

“Bailey Sarian’s YouTube series Murder, Mystery and Makeup drew me in as a fan, so when she launched a new crime podcast this year, I was all in. Sarian does her research and goes to great lengths to show how these traumatic events have an impact to this day, but she comes across as a girlfriend just telling you a great story—with a dash of Elvira kitsch.”

A genre-busting — radio station

FROZEN SECTION RADIO
Recommended by Dorothea Paas, musician

“FSR is a new online Toronto-based radio station, founded by the incredible Amy Fort, who also does audio engineering for bands like Big Thief and U.S. Girls. The programming is multi-generational and spans many genres. My favourite shows are Emo Hour, Songs to Deliver Pizza To and the comedy program Yr Jokes. The content is so fun and varied that you’ll certainly find your place amidst the waves.”
**An immersive Hemingway memoir**

*A MOVEABLE FEAST* by Ernest Hemingway  
Recommended by Hawksley Workman, musician

“I’ve travelled a lot for work over the years, and Paris has become very near and dear to my heart. *A Moveable Feast* is a pleasure-drift through the 1920s—one of the city’s most celebrated eras. I especially love disappearing into lazy afternoon drinking, chance encounters with Aleister Crowley and James Joyce, or road trips with F. Scott Fitzgerald. And, of course, Hemingway’s writing has the effortless economy that has made him a literary icon.”

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**A Ryan Reynolds adventure show**

*Ryan Doesn’t Know*  
Recommended by Matt McGowan, director and general manager, Snap Inc.

“This lighthearted and funny short-form show on Snapchat—hosted by Canadian superstar Ryan Reynolds—is a hilarious exploration of activities that Reynolds hasn’t tried before, like ice sculpting and flower arranging. It’s punchy, easy to watch, and always leaves me excited for the next episode.”

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**An offbeat series for true crime fanatics**

*Only Murders in the Building*  
Recommended by Nita Prose, writer

“This quirky Disney Plus series set in a posh New York apartment complex is sardonic, witty and completely character-driven. When a man is found dead in his suite, his neighbours—played by Steve Martin, Martin Short and Selena Gomez—become obsessed with solving the crime. It both parodies and celebrates the true crime genre.”

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**A renovated revival**

*Gordon Lightfoot*  
MUSIC | Nov. 25 to 27 | Massey Hall

Over the years, Gordon Lightfoot has performed more than 165 shows at Massey Hall (aptly nicknamed the House of Gord). So it’s fitting that the indefatigable 83-year-old troubadour would be the headliner when the concert hall reopens this month after three years of upgrades. (Lightfoot played the venue’s closing concert on Canada Day in 2018, so, full circle.) A trio of shows are slated for late November featuring the Hall of Fame inductee.
**A K-pop cottage getaway reality show**

*BTS in the Soop*

Recommended by Ann Pornel, host, *Great Canadian Baking Show*

“I’ve recently discovered this reality show, available on South Korean app Weverse, in which the members of BTS spend a few days relaxing at a cottage, and I’ve never been more soothed. There’s something so wonderfully charming about watching these larger-than-life figures do the most mundane activities like playing ping-pong, going fishing and figuring out how to cook a meal that can feed all seven of them (spoiler: it’s almost always instant ramen).”

**A grippingly gritty novel**

*The Coldest Winter Ever by Sister Souljah*

Recommended by Curtis Carmichael, writer and entrepreneur

“During lockdowns, I read *The Coldest Winter Ever* too many times to count. Sister Souljah writes so vividly that I feel like I’m in the streets alongside the characters in the novel. The story follows the daughter of a Brooklyn drug kingpin who is arrested on trafficking charges and taken away. Souljah’s writing reignited my passion for living life and amplifying stories from the margins that deserve to be told.”

**A podcast about the pursuit of happiness**

*Ten Percent Happier with Dan Harris*

Recommended by Hailey Gillis, actor

“This podcast is a nuanced exploration of meditation and mindfulness in our modern world. Dan Harris is a thoughtful interviewer not only of teachers in this sphere, but also doctors, scientists, writers, coaches and economists. The episodes are often paired with guided meditations, aligning the discoveries in this field with the practice itself. I had my son in December of 2020, and your whole world becomes about your child. Listening to this podcast helped me connect to myself again.”

**A historic opening**

*Jack Harlow*

Music | Nov. 16 | History

Drake’s new 2,500-seat Queen East music hall opens this fall, and one of the premier acts is none other than rising rapper Jack Harlow, with the supporting acts of his first Canadian tour—Mavi and Babyface Ray—in tow. With a recent marquee feature on Lil Nas X’s “Industry Baby” and public praise from Eminem, the Louisville native is hoping to reverse-break the 49th parallel. No word on whether Canada’s certified lover boy will make an appearance.
A musical sojourn

**MIXTAPE**
THEATRE | Nov. 9 to 28
Streetcar Crowsnest

The best mixtapes are both eclectic and personal, and that’s the case with Zorana Sadiq’s new solo show. The Dora Award–winning actor and soprano takes audiences on an auditory journey through a life defined by music and sound. From beloved songs by Prince, Radiohead and Kate Bush to classical, jazz and contemporary tunes, Sadiq explores the music that makes her tick, while also revelling in everyday noises from squeaky doors to human heartbeats. Mixtape is being performed live at Crow’s Theatre’s east-end venue for fully vaccinated audiences, and will also be filmed and available online.

**A podcast that breaks down the headlines**

**SANDY & NORA TALK POLITICS**
Recommended by Naomi Campbell, artistic director, Luminato

“I am still sticking close to home, so I’ve been catching up on this excellent podcast, in which hosts Sandy Hudson and Nora Loreto casually talk about Canadian politics, but with razor-sharp analysis and tons of research to back it up.”

“Recommended by Naomi Campbell, artistic director, Luminato

**A deep dive into the life of a musical genius**

**THE PRINCE PODCAST**
Recommended by Harkness, musician

“When I’m cooking or working around the house, I love to listen to this podcast hosted by musician Michael Dean. The guests are people who worked closely with Prince, including band members, hairdressers and sound engineers. The stories they tell are awe-inspiring and often hilarious as they peel back the layers of an incredibly hard-working and truly eccentric individual.”

**A role-playing adventure game**

**THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: BREATH OF THE WILD**
Recommended by Terry and Eric Fan, writers

“We’ve been big fans of the Zelda video game series since playing Link’s Awakening decades ago, which is also a masterpiece. The pandemic was the perfect time to dive into a lush, epic fantasy world on the Nintendo Switch. As in previous games, the real stars of the show are the intricate dungeons—in this case, shrines—and the brilliant puzzles and game design.”

**A web series about Nietzsche and night shifts**

**MEILLEUR AVANT**
Recommended by Hannah Cheesman, actor and filmmaker

“This French-language web series from creators Laura Bergeron and Maxime Robin was shot at a grocery store outside Toronto. It takes a creative, absurdist and funny look at the night-shift janitor, who has failed to finish his doctorate on Nietzsche and finds himself in need of money.”

**IRL Event Alert**

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When a teenage boy was stabbed outside a McDonald’s in Richmond Hill, I stepped in to save his life

BY CHRISTOPHER LUONGO

I’m a poli-sci student at U of T, and I have a young daughter, who’s with me about half the time. Being a full-time student and a parent is extraordinarily challenging, but I’m determined to make it work. My goal is to go to law school and become a constitutional lawyer.

One day in February of 2020, just before the first Covid lockdown, my daughter and I visited a McDonald’s in a plaza in Richmond Hill to get her a Happy Meal. I sat her down at a table and let her know I was just going to be a few feet away. While at the ordering screen, I felt someone graze my right shoulder. I turned around and came face to face with a boy who looked to be about 16 years old. “Call 911,” he said in a faint whisper. I looked around the restaurant and noticed there was blood dripping from his fingers onto the floor, with a long trail snaking toward the entryway. It was clear he was seriously hurt.

I knew I had to try to help him before he lost any more blood. I worked for years as a personal trainer, so I had a solid understanding of how the human body works—enough to feel confident that I could prevent additional blood loss. I locked eyes with my daughter and gave her a look that said, “Everything is going to be okay.”

The boy was losing blood rapidly, and the colour was draining from his body. I went to the kitchen and said, “I need someone to call 911.” That got everyone’s attention, and the mood in the restaurant suddenly shifted. People popped their heads up from their tables. Everybody was instantly co-operative—we had all entered a state of mutual trust. One person went to get gloves and paper towels from the kitchen, and someone else called 911.

When I turned back to the teen, he had collapsed onto the floor. He was so pale that I could tell the blood was draining down to his lower body. I turned to a few bystanders, asking them to help raise his legs above his heart to get his blood flowing back to his vital organs. They jumped up to help, and soon I started to see some colour return to the kid’s face. I looked up to check once more on my daughter and saw a teenage girl and a woman sitting and playing with her to keep her distracted from what was going on. I was touched by their kindness. Knowing she was safe gave me the strength to continue.

I got down on the floor, level with the teen, who told me he couldn’t breathe. I figured his lungs were filling with fluids, so I turned him on his side to help him get oxygen. Within a few seconds, he was breathing steadily again. Two men helped me remove his jacket and sweater. By this point, everyone in the McDonald’s was out of their seats, crowded around us.

Somebody brought latex gloves. I put them on and quickly looked for the source of the bleeding. Just below the teen’s armpit, I found a large, deep laceration. I’m six foot one—a big guy—and the gash was about the size of my hand. I covered it with my palm and pressed down to try to prevent further blood loss. I held the boy’s head in my other hand. A wave of anxiety washed over me. What if I’m not doing enough? What if my efforts to stop the bleeding, the boy would have likely have died before they arrived.

I felt a huge weight lift, but the terror and vulnerability of holding a person’s life in my hands will never leave me. This year, I received a Canadian Red Cross Rescuer Award. A paramedic had nominated me, saying that if it hadn’t been for my efforts to stop the bleeding, the boy would likely have died before they arrived.

Two days after the incident, the police sergeant called to tell me that the boy had survived. I felt a huge weight lift, but the terror and vulnerability of holding a person’s life in my hands will never leave me. This year, I received a Canadian Red Cross Rescuer Award. A paramedic had nominated me, saying that if it hadn’t been for my efforts to stop the bleeding, the boy would likely have died before they arrived.

In today’s world, we’re constantly inundated by images of malice and violence. If we all look out for each other and stand up for what’s right, we’ll see those types of stories diminish. I want to offer up narratives of strong, caring male role models—especially single fathers. We need to show compassion for others in our community, especially in times of crisis. That’s the kind of world I want my daughter to grow up in.

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I have a 16-year-old son, I’ve been a poli-sci student at U of T, and I have a young daughter, who’s with me about half the time. Being a full-time student and a parent is extraordinarily challenging, but I’m determined to make it work. My goal is to go to law school and become a constitutional lawyer.

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Christopher Luongo is a political science student in Toronto.

Email submissions to memoir@torontolife.com

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