



# DADDY

## THE NEW INQUIRY









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**THE** knowledge of paternity is said to be the origin of human society as we know it: that is, born of women's labor but held in men's name. In the world before, there could be no such thing as a father, only children, mothers, and sexual partners and childrearsers. In this telling, the tree of knowledge and the tree of life were one and the same, and kept a secret amongst mothers and daughters.

Fathers are haunted by this prehistory: they are always the last to know. The father invents a whole new meaning for himself based on the knowledge of paternity. Their anxiety manifests in many ways, sometimes violent, often tedious, always grasping for control. As that drama plays out over the course of children's lives, it's never clear when Father will be found out.

In this issue, a duo of sex workers share what they've

learned from their professional family obligations. Alana Massey addresses the young sugar baby as she would a junior trainee, reminding them that a sugar daddy is simply a crude kind of boss, getting away with wage theft and unpaid overtime by keeping his babies in the dark about the work they are actually doing. It's only a matter of time before the veil slips and the sugar baby is revealed to have been mommying all along. In another essay, Caspar explores how getting paid for sex by men who share his background helps him experience his ultimate fantasy: that in a world where love is distributed along race and class lines he could ever deserve what he receives.

In America, where we are writing this, race is a fantasy about daddies, too. Hannah Black once wrote that race is the social form that "mediates between sex and death, tells us who should be loved and who can be

killed.” But of course the same is true of daddies. Yahdon Israel’s “I Know You Are, but What Am I” addresses the way that growing up black in Brooklyn exposed him to different kinds of Africanness, routing history, language, and resources through differentially valued lineages. His mother and father raise him in their version of Africa, one constructed of kings, queens, and soap, while his sister leaves their home for an Ivoirian man, but neither daddy’s patriarchal power remains intact by the end. In “Daughters Have Their Own Agendas,” Tiana Reid rereads Dick Gregory’s *Nigger* in the light of her relationship with her dad and the titular word, weighing her loyalty to the mother who waits against the hateful desire to despise a black father in a world designed to kill him.

Under Reaganite conservatism, the 80s were peak dad, inspiring our cover—the spirit of history acting simultaneously as the authoritative know-it-all trying vainly to curb the revolts for freedom of the decade prior, and the midlife crisis selling coke and AKs to despots and contras. The violence of the dad was perhaps never more lurid. Teju Cole, in “Fathers and Sons,” unearths an old, foundational trope in the West’s mythology—the son carrying the father on his back, fleeing war—in the aftermath of this attempt to maintain the global structure of imperialism without its formal name. Out of this period of reaction, a liberal wing of patriarchy attempted to forge a newer, more palatable dad. The undertaking was diffuse but global, and Giovanni Tiso argues it may have reached its peak in the book *Being a Great Dad for Dummies*. Tiso takes the ideology of soft patriarchy without feminism to task in “Great Dads.”

A soft dad may just be a dad with a bad bod, a body type famously rechristened this spring by a college newspaper columnist. Vishnu Strangeways takes a deep dive into the structure of desire illuminated by the dadbod’s social cues. Desire formed in relation to social power structures in turn upholds them, he writes, and desire for

the body of the father is no exception. If the appeal of fucking a dad is “exhilaration at the potential of taking in the dominating violence of claustrophobic suburban horror as a special blessing,” celebrating the dad bod is nothing special. In Matthew Lawrence’s “Daddy O,” the booming genre of sex with stepdads and grandfathers in the gay porn industry comes in for examination, seeing its flirtation with incest as the animating drive and absolute limit of these films, whose point is actually to displace the father from the center of fantasy.

For a few years, the principle of our solidarity at TNI was No Dads. But unable to escape fathers, we’ve decided we prefer making and unmaking daddies instead. In “Feeling Myself” off her most recent album, Nicki Minaj sings “Yes daddy I do,” and you can hear her smile. As always, Nicki’s diction is clarifying: the otherwise off-putting shades of incest in eroticizing childplay aren’t present here. She isn’t casting herself as a daughter. Deputizing a daddy for a night, like extending the permission of roleplay, demonstrates that you have some power to extend. And a nightly, weekly, or monthly daddy is only one in a series, while a father draws his tenuous power from uniqueness. Designating your own daddies short-circuits the dependency inherent to childhood.

The current popularity of “daddy” as a term of endearment ranging in irony levels from 0–100 marks an era of social and economic precarity that leaves young people righteously without faith in institutions, but more fluent in language with points of origin online. Casting faves as moms and dads is a fantasy gesture by those orphaned by school curriculums we know to be biased, news media we know to be propagandizing, and job opportunities that aren’t. We can look up to whoever we want: the hot selfie we caption with the filial titles, the fandoms we indulge in, the bonds we insist on making as rich or devoid of meaning as we please. Fathers are free, disproportionately empowered, and disappointing. Daddies are whoever we want them to be. **TNI**

# Letter to a Young Baby

By ALANA MASSEY

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*Don't kid yourself, it's a job*



I write to you today with congratulations and cautions. The congratulations are for having the good sense to consider one of few professions where the wage gap actually gapes in your favor, even if you look no fur-

ther than your search engine. The word of caution is because, despite the informality of even the most pleasant sugar daddy or the insistence of the most insufferable ones, you are thinking about entering a profession.

The prospective daddies will resist this notion at every turn, incapable of understanding or willfully ignorant of the fact that spending time in their company is not only laborious and worthy of compensation, but that tolerating it requires rare and specific skills.

***The sugar daddy,  
like any employer,  
would rather you  
not know what  
you're worth.***

My hope is not to dissuade you from your search for a sugar daddy entirely. I will not try to entice you into a more explicit form of exchanging a sexual acts for a fee. I won't even gently nudge you in the direction of identifying as a sex worker. Sex workers experience quite enough lateral disdain, and I wish neither to di-

minish nor elevate the particular experiences of sugar babies. I only ask that you always recognize sugar baby labor as such and value it accordingly.

The first thing to know is that billionaires do not find their sugar babies on the Internet. Securing a sugar daddy with truly exorbitant wealth is more likely to happen via mercenary personal assistants at a TechCrunch Disrupt gala or Fashion Week after-party. Anna Nicole Smith was the last and only exception. This does not mean that sugar daddies are not by and large wealthy. They are. But social and professional exposure to levels of wealth that seem merely hypothetical to most of the world has disfigured their sense of what constitutes "rich." The resulting chip on their shoulder means they seek out sugar babies whose relative poverty will make him feel better about his own place in the world. This should not discourage prospective sugar babies, but it should help manage your expectations.

When you embark on a search for a sugar daddy, the specification you'll read most often in ads will be "No pros." It is a vain hope that no professional sex workers will contact him because they frequent the same sites he browses. It is frankly foolish on his part. The most successful sugar babies I've known are not fresh-faced college girls but seasoned veterans of the sex trades who know just how much emotional labor the sugar daddy will require and can charge accordingly.

The sugar daddy, like any employer, would rather you not know what you're worth. He relies on his sugar baby having no social circle where she can exchange experiences and learn the value of her labor (indeed, learn of the existence of her labor). The sugar daddy will remind you regularly that you are "not like them": strippers, escorts, or even more experienced sugar babies. He does this not to compliment her, but to preserve his sense of himself as a man who does not need to pay for "actual prostitutes."



For these reasons, the sugar daddy is unlikely to think or say the term “sex worker.” He is unlikely to grasp the idea of companionship, particularly his own, as work. He has similar difficulties understanding the value of time. In his advertisement he belabored the point that he is far too busy for a traditional relationship, but he is most likely inconsequential at his firm and lying to himself and others about how often he is needed in the office.

The sugar daddy has time, what he lacks is a willingness in listening to women for any meaningful length of time. The normal relationship expectation that he acknowledge his partner’s interior life positively beleaguers him. He will be similarly exhausted to learn that a sugar baby having to be on-call for him is, in fact, a form of labor. Other people’s needs are very hard for him.

A big red flag on any sugar daddy’s profile is an expressed predilection for acting as a “mentor.” He wants to be no such thing. Ask any mentoring program in any major metropolitan area in the United States and you will find them absolutely starved of male mentors. What this man wants is an audience that is compelled to listen to him pontificate on topics like evolutionary psychology and American exceptionalism. His opinions are offensive and reliably dull.

As sad as it makes him that he is not as rich as the CEO, he is even more profoundly wounded by the fact that he has not been recognized for his leadership skills, particularly his public speaking. The sugar daddy is an expert in one topic: his own tedious mythology. He wants to impart the wisdom he’s gathered on an automated career trajectory that is nearly indistinguishable from that of his peers, which he treats as though it has been an extraordinary, singular travail through true adversity. He dreams of delivering a TED talk about these toils and snares. In the meantime, the rapt attention of a young woman tethered to him by unpredictable cash dispensations will do just fine.

At some point in the arrangement, the sugar daddy might attempt to make a payment in the form of a handbag. It is possible that there is a cinematic origin to this bizarre custom of men trying to pass off portable storage as currency, but it is more likely because he wants your relationship to remain informal, a system of spontaneous gifts that cannot be priced and compared to labor-time expended. In any case, the bag he chooses will be reliably ugly and only moderately expensive.

A sugar baby can rely on few things under the capricious gaze of a sugar daddy, but he will ask why you didn’t choose to wear that handbag every time you appear without it. This handbag was never a gift. It was a measuring stick for the sugar baby’s care and attention and he will notice it waning around the same time he becomes preoccupied with your social media profiles. This preoccupation gives way to obsession that soon turns to possessiveness. He begins to quiz you on the exact plots of movies she claimed to be watching when she was unavailable. Your haircut becomes an act of aggression. He finally begins to think of you as a whore.

Maintaining your composure once it becomes clear that the sugar daddy’s most persisted need is to have his social and sexual value validated often ends up being the most difficult part of the sugar baby experience. Young women who were promised that they would be taken care of find themselves taking care of the sugar daddy’s sexual needs occasionally and his delicate ego constantly. The sugar baby’s youthful energy gives way to maternal exhaustion. Instead of accommodating her adult needs, he resorts to infantile whining disguised as fatherly disappointment. But by this point the jig is up. The sugar baby realizes she’s been the mother all along. And though that role doesn’t come with an allowance, it comes with a familiar cliché that the sugar daddy can’t abide: It’s the hardest job in the world. **TNI**

# You Deserve It, Sweetie

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*The sugar daddy upholds the fantasy of unconditional love by masking the very real conditions of lovability*

**MY** extended family has all but withered away. Their love contracted and contracted and now there is no one left to give it to. They loved in a totalizing and aggressive and painful way, heaping love on people who didn't deserve it and withholding it from people who did. These random acts of exclusion and inclusion seem cruel, but they form the founding conditions of a family. In order to love people unconditionally, there have to be conditions regarding who can receive that love.

Love's conditions are invisible and arbitrary—they have to feel non-existent so that the love can feel true. To believe that “love is blind” is to believe in a realm of



human connection free of power—we fetishize stories where love overcomes differences in race, class, age, and gender to allow people to *really feel*. In fact, love is not “blind.” Marriage, the consummation of traditional romantic love, is often a tool for concentrating wealth in the hands of people who already have it. This is why resources like healthcare, citizenship, and tax benefits are distributed through marriage, and why married couples can share money without paying taxes on it: love compounds wealth. But we talk about it as if it is a magic spell that *just so happens* to bewitch people of similar racial and economic backgrounds.



We like to believe that the market is also unconditional—free market ideology makes the rules of distributing resources invisible. For example, one of these rules is race, a caste system invented to steal wealth from people of color and give it to white people. With the invention of blackness and the commodification of black people, white people literally invented a new source of wealth for themselves to buy, sell, and exploit. This exploitation continues today, and probably all wealth in this country derives from slavery in some form. But national discourse continues to focus on the “cultural differences” between black people and everyone else, as if *that* explains the staggering wealth divide. In order to continue concentrating wealth in white hands, we must continue to believe that race is a set of cultural practices that *just so happens* to correspond to different groups’ differential access to resources.

The patriarch of my family was a first-generation Italian-American: an anti-fascist, feminist, anarchist sausage-maker. For him, money was the most important thing in the world, but only so that you’d be able to give enough of it to your children so that money wouldn’t have to be the most important thing in the world for them. Work is the most important thing in the world, but only so that the next generation doesn’t have to work as hard as you.

Three generations later I am left with a lot more invisible rules that *just so happen* to benefit me. I was brought up with these implicit beliefs: If your parents love you, they’ll make sure you don’t have to worry about money. But your parents shouldn’t have to work too hard for money, because then you’d be able to tell they were sacrificing for you, and that itself would mean you should worry. One resolution to this problem is to learn the two secret passwords into the bourgeois liberal class: either *just so happen* to have rich parents (like me), or *just so happen* to have highly compensated work that fulfills the neoliberal ideal of perfectly egosyntonic labor (like my parents) so that it doesn’t feel like work.

The coercive power of capitalism is so strong that these rules of respectability and power always felt like they grew organically out of my family’s story—desperate to escape the instability and emotional violence of her family, my mother accumulated capital of all kinds until she could create a family that was seemingly protected from the influence of money and work. Care that left a sign of its effort was repulsive to me because it made love seem transactional—if something had to be sacrificed in order for me to have something, then I was in debt. Real love should erase all other considerations. Care was only authentic when it was in a vacuum. My family’s love was supposed to provide a break from the cruel, hateful market, but it only reinforced the truth of the market’s rules.

Under these conditions, learning to hustle was an erotic activity. It was a deliberate, empowering, exciting exploration of something that had always been repulsive and forbidden to me: the transactional nature of relationships. Always judgmental and magnetic, since I was young I’ve been able to make people think that supporting me would have some immediate reward for them: my kindness and my approval. I walked around the cafeteria in high school getting quarters to buy lunch just because I could and I made teachers believe I respected them so much that not giving me an A would be a mark against *them*.

This power depended in large part on maintaining an unassailable, easily digestible normality. In my case, this meant being held hostage by my masculinity. I never felt good being male and strove, with best friend after best friend, to find someone who was so expansively, totally masculine that he would forbid me from even trying to be male at all. But, in my eyes, a correctly masculine boy would only like me if I, too, were correctly masculine. I dreamed of becoming male enough to no longer have to be a man at all.

This is the material that formed my desire for sex with men. As in my search for a best friend, in sex I sought

a partner who could vanquish my masculinity once and for all. I always wanted to be fucked as a woman, whatever that means. And I started to fantasize about getting paid for it because getting paid to be a woman would mean I finally got to have it both ways: I would get undeniable, immediate proof that I was worth something and it would be because my masculinity was weak, not because it was strong.

The only kind of sex my sugar daddy and I had for a while was me jacking off while he told me about letting me use his credit card. That's the only thing I could cum to. Afterwards he would sometimes ask me, "Would you still want to be with me if I didn't have money?" and I would respond, "Would you still want to be with me if I weren't gorgeous, thin, kind, and permanently tan?"

Bourgeois white women—the standard-bearers of the regulative ideal of femininity—have traditionally had to find financial support from a partner rather than from a job, or rely on a male partner's income to supplement their lower wages. In exchange, they have been expected to do the emotional work that their partners need in order to go on producing value for their boss. So the resources women have traditionally needed from relationships are easily quantifiable, while the resources men have needed are not. Women are easily depicted as gold-diggers for getting what they need from a man, but it seems inevitable and natural when men plunder everything they can take from a woman.

Sugar daddy relationships affirm both the illusion of unconditional, blind love and the illusion of a fair free market. They distribute love on the logic of money, making love seem like the hard-earned prize of all your hard work, daddy.

And they distribute money on the logic of love, making money seem benevolent and unconditional, sweetie.

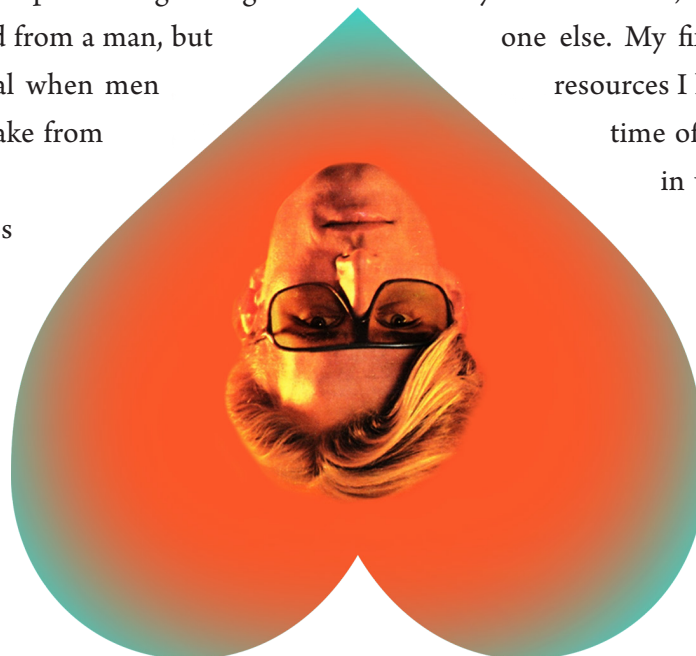
In order to believe that you deserve the glut of resources and love that comes with being a respectable member of the middle class, you have to erase the true cost of that status—the exchanges, violence, and power that earned you that care. Bourgeois liberals will admit that the world is a violent place, because they're liberals, and they'll admit that they did well in that world, because they're middle class, but they won't often admit that succeeding in a violent world must mean employing violence for your own benefit. This is what I mean by erasing transactionality.

My struggle with gender made the transactional nature of earning care unavoidable. People assigned male at birth learn young and quickly how much we stand to lose if we so much as talk to girls too much. Staying masculine was the result of a cost-benefit analysis. Gayness was as close as I could get to being a woman while still maintaining my power. Before ever doing sex work, I had been "selling myself" to maintain access to resources my whole life.

Of course, nobody should have to sell ourselves or our labor in any way to earn care, because no one actually deserves food, housing, or love more than anyone else. My fixation on earning the love and

resources I have access to comes from a lifetime of selling my labor and my image in ways I was so unaware of that I internalized them as natural behaviors.

And yet I'm white and have rich, caring parents—I could never earn all the care I was born to receive. Money turns me on because the illusion that I deserve it is my ultimate fantasy. **TNI**





# > Fathers and Sons

By TEJU COLE

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*An old trope: a son carries a father on his back, fleeing war*



Aeneas carrying Anchises and the Penates out of Troy  
(Veii, Etruria, c. 500 BCE)

**DO** you love me? he asks one. If I want him to remain alive, what is that to you? he says of another, and then that other reveals himself as the author of the words we are reading. The twenty-first chapter of the Gospel of John is strange (a succession struggle, like those in King Lear or in Kurosawa's films). It is perhaps strangest when Christ prophesies Peter's death, When thou wast young, thou girdest thyself, and walkedst whither thou wouldst: but when thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry thee whither thou wouldst not.



"Dakhil Naso, a Yezidi from Sinjar carrying his blind father to Kurdistan to save him from death." (August 28, 2014), via @KhalafHamo

A little over a century earlier, Virgil wrote, of Aeneas recounting to Dido his family's escape from Troy, Come then, dear father, clasp my neck: I will carry you on my shoulders: that task won't weigh on me. Whatever may happen, it will be for us both, the same shared risk, and the same salvation.

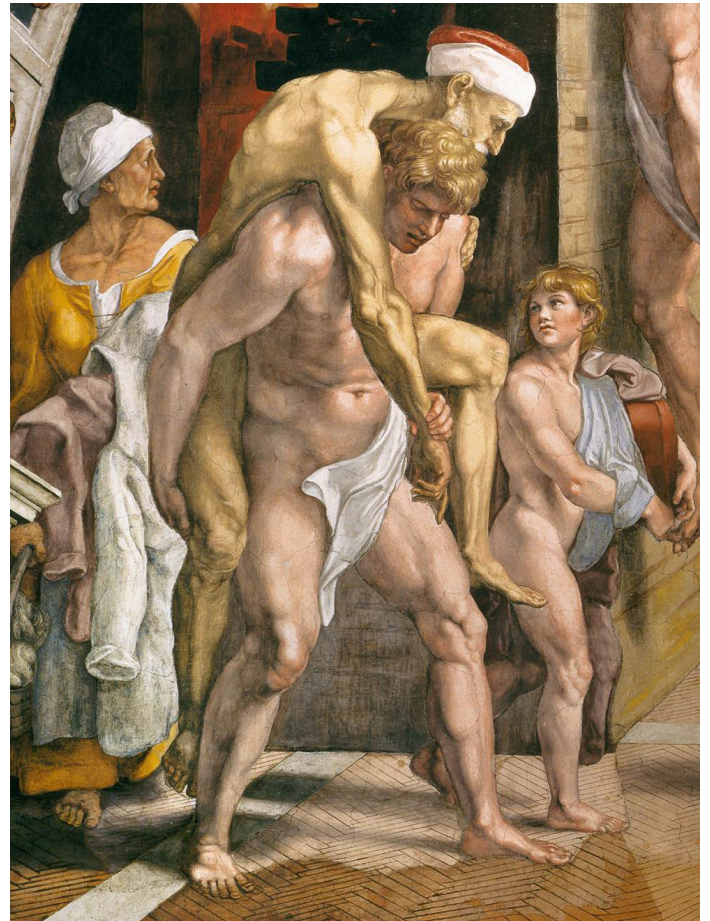
Anchises, the father, carried by the one he had once carried, was to die far from the battle, in his old age, in Sicily. The story of Aeneas carrying his father is a vital fiction of Western myth, and was useful to Shakespeare who wrote, of Cassius' boast to Brutus that he'd once saved Caesar from drowning—Ere we could arrive the point proposed, Caesar cried, Help me, Cassius, or I sink! I, as Aeneas, our great ancestor, did from the flames of Troy upon his shoulder the old Anchises bear, so from the waves of Tiber did I the tired Caesar.

And if war came, again, and a son were to carry a father, again?



Of the painting by Raphael, or as now seems more likely, Giulio Romano, of the ancient fire in the Borgo, Vasari wrote, An infirm old man, distraught by his weakness and the flames of the fire, being carried (as Virgil describes Anchises being carried by Aeneas) by a young man.

Between the image made in Etruria around 500 BCE and the painting from Raphael's workshop two thousand years later, there is hardly any change in the form (one does not carry a father the way one carries a child). The form is the same, as are the pathos and the horror, in this formula of a son carrying on his back his aged father from a crisis that imperils them both, the same shared risk, as Virgil wrote, the same salvation. May it not be you. May it not be your father. **TNI**



Giulio Romano, *Fire in the Borgo* (1514)

# Great Dads

By GIOVANNI TISO

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*Great Dad is able to do mom's feminism for her, just one of his many surprising talents*

**HE'S** an amazing creature, the modern father. Possessing in equal part confidence, creativity, endurance, optimism, passion, patience, and presence, he has thrown away the shackles of his oppressed forebears and reclaimed the prerogatives of his role. To those who doubt him, he has only one thing to say: I can do this, I will do this.

This is the modern father. No, better: the modern dad, for they are not quite the same thing. The father is authoritarian, backward-looking, distant, and uncaring, whereas the dad is authoritative—meaning that when it comes to instruction and correction he sets boundaries without punishing. He chooses instead to lead by example and with a clear mind, while in all other child-related things he gets involved, he mucks in, and most important of all, he cares.

I doubt you could find a better guide to the modern



dad than *Being a Great Dad for Dummies*, the brain child of the three New Zealand-based entrepreneurs, Stefan Korn, Scott Lancaster, and Eric Mooij, who launched the website DIYFather.com after recognizing “the need for social innovation in the fathering space.” It is on this website that you’ll be able to follow what the modern dad gets up to on a day-to-day basis and be informed on the risk of having friends of the opposite sex, read daddy’s rules for dating his teenage daughter, or fantasize in melancholy fashion about a world without dads. (Without dads, we are informed by the author of this piece, there would be nobody to take the sons to the games or show off daughters with pride. You get the gist.)

Absorbing as the website is, however, the guidebook is an altogether different object and fixes in time the essential qualities of dadhood in a superbly coherent and concise way. As is the case for most superheroes, Great Dad is defined by his origins—that is to say, the circumstances in which he acquired his powers. You might think that these circumstances might in some way be related to challenges presented by the women’s liberation movement. Not so. Echoing a remarkably widespread rhetoric concerning modern fatherhood in the Western world, Great Dad is said instead to be the product of a “quiet” or “peaceful revolution ... among men who want to become more involved in the upbringing of their children.”

Armed with the conviction—also in no way related to feminism—that “dads can do everything mums do except give birth and breastfeed,” and that “staying home looking after the kids is no longer a reason to hand in your man card,” Great Dad swats aside all the misgivings of his partner and of society at large in order to answer his calling. As a matter of fact, seeing that, if anything, it is mum who holds him back—as she may “have a tendency to ‘take over’ and secretly or unconsciously harbor the belief that dads are somewhat inadequate when it comes to dealing with babies”—by overcoming these obstacles, perhaps even to the point of “sending mum back to the workforce,”



Great Dad is able to do her feminism for her. Just one of his many surprising talents.

The elision of feminism as a historical phenomenon fits within the book’s benign and staggeringly under-theorized essentialism. Being inducted into the dad club means becoming nothing less than “a bona fide member of the human race, a piece in a puzzle that has been put together over millions of years,” but there is no triumphalism in this statement, nor does it follow that one should practice an old-fashioned and therefore syllogistically more natural or correct brand of fatherhood. On the contrary, the book is relatively enlightened in some of its advice, notably when it comes to supporting the choices of the partner during pregnancy and labor, and in its rejection of smacking children as a legitimate form of discipline.

Great Dad is a liberal dad, in other words, and with something of the model citizen of neoliberalism, the well-adjusted, about him. More to the point, however, Great Dad’s being modern and progressive is not the result of a historical process, much less the outcome of a his-



torical conflict between different social actors. Rather it's a spontaneous coming to terms, the realization of a latent potential. Repressed for far too long by social prejudice and mum's overbearingness, the dad within is finally able to shine.

This myth of origin out of the way, a proper analysis of *Being a Great Dad for Dummies* would have to be based on what is and isn't written, what is and isn't included. But one would be remiss not to comment briefly on the language, which is not quite straight out of the usual style sheet for a *For Dummies* guide. If you get past the relentless cuteness and somehow stop yourself from hurling the book out the window after the 50th use of the phrase "your little champ," you will note a most curiously passé prudish reticence, the kind that makes the authors exclaim, on the business of getting pregnant, that "there aren't many projects in life that start with a little nooky with your best girl!" or advise, should the diminished sex after the birth be a problem, to "take cold showers and do plenty of exercise if need be." Odder still is the suggestion that in high-stress arguments with a toddler, dad may want to take a deep breath and sing a song to himself, "perhaps Incy Wincy Spider"—surely a scene that has never been played out on this planet.

There is a tendency, in other words, for this book to infantilize Great Dad, to talk down to him at the same time as he's encouraged to take on a fully adult role. But this too fits within a more important aspect of the design: namely, the fact that *Being a Great Dad* turns out to be a manual for early fatherhood only, up to the little champ's first day at school. But if the tantrums of a three-year-old are enough to launch Great Dad into a self-soothing rendition of Incy Wincy Spider, one might well wonder what issues might arise later on and if he has been properly briefed on how to deal with them.

More fundamentally, a preschooler poses no meaningful challenge to parental authority. It is therefore relatively easy to design a working and workable theory of fatherhood revolving around setting the kinds of boundaries

that would equip a child to function amongst their peers in a playgroup or kindergarten setting—a tricky time, to be sure, but rather less challenging, in every sense of the word, than, say, adolescence. Or adulthood.

Thus even before we get to the observation that every theory of parenthood is also implicitly a theory of society, and ask what kind of social model underpins the book, we find that the theory itself is incomplete, or rather, that it is the product of its limitations: meaning not only the fact that it stops at five years of age but also that it does not conceive of families other than the nuclear kind (whether intact or broken) or of fathers except of the heterosexual variety. Utterly unsurprising omissions, these last two, if you are familiar with the genre, but which nonetheless underscore how normative and oppressive the soft, cuddly patriarchy of the Great Dad actually is.

Still, we can speculate about how Great Dad may behave with older children and reason that based on the caring model of the early years he won't be the kind of father who fires nine hollow-point 45-calibre bullets into his daughter's laptop because of something she wrote on the internet. That kind of violence—physical, psychological, existential—seems quite incompatible with the gentle prescriptions of *Being a Great Dad*. It probably is, but it's just not possible to be sure. Not without filling those blanks: How you go about relinquishing that early first-teacher role; how you respond to actual challenges to your authority, up to and including your daughter writing stuff about you on the internet; how you allow for possibilities other than your children being the best they can be, because personal development is not that linear or neutral, nor is it the fulfillment of a promise; finally, whom you not only help them to be but also allow them to be, is what determines the kind of father, the kind of parent you are. And in this respect, too, fatherhood as it is currently conceived, even in its more ostensibly progressive forms, is an imprint of society at large, and therefore a deeply flawed thing. **TNI**

# The Bod of the Father

By VISHNU STRANGWAYS

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*The dad bod dad is not so much a person as an organizational principle of patriarchy*



**AS** #LoveWins trended around the world earlier this year and people were pictured holding “full equality

at last” banners outside the historic Stonewall inn, it was clear that for some, human intimacy achieves its highest re-

alization through state-endorsed coupledness. Everyone irrespective of sexuality deserves a shot at unhappiness, but what exactly love has won is unclear. When love becomes law, the appeal of marriage has to be understood through its monopoly over entry to an array of legal, economic and social privileges.

In her essay “Why Girls Love The Dad Bod,” Mackenzie Pearson lays out an ethnography of desire in which dadhood redeems the male body from the rock hard abs that haunt it. In terms of purely physical descriptors, the dad bod knows very well what it isn’t: it does not have muscles so defined you could break dreams on them, nor will it stand out on a crowded beach, nor still will it be able to lift you up without getting faintly winded. Pearson’s essay champions a body whose desirability lies in both what it is and what its image negates: “the dad bod is a nice balance between a beer gut and working out.” The dad bod isn’t ripped, but it’s not a million miles away from it either. For Pearson, the dad bod represents the impossible notion of physical normalcy, the aesthetic middle ground. If the dad bod could speak, according to Pearson, it would say: “I go to the gym occasionally, but I also drink heavily on the weekends.” It’s not too muscular, not too fat, it’s just right.

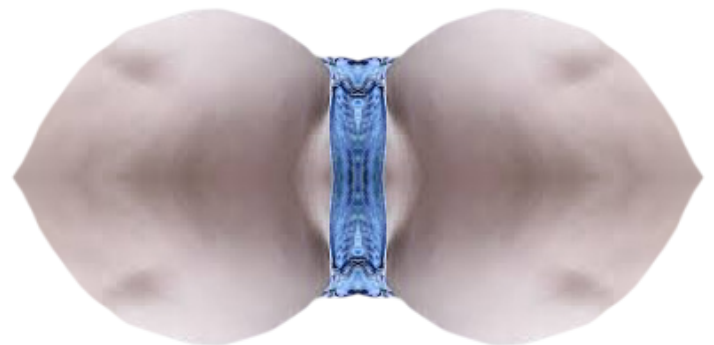
The dad bod exists through the life the body exists in. Who epitomises the dad bod? MSN says Simon Cowell, Jason Segel, Leonardo DiCaprio. *New York* magazine’s dad bod lives off orange Gatorade and frozen burritos from Trader Joe’s. The visual aesthetic of dad bod is a white picket fence, ashtrays filled with empty pistachio nut shells, the rim of a NASCAR-branded baseball cap. Dad bod is a self-assembly garden shed with a fraternity crest embossed on the door. You sit close to dad bod and tremble at the possibility that not only might it play you a Gotye song, it might also pump its fist out of time with the beat. Although the dad bod advertises its failure to conform to masculine beauty standards, it remains conventionally white and able-bodied, rather than joining with other forms of non-conformity. This is because dad bod is not

primarily defined through the body, but by the insistence that intimacy is synonymous with coupledness and love is synonymous with marriage, by the office cubicle you lose the individuation of days in.

Of course, an idea can’t truly exist until someone finds a way to extract value from it. CJ Cardenas, Los Angeles-based talent manager for Bear Grylls, has been so moved by the revolutionary potential of dad bod that he is in the process of trademarking a lifestyle brand around it. In an interview with *New York* magazine, Cardenas reveals how little dad bod has to do with the physical properties of the body it describes:

There’s a misconception that dadbods are lazy, eating pizza, playing video games. That’s not it at all. A lot of men who fit in the category are active guys with families. Dads who enjoy a beer on the weekend, dads who hit the gym a few times a week, dads with friends, colleagues and kids. Dads, in other words, with bodies shaped by their full, fulfilling lives.

Champions of the dad bod talk as if advocating for a defiant new invention. At the same time, Cardenas and Pearson emphasize that the dad bod isn’t an attempt at embracing traditionally non-valORIZED body types. Pearson outright states, “It’s not an overweight guy,” whereas Cardenas more tentatively says, “The idea is that it is okay to have a little bit of extra fat in certain areas.” It is fitting that dad bod will become a lifestyle brand, because it asks those who desire it to aspire to the most readily available ideas. Its sensuality is a wedding, dates are homeowner mortgage schemes, sucking dick is Christmas cards with





photos of family on them, and when it lies in bed it is the overwrought silence of running out of things to say to each other that courses between its legs.

In written accounts of the dad bod, the dad of reference is always a cis man, invariably straight, painfully white, suburban, commercial: a golden ticket to a social position where lawn grass is always freshly mown and faith in cops can still exist. The dad of the dad bod is never poor and certainly never of color. Dad bod is an entirely conservative attractiveness that cannot extricate itself from the power structures that have chewed up momentary desire and repurposed it as a means of keeping capital in the right hands. In heteronormcore, the dad figure is at the vanguard of social conservatism. The dad bod dad is not so much a person as a organizational principle of patriarchy. He occupies the exact middle distance of conventional desire, where bodies are means for long-term planning. Pearson argues that the dad bod “makes boys seem more human, natural, and attractive.” Part of the appeal of dad bod lies in knowing “what you are getting into when he’s got the exact body type at 22 that he’s going to have at 45.” Dad bod is a safe investment strategy, frozen in the lifeless capture of monogamy.

Marina Adshade, author of *Dollars & Sex: How Economics Influences Sex And Love*, describes an intimate form of economic rationality deployed to minimize monogamy’s inherent risks. In Adshade’s account, a potential partner’s attractiveness, income, and willingness to leave you are a finite balancing act; improvements in one area leads to diminishments in another. She argues that desire for the dad bod is a security measure: if a man has a dad bod, not only is he less likely to leave you, but you are more likely to be able to, in Adshade’s words, exert your own “household bargaining power” in the relationship. According to this logic, the dad bod’s inverse is the alluring body that will leave you vulnerable to betrayal and heartbreak if you submit to its powers. The dad bod’s other is those racialized, differently abled, or otherwise unimaginable bodies that

dad bod lovers don’t even bother considering. And there is the dad bod itself: a sexy pillow of safety and fidelity. On these terms, the dad bod promises to soften or alleviate the susceptibility of romantic attachments to disappointment, by virtue of its intense normality.

But the insistence on dad bod’s humanizing quality is far less benign than Pearson’s dreamlike account. The image is put forward as sweet, docile and warming like a fireplace in a Christmas movie. But at the heart of the abstracted dad image is the dad as an oriflamme of power. The appeal of fucking a dad is the prospect of receiving the violence of domination and the claustrophobia of the suburbs as special blessings.

The dad in these accounts exists as patriarchal power, and the repetition of its attractiveness implicates desire in the reproduction of domination. Desire is formed in relation to social power structures, and in turn upholds them. And yet a widespread belief in the innateness and immutability of desire somehow reigns. People write “not into blacks/Asians, not racist just a preference” in dating app bios with the same lack of self-critique as academics who use e-fits to generate the most scientifically attractive face and end up with research papers that could be Abercrombie & Fitch campaigns. Lee Edelman writes in his book *No Future*: “Politics is a name for the temporalization of desire, for its translation into a narrative, for its teleological determination.” Far from desire being apolitical, politics is a means of organizing desire, and vice versa.

Perhaps the only way to become liberated from the violent structures embedded in desire is to turn away from it and unlearn the value of being considered physically desirable. But the longing for love and safety are hard to unlearn. The dad bod’s form, though ill-defined, is the sum of the values that we are already forced to navigate. With the dad bod, you can imagine a future: a future that perpetually serves those it was built by and for. You look upon the dad bod as it picks up a golf club and you could drown in the whiteness of its trousers forever. **TNI**

# My Two Dads

By MARYAM MONALISA GHARAVI

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*U.S. elections are by default world elections*

**EVERY** few years we get to play a part in choosing the national Daddy. I see your Tiger mom and raise you an Eagle dad.

**I'VE** held several jobs considered menial or 'job-by-jobs' but one I have never chosen and would never be able to choose is sewing flags. To thread non-wearable fabric in primary colors would give me nightmares of being BLED THROUGH with them.

**THEY** hate us because we use money from China to pay for a children's program featuring a giant bird. We have failed in being nuanced and cautious about how we pay for the televisual sighting of our national birds.

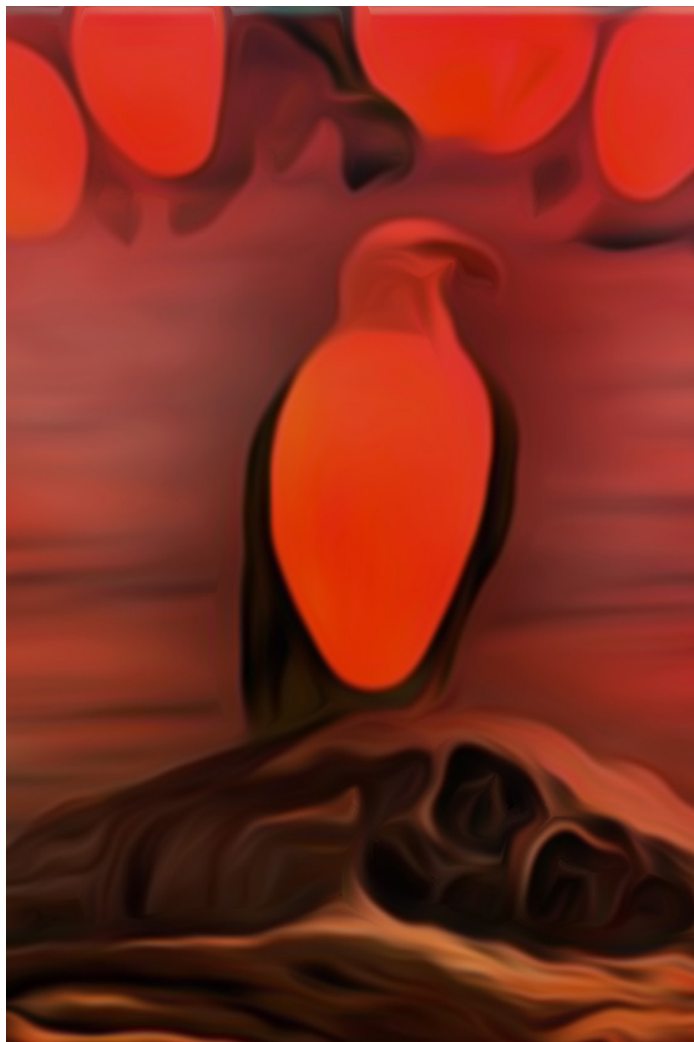


image after 'Eagle Watching the Gulls' by Stewart Butterfield



**IT** is dishonest to call U.S. elections U.S. elections. They are by default world elections. They collapse the concept of “at home” and “abroad” in ways that have not even begun to be touched. They are a sizable part of the machinery, along with taxes, lobbyists, mercenary-corporate extraction technologies, and the solitary-confinement-penitentiary system that decide who suffers or dies for what is termed ‘the bottom line.’

Everyone is assumed to have a bottom-line issue in American politics: gun control, drugs, abortion, education, healthcare, etc. etc. Let’s go all out and say that this bottom-lining singularly defines the “domestic” American electoral system in ways no other nation-state can claim.

We have given up on so *much*, compromised sheer human evolutionary potential, for the specter of “incremental change.”

Death has no incremental change. The radical act of designating oneself the decider of the moment of death, and maximizing this act as a mechanical data output, is part of the American machinery. (This is not an issue but it is also a bottom line.)

**FROM** CAConrad’s “say it with grEEEn paint for the comfort and healing of their wounds” (from *A Beautiful Marsupial Afternoon*, 2012):

the babysitter of  
empire wants a raise

write on walls write on court  
house sidewalks write on every single mirror you  
can find

“I MAKE  
HOLES IN AFGHAN  
FAMILIES EVERY TIME  
I PAY MY TAXES!”

**TNI**



# Daughters Have Their Own Agenda

By TIANA REID

*Black women are blamed for the “absent black father” even as their suffering by that absence becomes invisible.*

*“I loved that book, Invisible Man, but the title says it all. It says, invisible to whom? Not to me.”*

—Toni Morrison in a *Studio 360* interview with Hilton Als

*“Even though Daughters have their own agenda with reference to this order of Fathers (imagining for the moment that Moynihan’s fiction—and others like it—does not represent an adequate one and that there is, once we discover him, a Father here), my contention that these social and cultural subjects make doubles, unstable in their respective identities, in effect transports us to a common historical ground, the socio-political order of the New World.”*

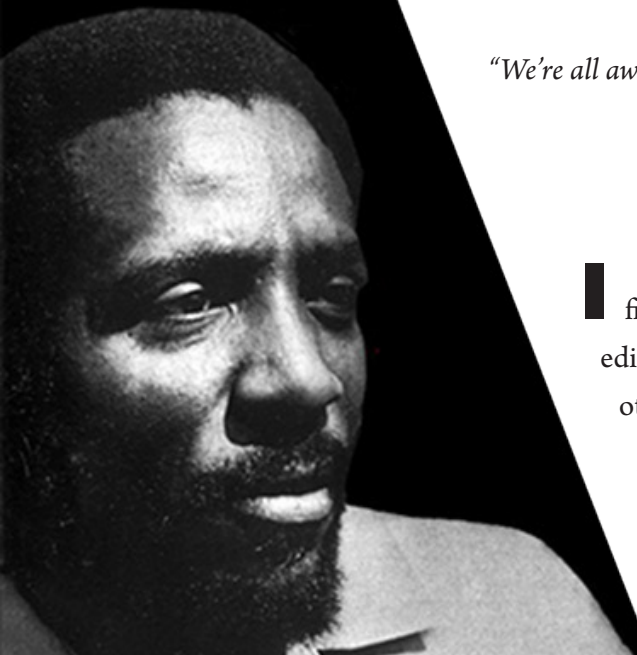
—Hortense Spillers, *Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book*

*“It’s probably been twelve years since my father left, left me fatherless  
And I just used to say I hate him in dishonest jest  
When honestly I miss this nigga, like when I was six  
And every time I got the chance to say it I would swallow it”*

—Earl Sweatshirt, *Chum*

*“We’re all aware of what’s going on here, aren’t we, baby?”*

—Dick Gregory, *Nigger*



I first read Dick Gregory’s *Nigger* years ago. I was a teen and had found the 1969 edition, withdrawn from the North York Public Library in Toronto in a pile of other free books. I was in Canada, which at 14 felt like the most frustrating place to be a black girl, and I was curious about what a word like “nigger” might mean for me.

Since then, I've used *Nigger* most blatantly as an art commodity. Like the proud white girls who read Chris Kraus's *I Love Dick* on the subway with their gripped hands in the air, I read *Nigger* on the streets, mostly park benches, where I didn't feel (as) trapped. When I moved into a new apartment, in one of my first décor decisions, I propped *Nigger* up on the window ledge. It has the most beautiful cover: on an all-white background and in a disappearing black paintbrush cursive is that word, "nigger," all in lower-case. Once I opened and reread it, once I was really in it, that superficial kind of beauty stops. What remains is the kind of beauty that implicates you, asks you why you're looking. I still don't know for sure; I stare because of something like a mix of dread and desire, laughter and longing. It's a serious book chronicling serious stuff (what it's like to be poor and black) but it's singed with a level of comedy that often makes the passages of, say, Gregory's mother getting beat with a belt harder to swallow.

But if, as Gregory said to Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah in her 2013 essay "If He Hollers Let Him Go" for the *Believer*, "Comedy can't be no damn weapon. Comedy is just disappointment within a friendly relation," Gregory—the Gregory character we get to know through text at least—knows what true might is, what true violence.

**DICK** Gregory has said that *Nigger* was written in a way that white people would understand, which is one way to explain that it was written with sports journalist Robert Lipsyte. The autobiography chronicles Gregory growing up poor in segregated St. Louis, Missouri, his track-and-field career in high school and then at Southern Illinois University where he doesn't graduate, his rise as an entertainer, and his civil rights activism.

*Nigger* was published in 1964, a year before the Moynihan Report, the U.S. Department of Labor's publication also known as *The Negro Family: The Case for*

*National Action*—and now somewhat of a black studies anti-bible. Hortense Spillers, wrote about it better than anyone ever could, in her 1987 "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." She writes that in the Moynihan Report, "the 'Negro Family' has no Father to speak of—his Name, his Law, his Symbolic function mark the impressive missing agencies in the essential life of the black community, the 'Report' maintains, and it is, surprisingly, the fault of the Daughter, or the female line. This stunning reversal of the castration thematic, displacing the Name and the Law of the Father to the territory of the Mother and Daughter, becomes an aspect of the African-American female's misnaming."

Following that mid-'60s moment of policy visibility, *Nigger*, then, could be said to be a book about the Fatherless Negro Family, or at least one version of its fiction. *Nigger*, which sold millions of copies while Gregory was a successful (and funny) comedian and a civil rights activist, is not a social etymology of a "controversial" word, a marking of the borders of the limits of the sayable. Although, it's true, when Ghansah wrote that "One also cannot discuss the n-word without discussing Dick Gregory." In other words, one cannot discuss the word "nigger" without discussing the social relations that bind us. What can't be said is never just a word, never "nigger" only. Ten years ago, I read *Nigger* looking for a kind of black practice of life, politics, love. I would have then guilelessly called it "community." I am now unsatisfied with the recognition and acknowledgement a word like community, when pseudo-institutionalized, implies. Ten years ago, I brought *Nigger* with me to Jamaica to read on the beach while my dad was at work. He was always at work when I was visiting him where he lives on the Western part of the island in a small tourist town. My first few readings focused on the male characters, Dick Gregory and his father, and culled them into representative figures in order to make sense of my own #daddyissues.

Similar to what Toni Morrison said of *Invisible Man*,

the title “nigger” doesn’t attend to the sociality that happens beyond the label of “social problem,” the sociality around all the shitty sugar-loaded dinners (Twinkies and Pepsis)—and that’s despite the complex role comedy plays. It seems as though Gregory’s main concern is to not be called nigger, to be addressed with respect in a state that wants to kill him and has, we later learn, killed his mother.

One of the most quoted one-liners is the ironic dedication, which frames the book: “Dear Momma—Wherever you are, if you ever hear the word ‘nigger’ again, remember they are advertising my book.” While there is so much in this book addressed to her, Gregory’s claim to Americanness is siphoned through the memory and image of his suffering and destitute mother, and as a result, that claim is validated. If, as Angela Davis wrote in 1971, “the matriarchal black woman has been repeatedly invoked as one of the fatal by-products of slavery,” then the address and regard for the lost black mother does a particular kind of work, one of mining investments and attachments. What kind of work is the black woman expected to do perhaps only because of the now rather exhausted mother/son binary relationship?

**TODAY** I read *Nigger* more like a séance with my own nigger-ness, which is to say, a claim on our own nigger-ness. Today I read *Nigger* after a few years of a particularly fraught relationship with my own dad. Today I read *Nigger* looking for something devour.

When rereading, I mostly don’t read books like this anymore, I thought, books so publicly filled with true stories and facts, narrativized autobiographies, books where thing after thing happens, books so concerned with a sequence of events. I don’t love to read books written by men—I do read them, a lot of them and even more with a masculine point of view—but I’d almost always rather be reading something written by a woman.

Why be reminded that men exist?

And then in *Nigger*, there are moments like this where I’m reminded why I’m reading: “I started walking again, choking on the heat and the dust, watching my blood run down the sidewalk and the insides come out of my hand. It was white. Then I fainted. A wonderful feeling, like falling away from the world.” Or like this, Gregory’s description of the summer before the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing in Birmingham in 1963: “It was like being in the forest in the daytime when the sun is shining and everybody’s having picnics and laughing and playing ball, and then suddenly it’s night and you’re alone. You’re running through the pitch-black cold.”

In moments like these, recalling to me a kind of enabling écriture, there is no holding back. *Nigger* lends itself to a kind of indeterminacy, a kind of sangfroid, where I read not for content but for gaps and silences. That being said, the part where I feel the gulf between my self and my blood is the first 60 or so pages. I take Dick, the child, seriously. Once Dick grows up, I feel less and less like him. And I like his character less and less. He becomes a man. I stay a woman.

In reading, then, I gravitate to the first sustained yet very faint presence of a woman, Gregory’s Momma, who is also the prototype of black womanhood. She works as a maid in white people’s homes. The first of several documentary-style photographs in the book is of her (a “her” who I have not yet named till...now), immortalized with the caption “Lucille Gregory (‘Momma’) 1904-1953.” In the black-and-white image, Momma lifts her eyes and looks to the heavens with a bright gap-toothed smile. Momma is sitting for a studio portrait photo, all cheap lights and artifice, but she looks happy, however feigned and steeped in respectability politics, and I get now why Gregory compares her to Miss America. And means it.

Despite the presence of some image of her real self, I don’t gravitate to her because she offers a redemptive “Dear Mama” narrative but because of the ways depression



and dispossession enact itself on her character. The black maternal figure, as we know, props up and reflects the heroic ones who persevere. But in her drama, her forever-impending death, she also nervously reflects the future: the daughter, then the girlfriend, then the wife.

**LUCILLE,** however discredited, destabilizes me. I guess I am a daughter and also sometimes a girlfriend and I gravitate to Momma because she waits. She is constantly waiting. She's waiting for regulatory regimes to act. She's waiting for love. She's waiting for welfare, she's waiting for her check from work. She's waiting on her dirty-ass kids. Most of all she's waiting for Gregory's father to come home, even in her own death it feels like she's waiting.

Momma's helplessness reflected the wretchedness I felt being compelled to wait for someone so far away—mentally and physically. My dad moved to Canada from Jamaica in the 1970s after his grandmother sent for him when she moved a few years prior as a nurse's assistant. Before I started kindergarten, he moved back. I saw him maximum once a year since.

I waited for my dad for years. I waited for him to remember my birthday. I waited for him to pick me up at the airport in Montego Bay. I waited wearing the sneakers he bought me. Even when I entered adulthood and committed to something like the Nicki Minajism of "I don't wait on niggas," I knew that sometimes I would feel forced to.

In reading *Nigger*, it felt like capital H Hate to despise a black father trying to get by in a world structured to kill him. After all, he left Toronto because he didn't want to compromise. He had been the oldest brother to migrate. He aspired to be the big boss—and in Canada in the 1990s, where he drove trucks, a black man was only ever allowed to be the most basic kind of boss. His desire for middle-class ownership eventually came true: he built a

house of his own and he's what they call in North America an entrepreneur.

I wanted to hate him, call a black father a dick and mean it. How is it possible to yell and scream—to elucidate my position in the world—articulated in the realm of "the struggle" where there are sides and we're supposed to be on the same one?

**IN** *The Lover's Discourse*, Roland Barthes famously wrote that "the lover's fatal identity is precisely: I am the one who waits." There is no real thing being waited for, no outside to not waiting except, maybe, scale or social position. In that oceanic space of waiting, what does Momma do? She works, she makes Christmas dinner, she listens to her children, she navigates the social worker, she cries. Waiting is never only a passive act, a receptacle for things happening and the world fast-forwarding outside of a window. Perhaps the idea of waiting, then, adds a kind of formality, makes the object worth the wait.

In 1953 at the age of 49, Lucille Gregory dies while in Dick is in his senior year at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, Illinois. His track coach tells him to phone home and right away, without as much as a clue, he asks, "Is it Momma?" He knows her closeness to death. He blames himself but he knows that America killed Momma.

Momma is everyone and no one, something like a meaningless yet essential pop refrain, always repeated throughout the pages of *Nigger*. Daddy, also known in their St. Louis neighborhood as Big Pres (after Presley), is a quite literal blow, something jolting yet something profoundly serious. In the book, though, Daddy is again leaving after he has come back. That is the heterosexual vision of flux. Nothing stays.

As Dick Gregory is the second of six children, these Daddy scenes in *Nigger* are brief and front-loaded, and evoke a cacophony of children screaming and the sound

of kicking. While Daddy is always disappearing, always disintegrating, even in front of your eyes, he's ever more present. Gregory clings onto the bullshit, makes it comedic gold in the way that we understand American comedy as defense, or is it last resort? "I got picked on a lot around the neighborhood; skinniest kid on the block, the poorest, the one without a Daddy," he writes. "I guess that's when I first began to learn about humor, the power of a joke."

From the bottom to the top of the world—the top obviously being Hugh Hefner's Playboy Club—Big Pres finally reappears like a footnote after leaving his family for years. "We didn't talk very long," Gregory writes, "There wasn't very much to say." Even though they're not talking, it doesn't matter, because the men do and, most importantly, are being seen doing. At least in how we look back at that time, the fiction of a strong black leader was potent, constructing actors, not those who get acted on, those who wait for change. You don't wait, says America, you get out and get yours.

**AT** the end of the book, when Dick Gregory has three children, he loses his son to pneumonia. His name is Richard Junior. Gregory is left to explain to his kids where Richard Junior went:

"Michele, honey, where's Richard?"  
 "Richard's gone, Daddy."  
 "Gone where?"  
 "To the hospital."  
 "When will he be back?"  
 "He's not coming back, Daddy. You'll have to get another Richard."  
 "How do you know?"  
 "I looked at Mommy's face."

The kids see Mommy's face all the time, with such clarity, with such softness, with such care. I don't dare ask "Who else sees Mommy?"

Gregory now makes Mommy, his wife Lillian who just lost her kid, make the decision: between Richard Junior or

Richard. In her grieving, Gregory writes, "I knelt there and I looked at a woman's face that was so distorted it wasn't even human, a face with two holes for eyes that were filled with hate for me. She jerked and twisted and I jumped up and pinned her down on the bed and I screamed at her." Lillian chooses Richard Junior. She doesn't make Gregory's mother's mistake.

Later, instead of a non-human vision, after his wife Lillian had been jailed for a SNCC-organized voter registration drive in Selma, she's the most human vision:

I'm driving with tears in my eyes. Here's a woman who just spent eight days in jail, and she's able to sit back there, so patient and kind, and tell her kids about the different kinds of gasoline. I wish I had that kind of beauty. I wish the world was that free from malice and hate.

Whatever her name, Mommy or Momma, the different suffixes mark the figure as similarly fungible. She's at once pathetic, paralyzed and disgusting, signaled by her waiting and especially by her waiting for a cheater, a no-good, and also some light vision of universal progress, both the degrader and carrier of culture. In an atmosphere of catastrophe, maternal loss and the memorials loss produces structure a moving forward because god forbid a man suffer and not do anything about it. Gregory writes in his coda: "You didn't die a slave for nothing, Momma." In death, she is once again flesh.

Like the dedication, the last chapter in *Nigger* is a moving address to Momma and "all those Negro mothers who gave their kids the strength to go on." Dick Gregory is a player in the revolution. Part of what makes Gregory a nigger is his stamp of fatherlessness, making his mother's degradation that much more pronounced. The black woman's "strength," it turns out, is fairly criminal. Momma's absence, either a psychic one during her life or a more material one in her death, creates a pace for Gregory's impetus toward social change.

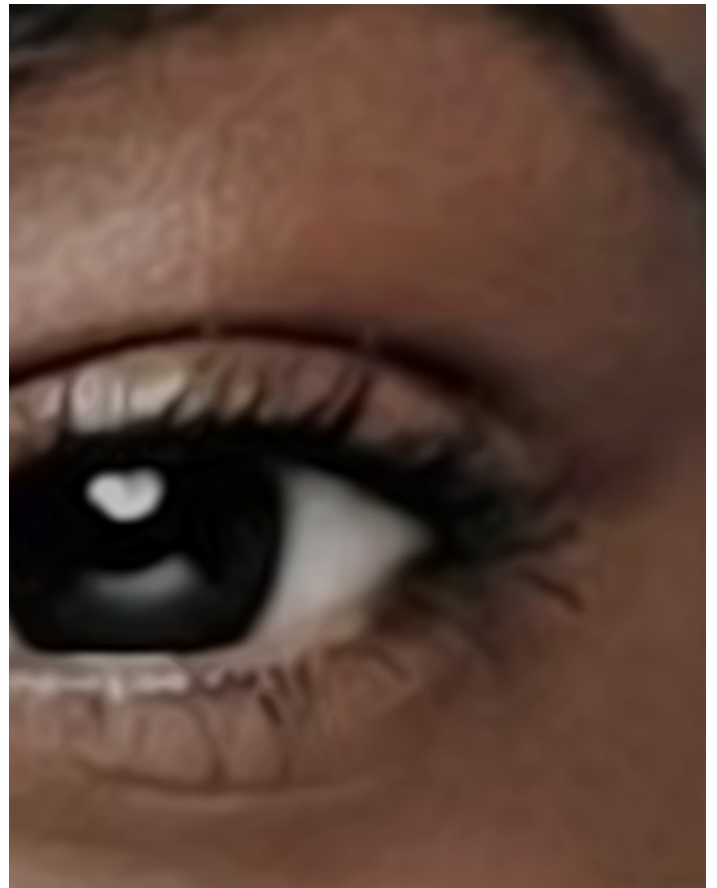
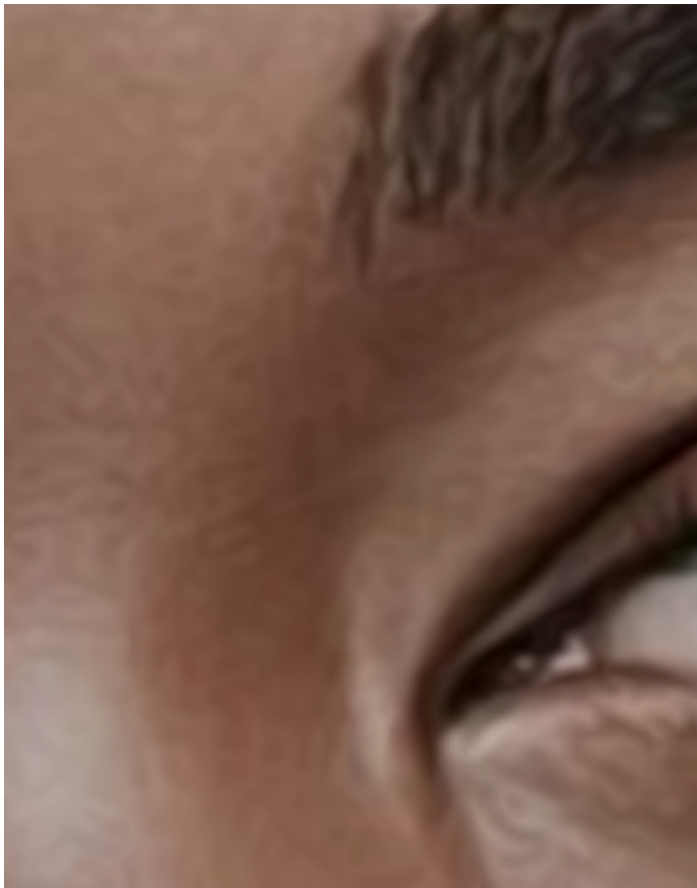
Dick Gregory is finally an American; Momma died over a hundred pages ago. **TNI**

# Coming to America

By YAHDON ISRAEL

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*On becoming African-American*



**WHILE** my father was still around, he and my mother revered all things “African.” Kente cloth covered and protected our bodies like saran wrap. My parents didn’t like Dove, Irish Spring and Lever 2000’s suggestion that soap should be white or light-pastel. Cleanliness was next to godliness and since God was Black, our soap was black too. Glade plugins, Lysol air-fresheners,

perfumes, colognes and lotions were for white people and those who wanted to be like them; we freshened our air with incense, scented our bodies with oils, and moisturized our skin with shea butter. We would have been Amish had we been white instead of black, and lived in Lancaster County instead of Bed-Stuy. But seeing that I was black and living in Bed-Stuy, Rumspringa came ear-



lier than expected.

Although all-things “African” had been exalted in my house, this was not the case for project kids at P.S. 40, nor the “best of the brightest” at P.S./I.S. 308. It was at those places where I learned that there was a world’s difference between how we’re raised, and how we grow up.

“Ugh, why are you dressed like that?”

“Because *I’m* black.”

“*I’m* black and I don’t dress like that ... is you an African booty-scratcher or something?”

“An African booty-scratcher?”

“Yeah, an African booty-scratcher. You know, Africans always scratching their asses because they’re dirty?”

“Where’d you get this from?”

“You know how on TV they always show all them ashy-ass Africans, starving and shit?”

“What channel is this?”

“Wait, you don’t have cable?”

“No, my mother—”

“Dammnn!!! You don’t wear regular clothes and you don’t have cable? You *must* be African.”

“My mother says we’re *all* African.”

These kids treated Africa like an inside-joke. All anyone would have to say is “Africa,” and everyone would click their tongues against the roof of their mouths and laugh. I would have shrugged it off had it only happened once, twice, or maybe even three times, but after months of insults stacked on my shoulders like poker chips, all bets were off. The odds were against me and it was because—to them—I was African. From then on, all things having to do with Africa had to be forgotten.

I no longer wanted to use the black soap because, like it had been suggested at school, I could no longer tell if the soap had removed dirt or put it there. I began to hate incense because the ashes discolored the carpet and shea butter became suffocating. I had already begun taking my brother’s clothes while he was asleep, placing them in my book bag the morning after, and changing into them before I got to school. The fact that my brother was 12 years older than me didn’t matter; better to reign in ill-fitted Iceberg than serve in tailor-made Tanakas. I had almost forgotten everything; I was almost regular, I was almost *Black*. And with the precision of a Grandfather clock, life had decided it was the perfect time to marry my sister to a man from Ivory Coast, West Africa.

I am generally grateful for life’s generosity, but this was one of the rare occasions where I felt life had been a little too generous. I hadn’t even become Black long enough to take my shoes off and here came this African man in his Air Max ‘95s. Strangely enough, he didn’t strike me as African. He didn’t wear dashikis, sandals, or kufis. He was draped in DKNY, Tommy Hilfiger, and Polo. I didn’t know what Prada was until I met him. He didn’t even click his tongue! He spoke a language more sophisticated than the Queen’s English: He spoke French. I wasn’t sure which “Africa” my parents or classmates had in mind but they both had it wrong.

According to my mother, he respected his elders—something we “American” kids knew nothing about. He worked hard—another virtue which “eluded” us. And

most importantly, he was *really* African—something we hadn't been for a long time. Although my family loved him—my mother especially—I had missed the boat. I was already deep into hating Africa and I could not look back now. I was still in the process of forgetting, and though I didn't want any reminders, I kept getting them every time he visited.

“Who's that? Is that my son-in-law?!”

“Yes Ma, it's me. I brought you more shea butter and black soap.”

“Thank you! I can't tell you where it all goes.”

I hid the tubs of shea butter and black soap under the sink behind shopping bags, along with incomplete homework packages, letters from teachers *about* these incomplete homework packages, and several attempts at forged notes promising something would be done about it. But no matter how hard I worked to forget what I was hiding Soap under the sink, *his* presence was something I always had to confront.

But except for the few gestures of respect and deference to my parents though, he didn't talk much. When I'd go to the Bronx to visit my sister on weekends, he was rarely there—and when he was, he'd slip between French and English like a pillow in its case, flipping it at whim to let us know that he wasn't to be slept on. He'd speak French to sugarcoat the shit he thought; flip to English to agree with our plain-vanilla thoughts; then flip *back* to French to remind himself that he didn't like vanilla. My sister caught on and learned to speak French—picking up teeth-sucking as part of her education—to show him that shit had not been as sweet as his French suggested. When he found out that she learned French, he flipped

the whole mattress on her and spoke another language that he and probably eight other people in his family understood.

There had been a disagreement between them while I was there one weekend. They shouted at their highest volumes to each other in French. I couldn't understand anything being spoken, but I understood everything being said. It wasn't a matter of following the ball; it was about knowing the players. I knew that my sister was smarter than her husband; I also knew that she knew this. But I also knew that her husband thought little of women, and nothing of their intelligence. Yet, here he was losing a shouting match on his home court. He was embarrassed.

After seeing how the French language had betrayed him, a bittersweet subtlety slipped from his lips like licorice. In plain-vanilla English he said, “This is exactly why I shouldn't have married a *black* girl.”

“Whatchu just say?!”

“You heard me! I was told to stay away from you black American girls because you're all niggers and it's true!”

“Ok, so we're the niggers?! We're the niggers, but *you* left Ivory Coast to come *here*? We're the niggers, but *you* wanted to marry *me*? We're the niggers, but *you* smile all up in *my* mother's face, talking about Africa when *you* could care less about it. I don't know what it is about y'all niggas thinking y'all are better than us but you're gonna learn real soon about who's the nigger here—and it's not just us.”

There was nothing else for my sister's husband to do besides storm into the bedroom, grab his jacket and bushwack out of the house, swinging the front door so hard behind him, the bell in the peephole chimed. I looked at my sister, who refused to look back at me. She went into her bedroom. I turned my eyes back to the television. Beneath the laugh tracks on *Martin*, I could hear my sister murmuring to herself like a Vietnam War veteran: "I'm the nigger? Nigga must be bugged. No, *you* the nigger, nigga."

**NIGGA** was major a part of my American curriculum. A *nigger* was something black people as Kings and Queens of the largest and most beautiful continent—Africa—never were. A *nigger* was something which only existed because Europeans wanted to possess what didn't belong to them: the land, the gold, the resources, and bodies of Africa. A *nigger* was something to be possessed; something to be owned. This is why Europeans took liberty in kidnapping, transporting, buying, selling, renaming, whipping, raping, killing, maiming and castrating niggers: *niggers* belonged to *them*. Everything the *nigger* did was for *them*; everything the *nigger* thought was for *them*. Everything the *nigger* was—the *nigger* was for *them*. This *them*, of course, was white people. Since this society belonged to *them*, deciding *when* to be a *nigger* was the perennial question for black people in America. The fact that our survival rested on this uncompromising fact is why my mother and father lost sleep trying to keep the world a safe distance from us. They understood this question because they had to answer to it their whole lives and didn't want us to.

As admirable as it may have been for my parents to protect us from the world, its whiteness, and its incessant need to make *niggers* of us all; this admiration was swift-

ly undermined by the fact that depended on the white world for State "benefits"—Welfare, Section-8, Medicaid, and public schools. No matter how hard my mother and father resisted this truth, it became something I had to confront it. If *we* were Kings and Queens, why were we on *their* welfare—instead of them on ours? No amount of Kente cloth had prepared me for these conundrums and each time I left the house I felt stripped, naked. I had been sent into the world alone and it was only a matter of time before I started to think that the white world's estimation of us was true. My attending public school; my disgust with Africa; my hiding the Shea Butter and Black soap; my stealing my brother's clothes; my private use of profanity and the word "nigga" was proof of this. I wanted to believe what my parents had taught me about the world—what kid doesn't? But I couldn't.

I can see now why my father left. There was nothing for him to really do: Our rent and utilities were paid by Section-8; our food was paid for by Welfare; our health was secured by Medicaid; and now, even our education was out of his hands. These benefits were depended him being decrepit, destitute and departed. Everything we enjoyed from the State came through my mother, not him: it was only *her* name that could be on the lease; it was only to *her* those food-stamp booklets were given; it was only *her* who had the power to sign off on our immunization records; it was only *her* who could sign us in and out of school; and finally, it was only *her* we listened to. He tried to convince her we didn't need *their* money and benefits. But we did.

There was no amount of oils, incense, or music he could sell that would provide what the State provided. That was the hard-truth. My mother knew; I knew; my two little sisters—young as they were—knew; Heaven knew; everyone seemed to know this, except for him. None of us liked it, but we understood. He couldn't—it all became too much for him. And when violence—his last refuge of control—didn't work, there really became



nothing left for him to do but leave. All of these things led me to cling desperately to the word, “nigga.” It was the only word that repudiated my parents’ romanticisms and reckoned with my reality. It also gave me insight into what the other kids’ at school were going through and connected me to them—“So *this* is what being a nigga feels like.” It was watching how black people used this word that I learned the difference between being the world’s *nigger* and your own.

## “My mother says we’re all African.”

*Nigga* did not only describe the lives loathed; it also described the lives loved. Far too often, these lives—loved or hated—were a part of the same life, and no one using that word could say anything about someone else that they were unwilling to say about themselves. This is what I realized the more I used it. *Nigga* could not fly from your lips if you were not implicated when it landed. People used *nigga* because that’s how they understood themselves. A *nigga* was anyone critiquing a world they were a part of.

“Them little niggas keep making all this noise outside, Imma hurt one of them. I got work in the morning.”

“Oh, nigga please—those kids ain’t

bothering you. Just last week your loud, drunk ass was outside howling like a damn werewolf and ain’t no one said nothin’ to you.”

In the tone, tenor and tempo of conversations overheard, nothing about the use of the word *nigga* was really about other people; it was really about the self. That word was an afterthought for the people I grew up around; not a premeditation. My use of the word became so fused with my personality I barely noticed it was there. What I began to notice was its so-called absence. This “absence” presented itself anytime I found myself around white kids who not only wanted to say the word, but wanted me to give them permission. I had come to understand that a *nigga* was any and every one, so the fact that I was being asked permission meant that some people were, and other people weren’t. This was revelatory.

“Why are you asking me permission to say ‘nigga’? You wouldn’t ask me permission to say pancakes.”

“Well it’s different, Yahdon. When you say it, everyone laughs and thinks it’s cool. But when I say it, everyone thinks I’m racist—which I’m not. I mean, look at us.”

“What, nigga?”

“Like, I fucking hate racists bro.”

“Ok. What does that have to do with you wanting my permission? If you really want to say it, just say it.”

“No, bro. Because if I say it, and

I don't have your permission  
that makes me racist and I fucking  
hate racists."

"And so, what? You think you're going  
to say 'nigga' and then drop my name  
like it's a password? Nah, nigga."

"That's fucked up."

"Whatever nigga."

My white friends made a lot of assumptions about the nature of our relationships. There was the assumption that I was friends with them because they weren't racist. Racists were evil, and my being their friend was a testament that I didn't see them as evil, but as good. There was the assumption that they were good because they were friends with me. After all, an evil white person would never be friends with a black person no matter how hard the black person tried to prove that they were different from the others. And there was the assumption that I was different from "the others"—the *bad niggers*: I didn't blame white people for all of my problems; I took responsibility for my actions; I worked hard. I was different because I had made it to where they were: their classrooms; their houses; their dinner tables; their parties; I was different. Since I was different, so were they. They were different from *evil white people* because they never owned slaves, didn't believe in race, and didn't see skin color. Only if *they*—the *bad niggers* and the *evil white people*—were more like *us*—good people—everything would be different. From these assumptions, I learned a lot more about my white friends than they learned about me.

I learned that my white friends saw themselves as living in a world that, apparently, didn't live within them. My white friends thought this country's history impli-

cated everyone else, except them. My white friends were "exceptional;" my white friends were "special;" my white friends were "better." Because they were "better," they assumed our friendship made me better too. They couldn't have been more wrong—not just about me, but about themselves. Long before I met *them*, I met people just *like* them—and they were not white; they were black.

Black people were the first people I had ever heard using the word *nigga*. The difference was black people had accepted its responsibility. They knew what the word described—its history and implications and were tied to it. Regardless of what they already knew about themselves privately, they knew that in public they were *niggers*. But they also knew that they needed jobs, and money, and food, and shelter, and family and love—they knew they needed to survive. Guilt was a luxury they couldn't afford, and survival was nothing to be ashamed of. Even when there was a survivor's guilt, it had to do with the deep understanding that living exacts incessant culpability. *Niggas* knew what they did—or had to do—to get where they wanted to be, but there was no judgment. A *nigga had do what a nigga had to do*. Watching the black people in my neighborhood, I learned that possession was not a matter of asking; it was a matter of taking. And taking meant that, whether you knew the weight of your actions or not, you were going to have to deal with the consequences. What we called that price was your life.

What my white friends were really asking was permission to own me, but they didn't want the responsibility that came with ownership. They wanted was ownership without the price. *They* wanted to say the word *nigga* without being racist. This is what I was for. But my permission had nothing to do with if I saw them as good or bad; it had everything to do with them proving to themselves what they already thought: that *they* were good white people. A racist white person would've just called me a *nigger* without asking. They were asking, and in their minds asking was courageous.

In my mind, asking was cowardice. No one I'd ever seen using *nigga* had ever asked for permission. They didn't need it. They were *niggas*—and for better or worse, they understood that. These white kids didn't, which is why I would never give them permission to say it. *They* wanted to call someone a *nigga* and instead of paying the price, they wanted me to cover the bill. When it was clear that they wouldn't get my permission; they no longer accepted my use and wanted me to stop saying the word as well: "Well if I can't say it, you shouldn't be able to either." Both requests were denied. I had already lost too much being someone else's nigger before and I'd be damned if I was going to let it happen again.

## *If we were Kings and Queens, why were we on their welfare—instead of them on ours?*

In using that word I was admitting that theirs was my world too. I was admitting I wasn't any different from those *bad niggers*. These white kids didn't want to hear that. When I refused them permission I became uncontrollable; arrogant; uncivilized; ungrateful; just short of eloquent; a heathen; a savage; disappointing;

untrustworthy; threatening; dangerous; I became all of the things they'd never considered themselves and everything I already knew I was: a *bad nigger*—just like my sister, Sarah.

While Sarah and I didn't share the same father—which made for a completely different adolescent crucible in most instances—we were closer in condition because we shared the same mother. Sarah was 17 when she married her husband. He, being six years older, having money, and speaking another language, thought this was enough to treat my sister less like a wife and more like his daughter. Nothing could be done about the difference in age, and he always got Sarah what she wanted when she asked. But he never had any intention of teaching her his language, French. That would have made them equal and he didn't want equality; he wanted control.

As long as she stayed in her place, the impromptu trips to 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue, the cars and credit cards were unlimited. But everything maxes out eventually. When her husband invited people over to the crib and they only spoke French, she realized she was being pampered, pacified and pedestaled for a reason. By not teaching her French, Sarah's husband made sure he got what he paid for: an American wife who would sit pretty, smile and do what she was told without talking back. Even if she wanted to resist what was happening, she could only do it in her language, never in his.

With her requests for French lessons denied, Sarah decided that she'd learn by herself. Her husband's teenage sister had just moved in with them from the Ivory Coast. She came for the education and was trying to learn English at the same time Sarah was trying to learn French. And in the same ways Sarah was being controlled by not being taught French, Sarah's sister-in-law was being controlled by not being taught English. The only difference was Sarah's husband didn't actually know English well enough to teach it to his sister—so he asked Sarah to teach her. I'm sure what this really meant for Sarah elud-



ed him. But many things did.

I'm sure Sarah's sitting quietly so she could internalize the attitudes and dispositions of foreign phrases eluded him. I'm sure Sarah's willingness to withstand his ridicule of her mispronunciations in public so she could fix them privately eluded him. I'm sure Sarah's secret pact with his little sister to help her grasp American grammar if she reciprocated in helping her acquire an authentic French accent eluded him. I'm sure the laughter from Sarah and his little sister's sessions—because they finally understood each other's language for the first time—eluded him. What didn't elude him was Sarah's gradual emancipation.

Eventually he noticed how Sarah was not only correcting his little sister's English but correcting his French now, too. He noticed how Sarah had more to talk about in his language with his friends and family than he did. He noticed the compliments: "You should be proud of your wife for learning French on her own;" "You never told us your wife was this smart;" "you never told us your wife was funny." There were a lot of things he couldn't tell because there were a lot of things he didn't know. His insecurity forced him deeper within himself. He stopped speaking French around Sarah and began speaking Mandigo, his other language. As quickly as he had abandoned French, Sarah was discovering Mandigo. There was no language he could hide behind where Sarah couldn't find him. Every time she found him, she found herself. Her self-discovery was rapidly changing the terms of their marriage. She was coming to understand that he did not love her and she did not love him—probably never did and, ultimately, never would. This, I assume, is what they were arguing about that night.

I finally understood why he never spoke much: He didn't want to be found out. He liked that my mother's romanticism for his Africanness had transformed him from beast to beauty. What he didn't know was my mother's rosy picture had nothing to do with him, and much

less to do with Sarah. My mother's African pride was her last refuge of protection from the same world he'd been trying so hard to acclimate himself to, the same world that had taken her husband and my father. Every step he took to be a part of this world was a step away from my mother's persuading Sarah to stay with him. This invested Sarah with enough morale to disenchant the fairytale. With nowhere left to hide, he was exposed. He really thought he could whip Sarah back into shape with the threat of being a *bad nigger*, not yet realizing that this was not Sarah's fear, but his. Being a *bad nigger* was the very thing which allowed Sarah to marry him in first place. Alas, he refused to accept this. It probably never crossed his mind.

He probably took Sarah as a challenge and thought his money, his age and his language were going to change her. He probably thought he was going to prove that what happened not so long ago to us was not going to happen to him. After all, it wasn't *his* family which was brought over on cargo ships. *His* family was flown in through JFK. This, along with everything else, was to prove that he was *no one's* nigger. By making Sarah *his* nigger, he was going to prove that he too knew the American way of doing things better than us. What he underestimated was the painful truth about "his language:" He learned his the same way we learned ours—by being *someone's* nigger.

Maybe if he had accepted these things and taught her, he would have spared himself the embarrassment of being owned in his own language. Maybe if he had accepted these things, he would have learned that there were things about this world, this country, America, that couldn't be changed by anyone alone. Not even him. He would have learned that no amount of money, languages spoken, good deeds, or maturity was going to spare him the fate of being *someone's* nigger. Maybe then he would've realized that there was a world's difference between being *someone else's* and being his *own*. I wonder if he learned by the time Sarah divorced him. **TNI**

# Daddy O

By MATTHEW LAWRENCE

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*Gay porn works out the complexities of filiation and paternity the hardcore way*



I bought a t-shirt last year at a book fair. Navy blue with cream colored text, the fan-made tee is emblazoned in a vertical, sans serif font with the words KANSAS

CITY TRUCKING CO. It's one of my favorite articles of clothing. It's non-descript enough that I can wear it anywhere, though those in the know instantly recognize

the title of Joe Gage's 1976 porn film. I'm like a teenager branded with the name of my favorite obscure band, and the smiles I get (nearly all from men over fifty) feel like the knowing glances exchanged by two music nerds passing in the street.

Joe Gage is the father, or I guess by now the grandfather, of intergenerational gay porn. At seventy-one years old, he still pumps out old-timey movies that buck nearly all recent adult industry trends. He shoots feature-length films, coaches performers on their lines, and inserts little homages to obscure mainstream films of yesteryear. The performers always use condoms, an increasingly rare stance in the floundering, chaotic realm of post-PrEP pornography. Gage isn't afraid to push buttons, and he's not afraid to stick to his guns.

His most recent epic is a three-hour adventure called *Dad Out West*. It's the fourth entry in a series of films about a father played by hunky, blue-eyed Allen Silver. In gay zoological parlance, the fifty-three year old Silver lies somewhere between an otter (lean, furry) and a polar bear (the fur is white). In each film—previous titles include *Dad Takes A Fishing Trip*, *Dad Goes To College*, and *Dad Gets Into Trouble*—Silver has about three sex scenes with a variety of men, nearly all of whom are a generation or so younger than he is.

These films feature an element of real cinematic drama, which is another rarity in commercial porn these days. Scenes build over time. Gage's dads and sons don't have sex with one another, because that would be crossing a line. But the dads will jerk off while watching the sons bottom for surrogate authority figures, holding the son's head in place while the younger man fellates a third party, for instance. When an uncle fucks his nephew it's made very clear in the dialogue that they're only related by marriage and there's no blood relationship between the two. Though flirting with the incest taboo is what animates Gage's output, actually breaking it would be going too far.

Characters in Gage films are rarely gay in whichever sense of gay we generally think of. They aren't in long-term relationships with other men, they don't date one another, and there are never visual signifiers to indicate that they might self-identify that way. It might be reactionary or it might be revolutionary; in either case, it's out of time. Gage characters are butch archetypes who are emotionally secure enough that the physical rewards of gay sex are wholly compatible with homosocial friendships and an otherwise heteronormative blue collar lifestyle.

These men also exist in real life. A visit to any cruising park, bathhouse, rest stop, or adult video store will reveal a whole world of men for whom the closet is not even a consideration, let alone an obstacle. In college, I'd visit a park I had read about on the internet, one where men in cars pulled up to other men in cars and arranged to sneak off to the woods together or, if one of them lived nearby, to go home together. The men I met in the park were always considerably older, despite the built-in awkwardness. I never quite got the hang of cruising etiquette, and at this particular park the excitement of getting caught was mitigated substantially by the risk of having your car towed if you were in the woods too long. Still, it was all fun enough that I kept going back.

**IN** early 2009, I launched a Tumblr to pass the time while working a mind-numbing data entry job. I called it Naked Pictures of Your Dad, a riff on a song called "Naked Pictures of Your Mother" by the Detroit band Electric Six. The site's content varied over the course of its six-year run, but generally it mixed vintage erotica with contemporary men's fashion, homoerotic art, photos of dreamy soccer players, and occasionally some of my own photography. There was a lot of nudity and I'd guess that only about fifteen to twenty percent of it was comprised of commercial porn (a blend of gay and straight still pho-



tos.) The site had a following of just over thirty thousand followers towards the end, but Tumblr abruptly deleted my account in June over a spurious copyright infringement claim. (They've been shutting down adult blogs more often, and it's generally assumed this is related to the company's 2013 takeover by Yahoo. They never replied to my request for an explanation.)

## ***Porn is escapism, a chance for even the most promiscuous people to live out situations that are too impractical or consequential to reach in real life***

I used to frequently hear from men who stumbled upon the site after searching some combination of the words “naked,” “pictures,” and “dad.” I’ve never been good with faces, but these strangers helped me identify vintage porn and physique models like Helmut Reidmeier, Sean Gallard, and Paul Barresi. We bonded over our fondness for the young Paul Newman and the older Sean Connery. Occasionally they would send me NSFW photos and, on more than one occasion, adult men would confide an unsolicited fantasy about a father, an older cousin, or an uncle.

Whenever that happened I always found myself at a loss for what to say. I had nothing beyond the obvious courtesies. (“Thank you for telling me your story, that sounds really hot.”) I’ve never entertained a fantasy about my own father, in the same way that I’ve never found myself turned on by a real-life boss, doctor, FedEx delivery guy or plumber. Real life just isn’t very porny sometimes, which is the whole reason that porn works.

But maybe the point isn’t for me to relate to these guys. Maybe reality isn’t the point at all. Without the means to act on their urges or express them publicly, maybe they’re just looking to share a fantasy that’s no more real than two porn stars pretending to be suddenly related via marriage to a woman that never appears on screen. So in that sense, there’s not a whole lot of difference between the porn stepdad who goes on a camping trip with his totally-not-blood relative and the demanding teacher who makes the misbehaving student stay after class for detention. But if that’s the case, why are intergenerational porn scenes so hot right now?

Big, mainstream companies like Men.com and the newer Icon Male are both flooded with variations on the same theme. The two most popular scenes at Men.com (according to their home page) are *My New Stepdad Is A Pervert* and *Son Swap*. (*My Two Daddies* and the construction-themed *Daddy’s Workplace* aren’t too far behind). At Icon Male, Dirk Caber stars in *Daddy’s Big Boy*, while Adam Russo appears in both *The Stepfather* and *My Son’s Best Friend*. (There’s also a series there called *His Daughter’s Boyfriend*, presumably for variety.) It’s all the same scene, every time, and I’m clearly not alone in enjoying a vast majority of it.

**KANSAS** *City Trucking Co.* was the first in a trilogy of Joe Gage features that also includes *El Paso Wrecking Corp.* and *LA Tool & Die*. He took a break

towards the end of the last millennium, but now he is back, cranking out movies as quickly as he ever has.

One of the more enjoyable parts of following Gage's career is the fact that his films have gotten progressively more ridiculous over time. I remember renting *Tulsa County Line* when I was in college. It's a mildly experimental collection of unrelated sex scenes strung together by following two Oklahoma park rangers on patrol. There's sex in a men's room, sex in a doctor's office, and sex in a log cabin. (There's also a really peculiar intergenerational jerkoff scene involving early webcam technology.) In one scene, a forty-ish Fish & Game deputy played by Chad Johnson stumbles upon a cabin full of college-aged boys that have just discovered someone's porn stash. The film, and especially the bodies of the performers, stood in stark contrast to the other porn I was renting at the time, a mix of plotless jerkoff scenes with barely legal skaters and, at the other end of the spectrum, the sumptuous (and equally youth-oriented) epics of the late Jean-Michel Cadinot.

*Tulsa County Line* was 2002. Flash forward a few years and behold Joe Gage's *Sex Files*, an anthology series now in its eighteenth installment. With titles like *Doctors and Dads*, *The Night Before The Wedding*, and *Divorced Men's Support Group*, the series straddles the border between real-life fantasy and sex-mad delusion. Hypothetically feasible men's room hookups and dalliances in the forest have given way to bukkake bachelor parties, cop orgies that include bail bondsmen and court reporters, and complicated group exams that manage to combine family, medicine, and the military. In *Runaway Sons*, the most recent installment, it's an overeager corrections officer who introduces dad to the joys of watching his son bottom.

**A** few years ago, I was hired by a hookup site to

guest-edit their blog while their regular guy went on vacation. That eventually turned into a weekly freelance gig, one where I got paid to review porn scenes and interview performers about their work and their lives. I had no idea how much dad-son porn existed in the world, even though I was well-placed to have encountered much of it already thanks to my Tumblr.

Max Sargent was the subject of my final interview over at that hookup site. Like many older porn performers he has a day job, one that some might find incompatible with his adult work. He entered the porn industry via Mike Gaité, a younger porn actor that he was dating. I recently spoke to Sargent again, as someone who might understand the dad porn phenomenon from the inside. "There's a certain titillation in doing things that you're not allowed to do," he says.

Joe Gage plays off of the real-life tensions that actors can bring to the set. In *Dad Out West*, Sargent plays dirty uncle to Mike Gaité, his real-life ex. "There's a strict line between fantasy and reality," Sargent says. "And rules will be broken."

I ask Sargent whether he has the experience I had with my Tumblr, where fans will share sometimes excessive feelings about their own father figures. "Several guys on Twitter have talked about their crushes on teachers," he says, "and when they do I sort of slip into character. I've had guys that I've been with actually talk about liking their uncles. Or cousins. I'm thinking of someone specifically who was referring to these great situations that had happened to him. He wasn't coerced, it seemed like a very natural thing."

There's a lot of displaced parental fantasy in straight porn, too, lest you think that gay men are any more deviant than anyone else. Occasionally there's a sleazy stepfather, but the incest taboo is a strong one. More often than not in porn it's a mother and daughter who for some reason find themselves having sex with the same man, generally a new boyfriend for one or the other of them.

There's also at least one site dedicated to white fathers that are forced to watch their daughters having sex with black men, a more heteronormative and racist take on the Gage formula. On the other hand, I've watched (and really enjoyed) scenes where a young man takes his girlfriend home to meet dad and finds himself as the unexpected intruder in a surprise three-way.

Porn is escapism, a chance for even the most promiscuous people to vicariously live out situations and physical positions that are too impractical, too consequential, or too unattainable to reach in real life. (That's why the very different condom debates in gay and straight porn are argued so passionately from all sides.) Moral arguments about plotlines won't get anyone very far.

Dad porn is a phase. A few years ago the Peters Twins and the Visconti Triplets were all the rage, so it makes sense that intergenerational family outings would come next (if only for the fact that they're easier to cast). Facial hair and body hair have also made a big comeback, and performers like Silver, Caber, and Russo all have varying degrees of facial scruff and chest hair. When Mackenzie Pearson published her article this spring about girls going wild for Dadbod, she was not talking about the kind found in gay porn. Still, older men's bodies have since become a part of the national discussion. ("The body all men should strive for," declared a *BuzzFeed* headline in April. "A sexist atrocity," *Time* said in May, though that didn't stop the *New York Times* from asking readers to "Show Us Your Dad Bod" in June. And so on.)

*Dad Out West* introduced a new character to the narrative, a grandfather played by Scott Reynolds, a man with a walrus moustache and the sort of body we're not accustomed to seeing on men over fifty. In one promotional still, Reynolds and Silver are photographed from below against a Southern California desert landscape. They stand slightly apart from one another, urinating together in the direction of the camera.

A nine-year veteran of the porn industry, Silver says that Gage adapted his Dad character to fit the performer's own personality. "Because I love the daddy-boy archetype in my own life," Silver says, "and he had to make this character be kind of a nice guy. There's nothing mean-spirited or abusive about him, but these amazing situations keep presenting themselves to him."

"If it were literally presented as incest then no, I wouldn't be interested. But that's not really the story there. I love a power and surrender situation, where you're assuming power over someone with their consent. I know I can sound like a hippie, but if you've ever experienced that side, it feels wonderful."

I asked if there was any kind of negative blowback from presenting the incest fantasy. "It's a fantasy," says Silver. "And I think people get that. The negative feedback I get is mostly from people who are basically ageist and think I'm over the hill and shouldn't be out there."

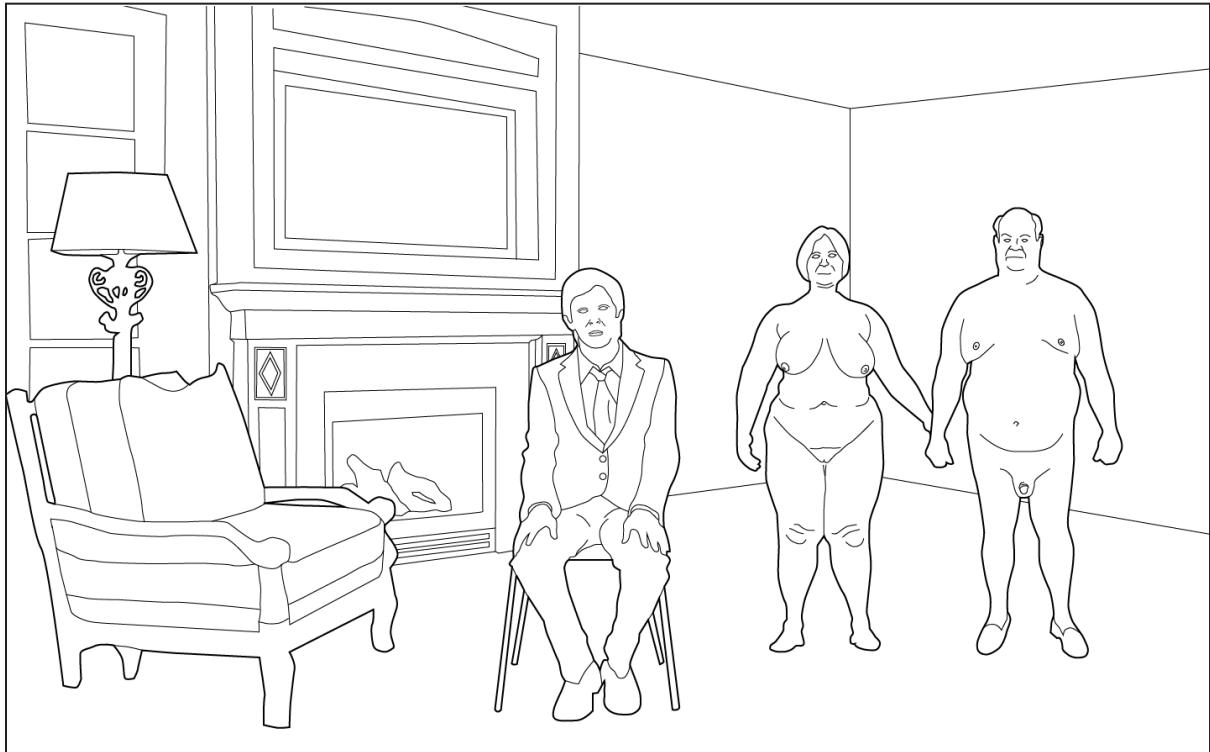
I can only imagine the harsh comments that Reynolds might expect, but Silver loves the idea of Pops, the grandfather, being incorporated into the story. "It's three generations now, and there's a fantastic idea that this is a family lineage. There's nothing coercive, this is just what this family does. And it's a little kooky, but he's a cool old coot. I've never seen anything like that before in a movie."

My own dad and I have never had a conversation about porn, especially about the kind of porn that I like, and I'm sure we both prefer it that way. I don't think he knows that I wrote for a hookup site, or that I had a dirty Tumblr for six years. He probably doesn't know that I've always been attracted to older strangers, ones who don't look anything like him but who aren't afraid to call me son, anyway. Porn like this allows us to explore our fantasies without any physical or emotional hazards getting in the way. By placing the figure of the father at its center, dad porn displaces his power over our fantasies and allows the son to finally grow up. **TNI**

# Oculus Rex

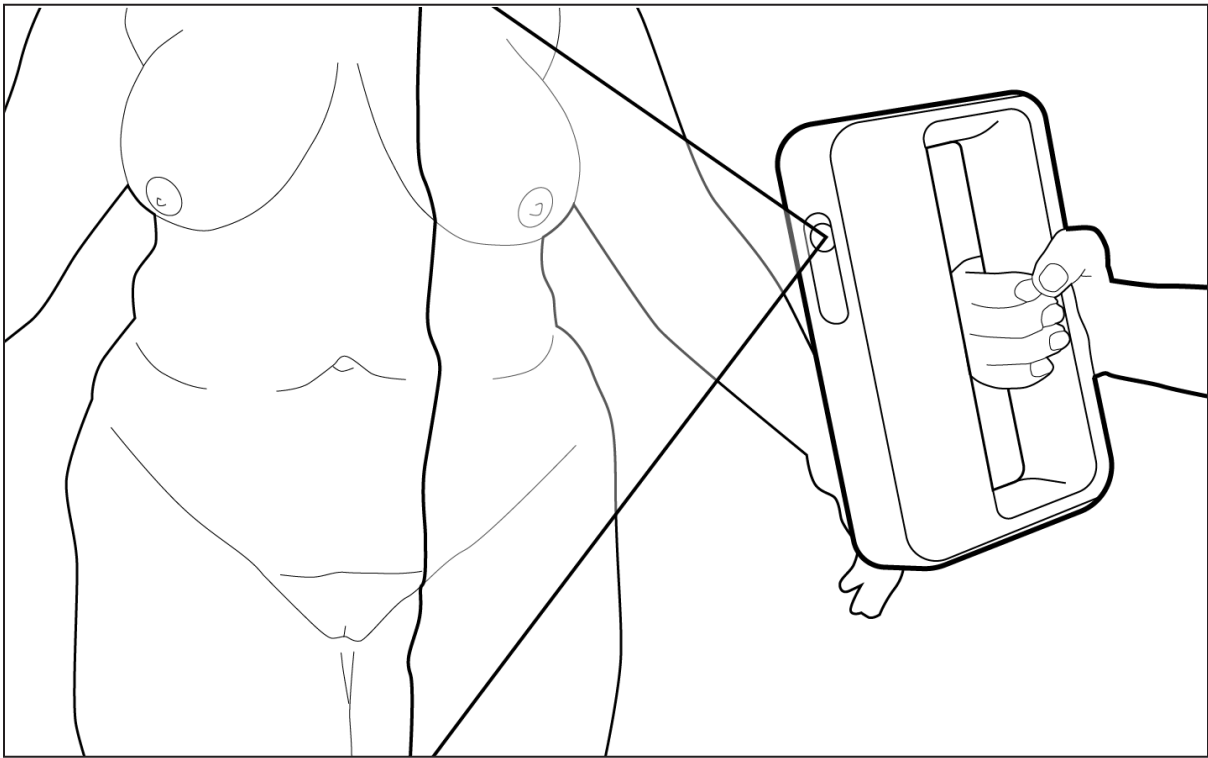
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By SAM LAVIGNE  
*with illustrations by* DAVID TRACY

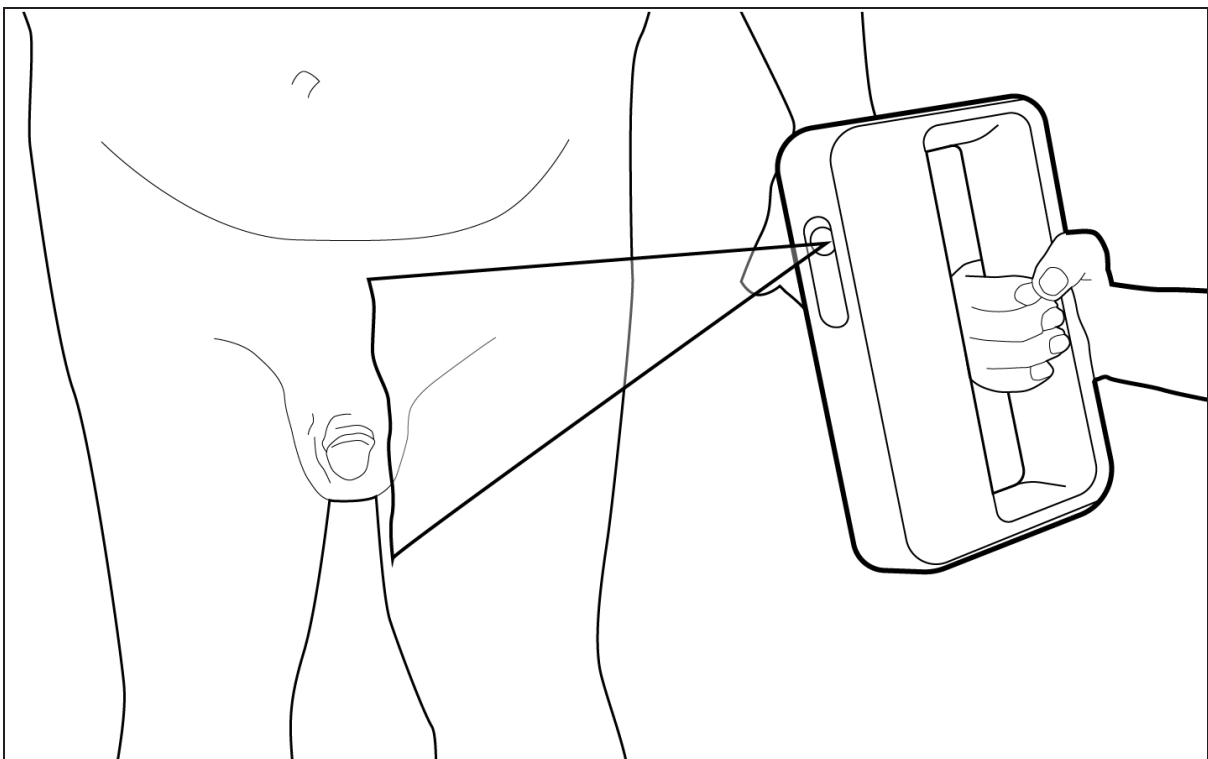


*Figure 1: The family*





*Figure2: 3D scanning of the mother.*



*Figure 3: 3D scanning of the father.*

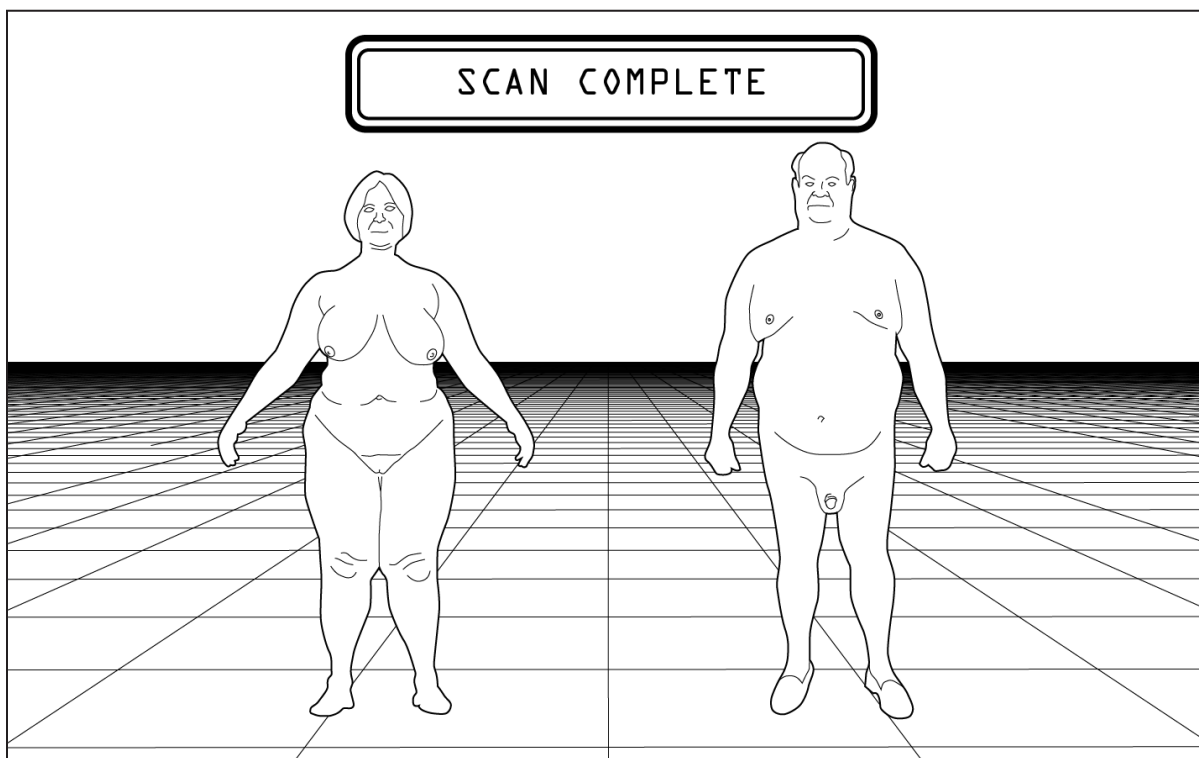


Figure 4: The mother and father are captured in virtual space.

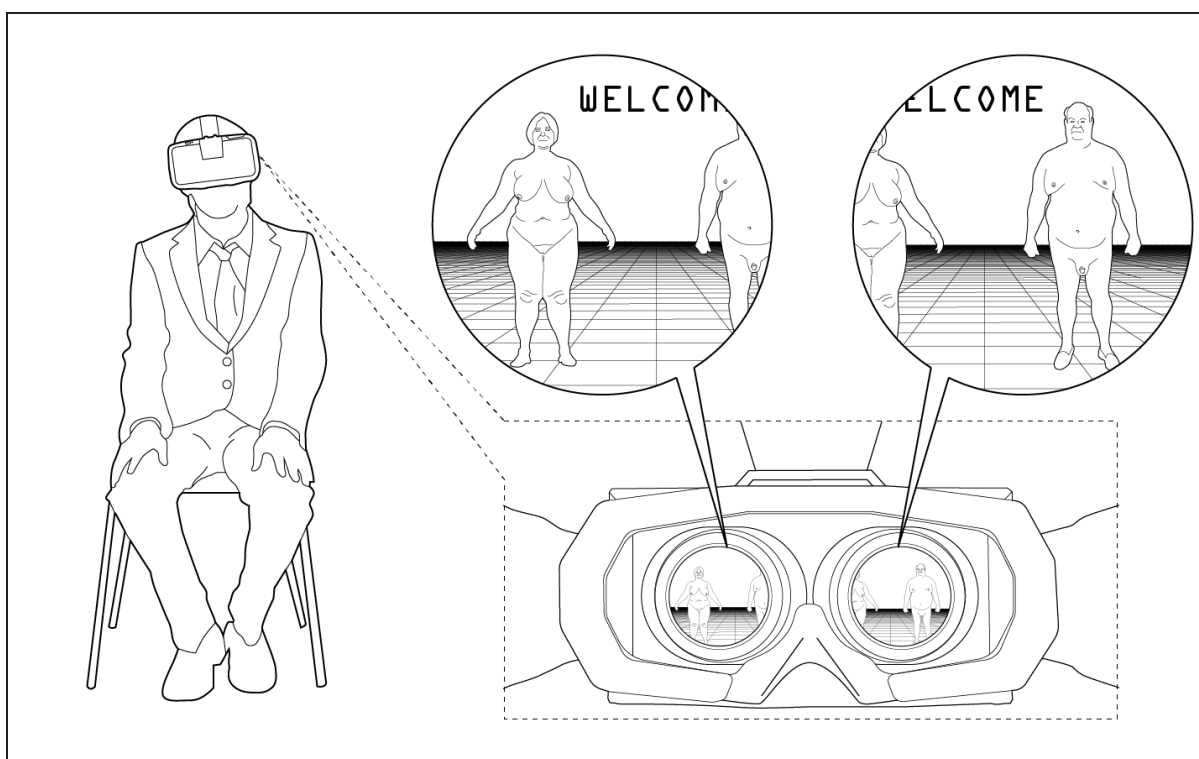
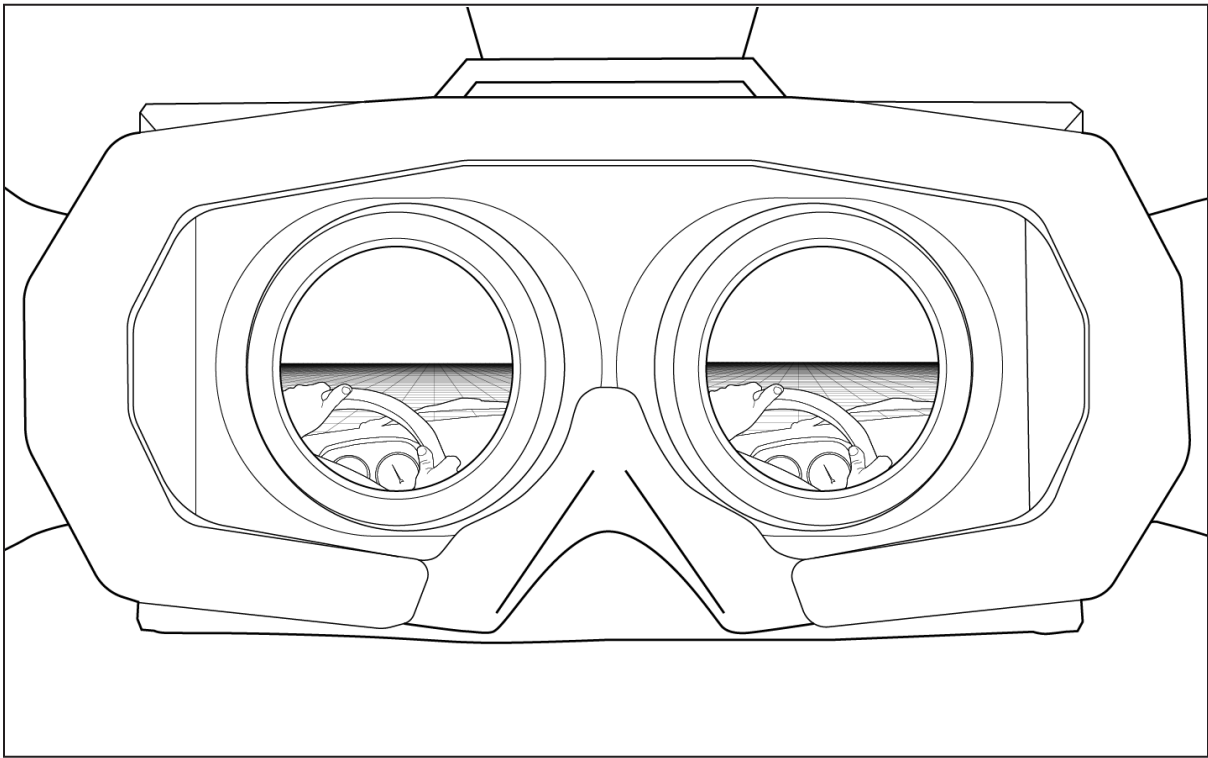
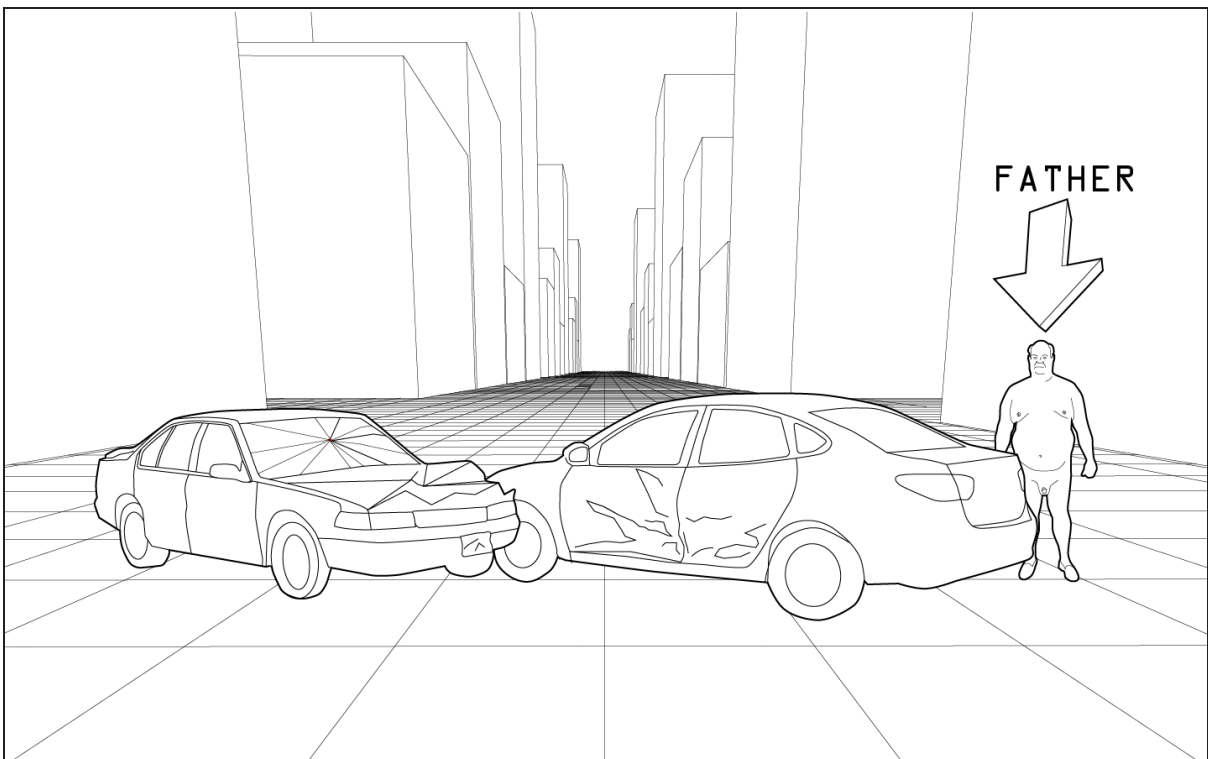


Figure 5: The user enters Oculus Oedipus.



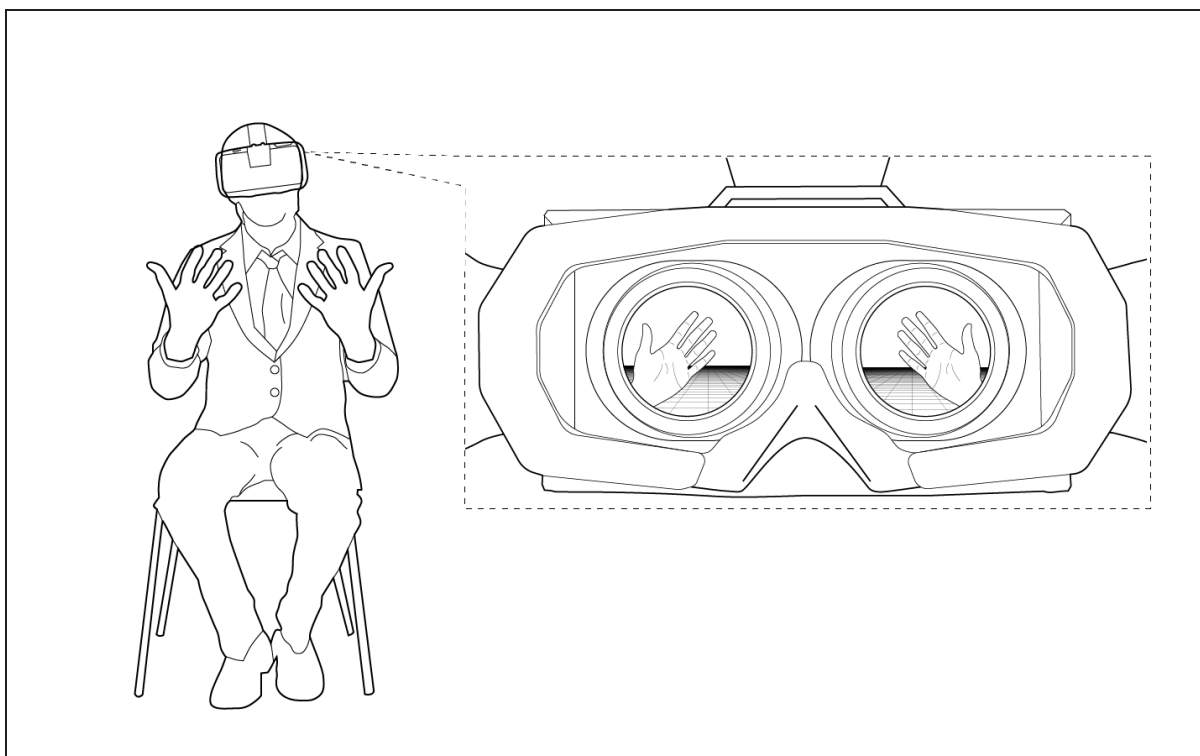
*Figure 6: "I'm really looking forward to this experience!"*



*Figure 7: A conflict on the road.*

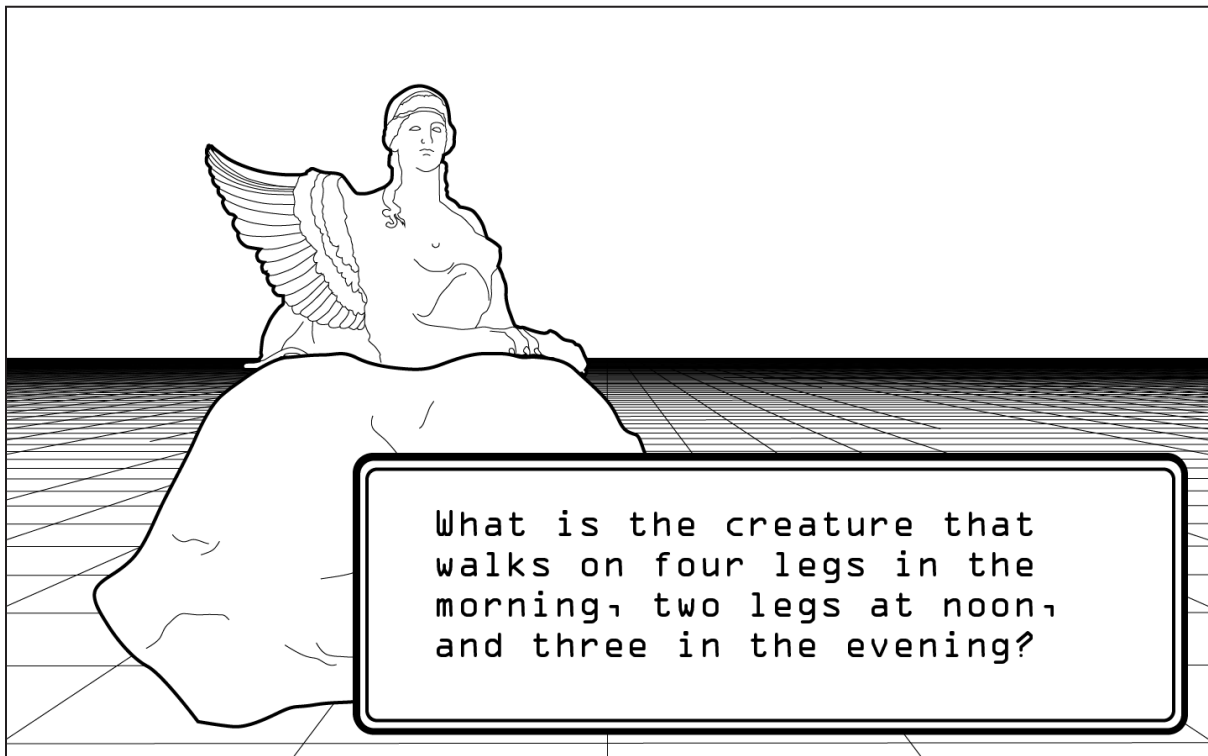


*Figure 8: The user murders the virtual father.*

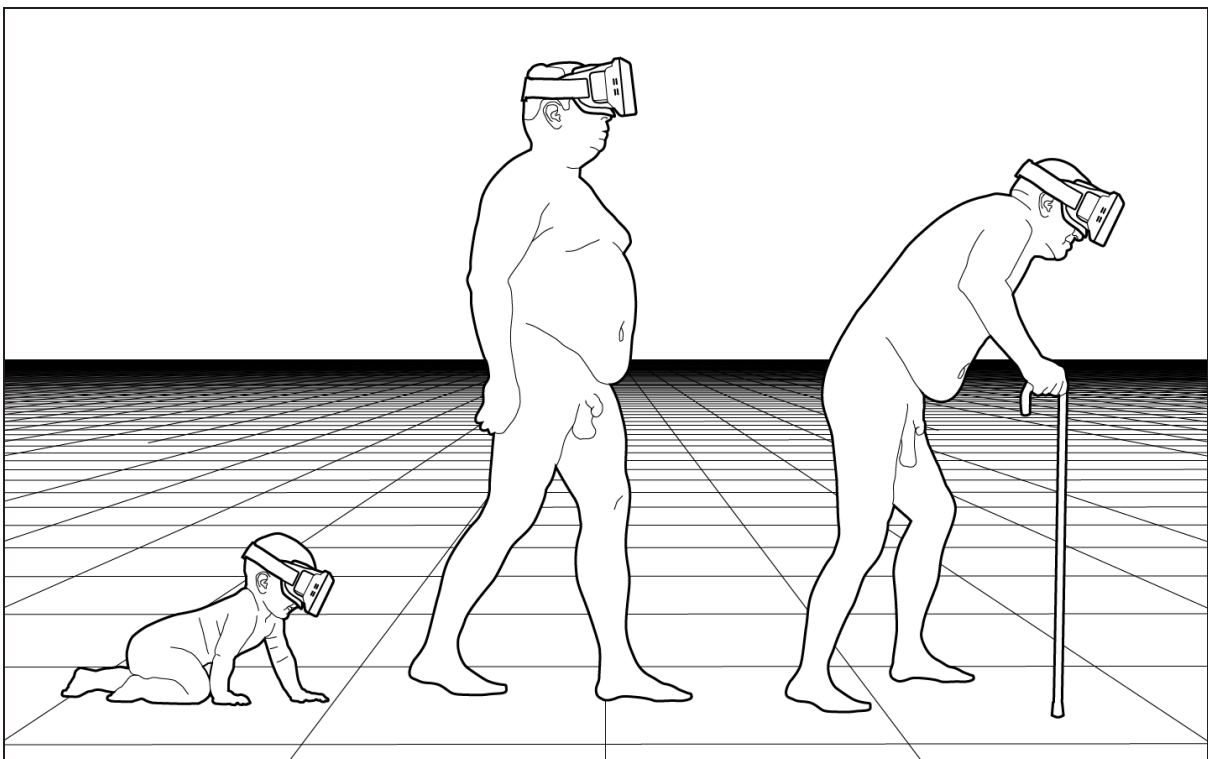


*Figure 9: The user reflects on his experience thus far.*

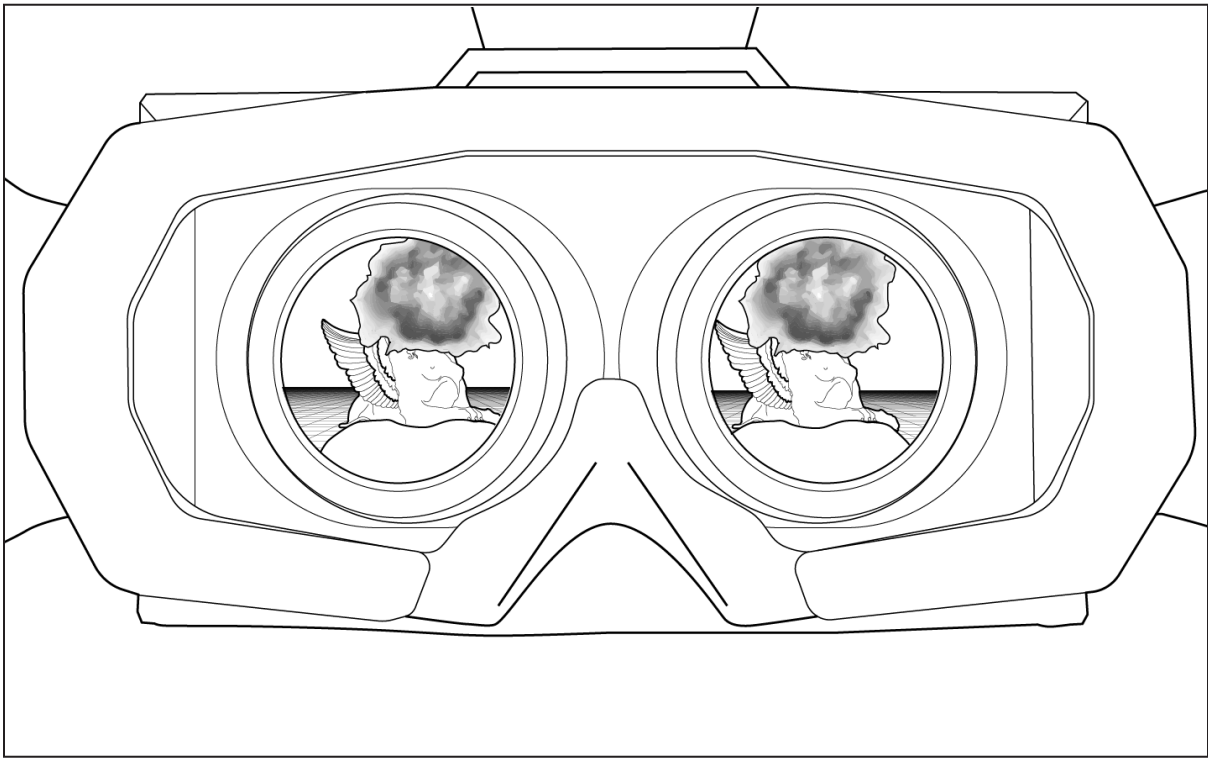




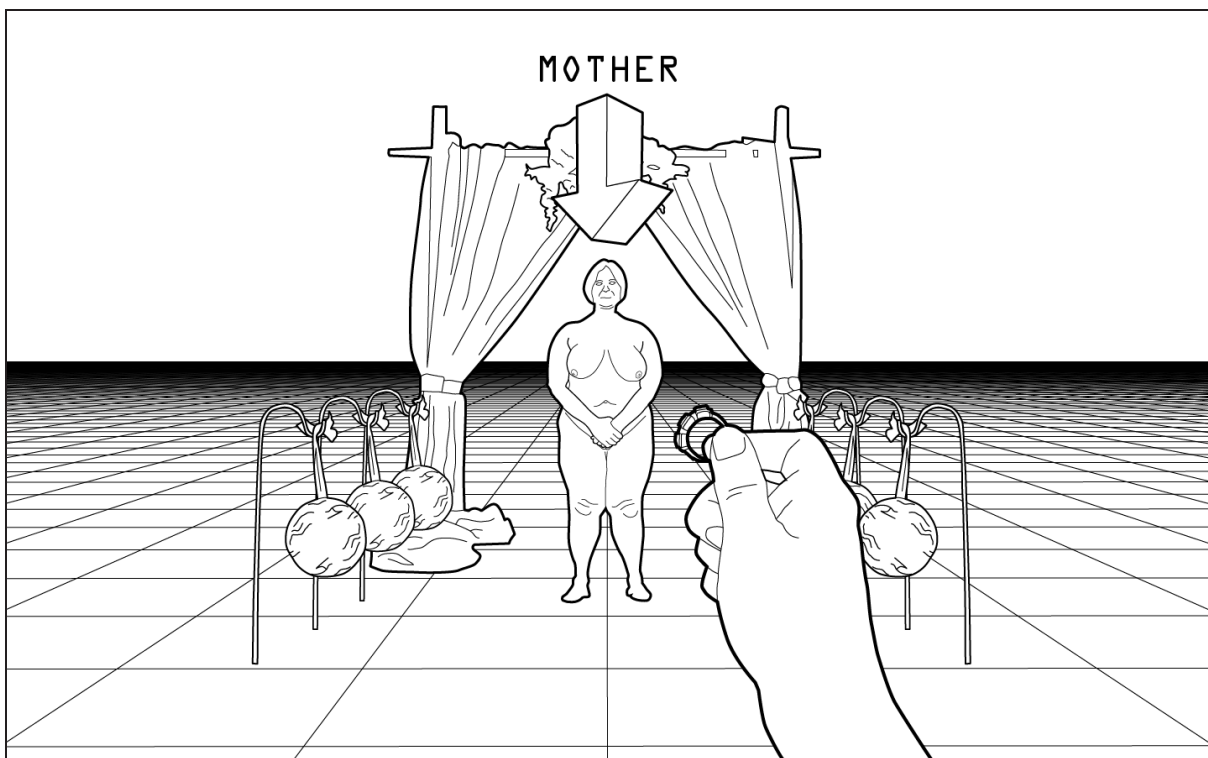
*Figure 10: The riddle of the Sphinx.*



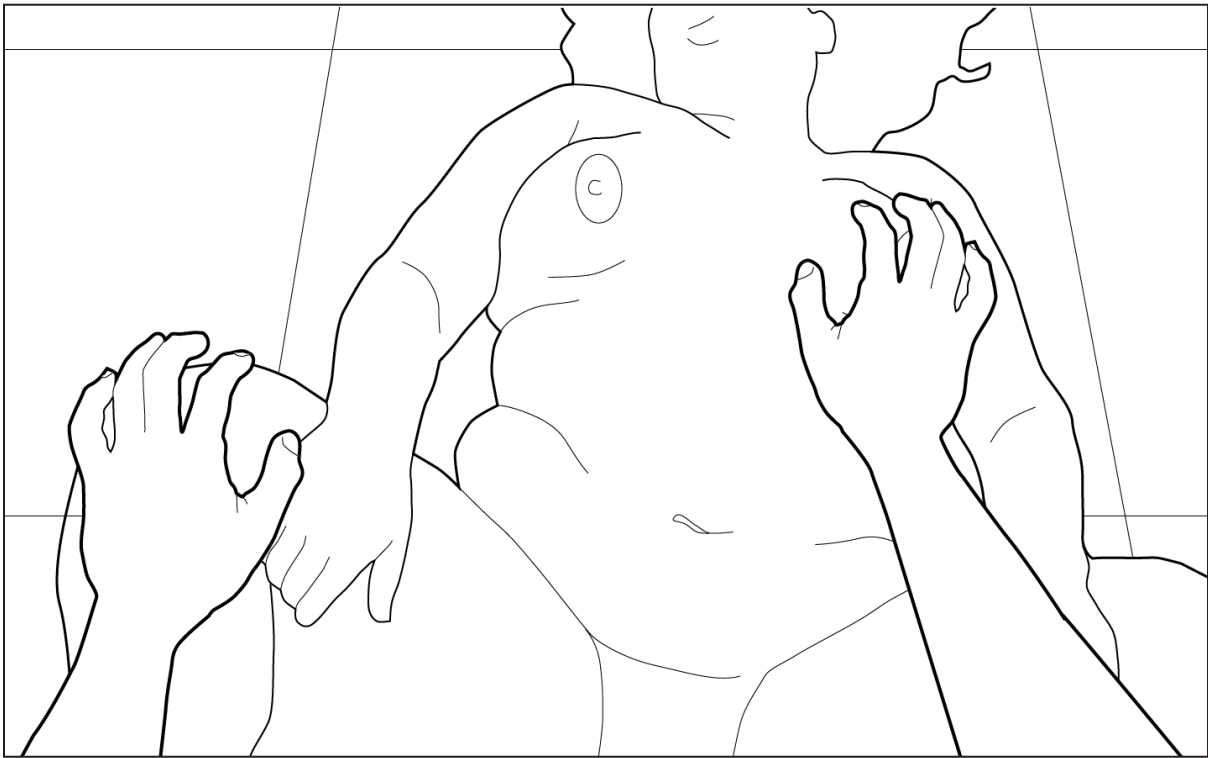
*Figure 11: The user offers a response.*



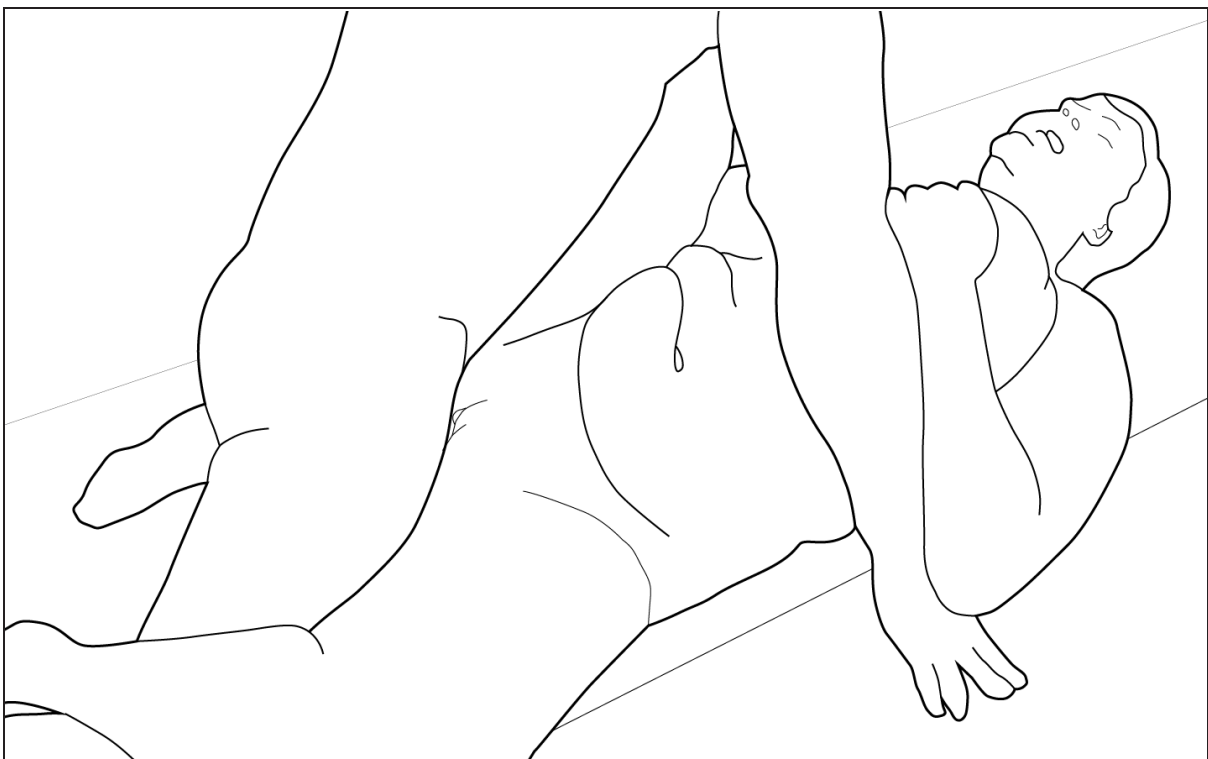
*Figure 12: The Sphinx is defeated.*



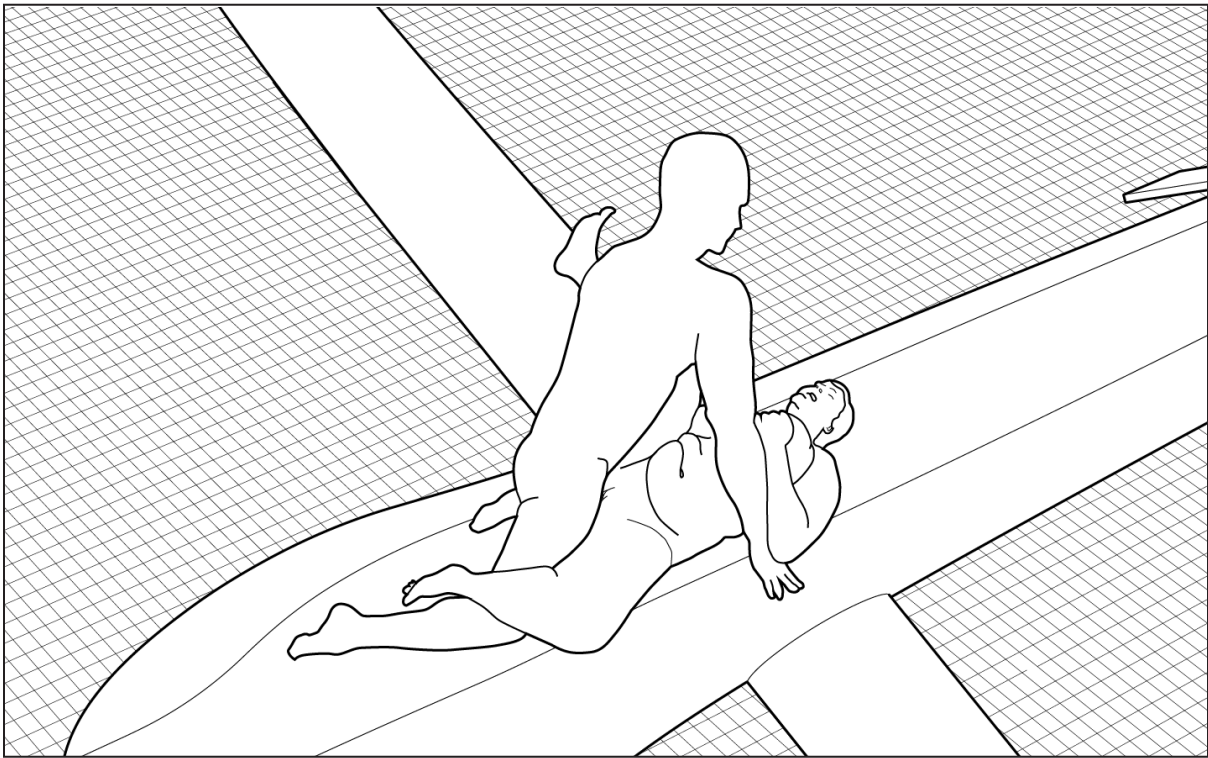
*Figure 13: The user seduces the virtual mother.*



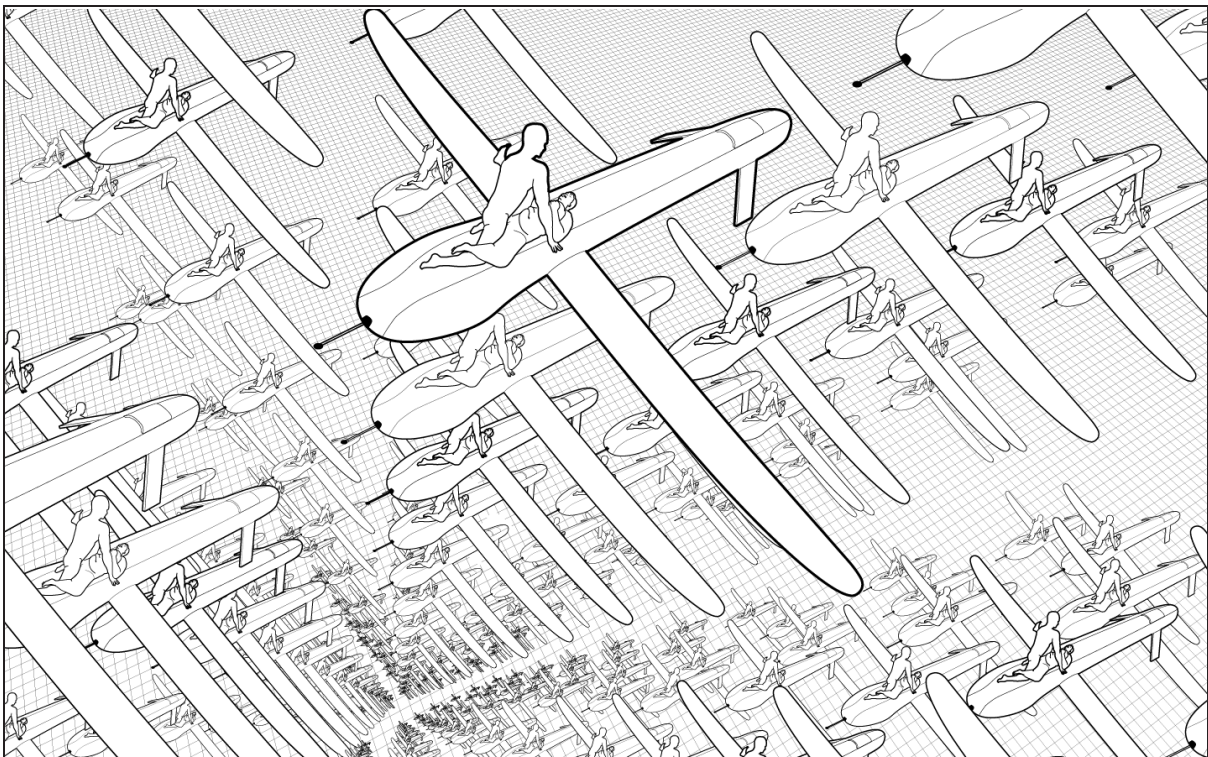
*Figure 14: Consummation part one.*



*Figure 15: Consummation continues.*

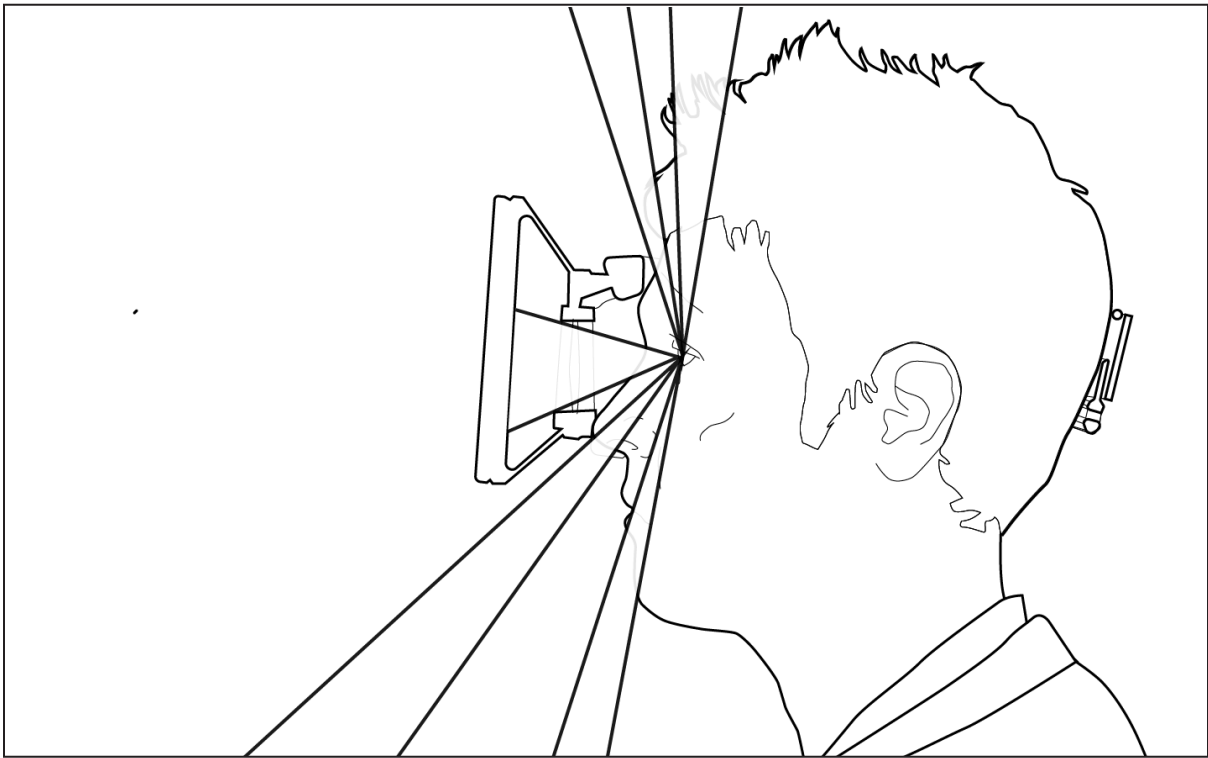


*Figure 16: A more robust fantasy.*

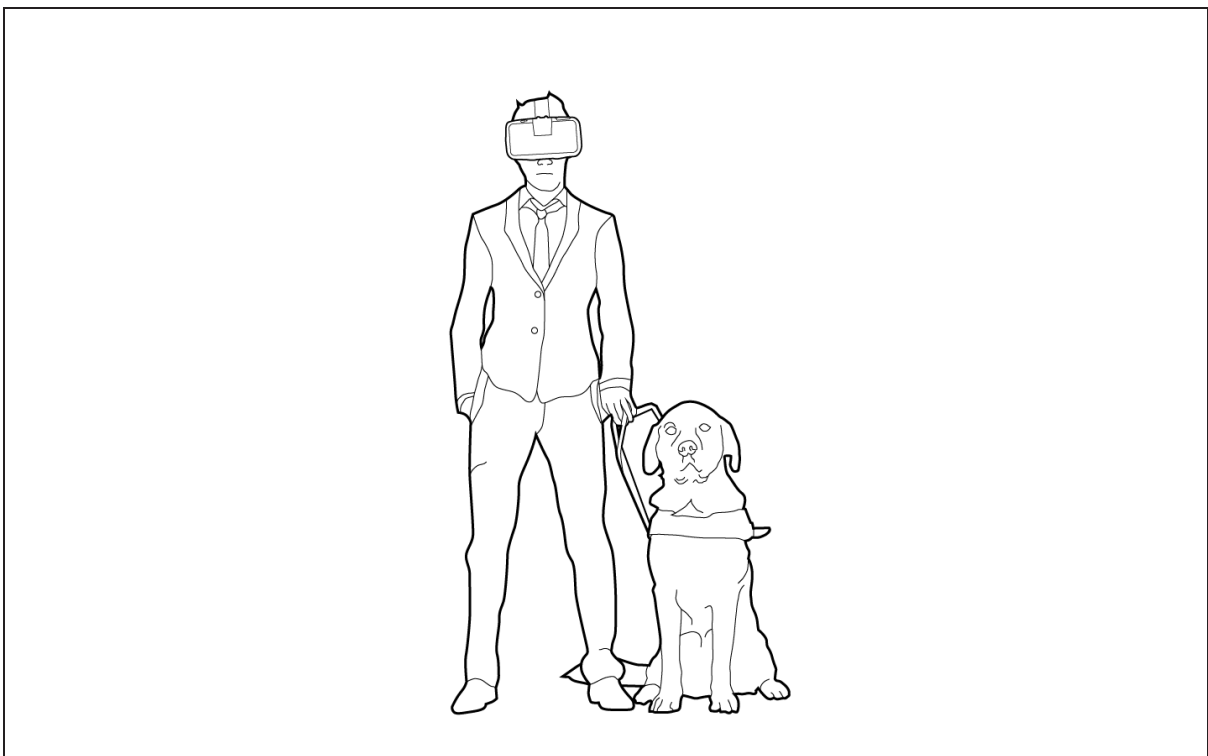


*Figure 17: Climax.*





*Figure 18: The user is permanently blinded. The experience is concluded.*



*Figure 19: The blinded user wanders the world.* **TNI**



Butlin's Ayr, Lounge Cafe and Indoor Heated Pool, 1970